

Introduction: Parties and policy making in Ireland

Continuity

One of the most remarkable aspects of post-Treaty Ireland was how well the political institutions established by the British colonial administration survived. This is not altogether surprising when one considers that the Irish struggle for independence ended in 'a compromise with the former coloniser which denied true emancipation'.¹ Many members of the new elite 'found nothing better to do with their freedom than to duplicate the British system' while 'a new use was found for the Irish language as a kind of green spray-paint to be coated over the remaining British pillar boxes, systems and titles, in order to conceal the ever-growing similarity with the British way of life'.² Kevin O'Higgins's conviction that they 'were probably the most conservative-minded revolutionaries that ever put through a successful revolution'³ gives some idea of the limitations and parameters within which the Free State would take shape.

The survival of the British civil service, based in Dublin Castle, provides a striking example of the basic continuity that followed the Treaty. 'Independence', Basil Chubb notes, 'did not much affect the well-established and powerful departments' and for the former British civil service 'life went on much as before'.⁴ Under the Treaty, the position of former colonial administration employees was protected and most managed to exchange political masters with equanimity. A small number (about one hundred) voluntarily transferred to Belfast to serve the Northern Ireland administration. The transition from colonial power to a native administration did not, therefore, impinge greatly on the civil service. The incoming Free State Government inherited 21,000 civil servants

and to this number it added a mere 131 of its own and reinstated 88 others. Chubb notes that

The administrative machinery of the new state did not have to be created: what existed was taken over by nationalist rebels, most of whom were by no means revolutionaries looking to effect great social and political reforms ... Their senior civil service advisers, steeped in the British tradition, saw no need for changes in administrative structures or practices. They looked for and got much friendly cooperation and avuncular advice from the Treasury, the very centre of British bureaucratic traditions ... The very smoothness of the operation and the overwhelming sense of continuity led to the central administrations being carried over into the new regime to a great extent unaltered and in working order.⁵

Centralisation

Since independence, government in Ireland has been centralised to an extent almost unrivalled in a democracy. At the apex of the decision-making hierarchy is the cabinet, which is constitutionally limited to fifteen ministers including the Taoiseach (prime minister). This supremacy is ring-fenced by a weak legislature and feeble local government system. Though drawn from the legislature (Dáil), the cabinet's primacy over Parliament is rarely challenged when a Government enjoys a majority. The executive dictates the content and schedule of the legislative agenda.

The Dáil is not 'an active participant in the process of making laws, let alone broader policy'.⁶ The ordinary parliamentarian (Teachta Dála; TD), if not aligned with a party or technical group (seven TDs) can make little contribution on the floor of the house. Moreover, for most of the period covered in this book, TDs enjoyed few resources to challenge government dominance. On the eve of the 1970s, for example, an age before mobile phones, faxes and the internet, deputies laboured in collective offices without Oireachtas secretarial assistance and with one direct telephone line per party whip.⁷ As most deputies represented non-Dublin constituencies they spent three days in the capital before returning to their constituency duties for the remainder of the week. The average lifespan of a government has been little more than three years, meaning that most TDs find themselves on an election treadmill involving permanent campaigning. Even ministers are vulnerable to losing their seats, often to a party rival, if deemed to have lost touch with constituents. The realities conspire to provide little space or encouragement to the average politician to think of national issues, let alone foreign affairs. Executive supremacy is, arguably, most pronounced in foreign policy, which generally excites few parliamentarians given the parochialism and clientelism fostered by Ireland's PR-STV electoral system, leaving many a

TD with little to do but harass civil servants with minor requests.⁸ These trends have also encouraged TDs to see parliament as a forum for raising constituency issues rather than debating the virtues of competing foreign policies.

Parliamentary committees, frequently an outlet for robust scrutiny in many European legislatures, are comparatively weak in Ireland, with legislative proposals typically discussed only after the plenary stage of a bill. The Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade, a relatively recent innovation established in 2011, has provided little scrutiny of Northern Ireland policy. This is partly due to its wide brief and competing demands on members' time. Committee delegates are not afforded the resources or staff necessary to challenge government policy, making them vulnerable to over-reliance on Department of Foreign Affairs officials who generally see their role as explaining and defending government policy. This lack of a strong parliamentary committee system has reduced opportunities for parliamentarians and opposition parties to play a meaningful role in policy formulation and provided little incentive for constructive debate.

The upper house of parliament, the Seanad, duplicates rather than challenges the lower house and enjoys far fewer powers. Elected mainly by public representatives and with the Taoiseach nominating eleven of the sixty senators, the Government's Dáil majority is reproduced in the upper house. In any case, the Seanad can only delay Dáil legislation and during the eight decades following the enactment of the Irish Constitution it has only twice (1957 and 1964) rejected a Dáil bill. While narrowly surviving a 2013 referendum designed to abolish it, the Seanad remains unreformed, despite occasional recommendations to alter its electorate, composition and powers.

The president, whose powers are largely ceremonial, can offer little resistance to government initiatives and is constitutionally required to have his or her speeches and engagements cleared by government. It is worth noting, however, that the only presidential resignation stemmed from the Northern Ireland crisis when, in 1976, Cearbhall Ó Dálaigh utilised one of his few powers by referring the Emergency Powers Bill to the Supreme Court.⁹ It says much of presidential impotence that his successor, Patrick Hillery, served for fourteen years without ever being subjected to an election.¹⁰

The Taoiseach and Minister for Foreign Affairs

The Taoiseach and Minister for Foreign Affairs, along with their respective departments, have been to the forefront in devising Northern Ireland policy. While the Taoiseach has traditionally been the formal authority for all major initiatives on Northern Ireland, the Department of Foreign Affairs, which has

a specialised Anglo-Irish Division, is responsible for day-to-day policy implementation. In recent years, the Minister for Foreign Affairs has been assisted by two ministers of state (sometimes called junior ministers), one for European Affairs (introduced in 1987) and a second responsible for overseas aid and, recently, North–South Cooperation.

For much of its time in office, Fianna Fáil governed as a single-party administration whereas Fine Gael had to contend with between one and four junior coalition partners. Since 1989, all administrations have been coalitions and consequently the main restraint on a Taoiseach has been his or her government partners. During the first decades following independence Taoiseach and Foreign Minister were drawn from the same party; in de Valera's case they were one and the same person for sixteen years, as the Fianna Fáil leader proved unwilling to delegate Anglo-Irish relations. The brief break from this practice during the novel inter-party Government (1948–1951), when Clann na Poblachta leader Seán MacBride held the Foreign Affairs portfolio in a Fine Gael-led administration, would not be repeated until the 1990s when Labour leader Dick Spring served as Foreign Minister in successive Fianna Fáil- and Fine Gael-led coalitions. Eamon Gilmore repeated the feat for Labour in 2011 but as holding the Foreign Affairs portfolio exposed him to accusations of losing touch with his party's support base, he was forced to resign, only three years after leading Labour to its best ever electoral performance.

Traditionally, Foreign Affairs has been a prestige portfolio given to a figure drawn from the leader's inner circle and demonstrating clear potential to succeed as Taoiseach or the leader of the junior coalition partner. Several Taoisigh, such as Liam Cosgrave, Garret FitzGerald and Brian Cowen, had previously served as Minister for Foreign Affairs. Leaders such as Seán MacBride, Dick Spring and Eamon Gilmore sought the portfolio as the price of coalition. Given the calibre and profile of many of the office-holders it is perhaps surprising that there has not been greater tension between the Taoiseach and his Minister for Foreign Affairs. In practice there has been a division of labour rather than of policy. In situations where the party of the Taoiseach and Minister for Foreign Affairs has been different (as in 1948–1951, 1992–1997 and 2011–2014) the fundamentals have been negotiated before entering government to minimise acrimony and ensure the harmonious implementation of an agreed approach.

Political parties and the Irish party system

The Irish party system bears little resemblance to its European counterparts. The classic cleavages around which democratic politics have generally been

conducted (centre–periphery, church–state, urban–rural, class) are not reflected in Ireland.¹¹ Rather, Ireland’s party system remains a product of the civil war of 1922–1923. As a result of the 2016 election, for example, the three main ‘civil war parties’, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Sinn Féin, garnered over two-thirds of the vote, demonstrating the remarkable longevity of this cleavage.¹² The electorate has proven less forgiving of smaller coalition parties, and when Labour has coalesced with larger right-of-centre partners it has always been punished in subsequent elections.

Fianna Fáil

Fianna Fáil’s traditional dominance has been another major feature of Irish politics. Originating in the losing side of the civil war, the party maintained a decades-long winning streak. Initially strongest in the non-Dublin periphery, particularly amongst small farmers, the petite bourgeoisie and urban working class, Fianna Fáil’s rise to power laid the basis for a ‘periphery-dominated centre’¹³ before transforming itself into a classic catch-all party claiming to encompass all strands of society.¹⁴ Until 2011, Fianna Fáil was one of a select few democratic parties that had established themselves as the dominant force in national politics, on a par with organisations such as Sweden’s Social Democrats and Japan’s Liberal Democrats. In the half century following the Second World War, no other European party surpassed Fianna Fáil’s electoral performance. Indeed, in 2002 Fianna Fáil was identified as Europe’s ‘most consistently successful vote-getter’.¹⁵ Subjected to a gradual erosion of support, reflected in an inability to form a single-party majority administration after 1981, the party endured a sudden collapse in 2011, when its parliamentary representation plunged from seventy-seven seats to twenty. This debacle did not prove fatal as had been the case with Italy’s Christian Democrats and within five years the party had more than doubled its number of Dáil deputies.

Fianna Fáil governed Ireland for fifty-four of the seventy-nine years between 1932 and 2011. Consequently, it played a major role in framing how Northern Ireland was viewed in the Republic. Party supporters argued that being in power for such prolonged periods – most of them without the nuisance of a coalition partner – afforded Fianna Fáil the opportunity to take the long view.¹⁶ Fianna Fáil also believed that its republican credentials gave it a unique ability to appreciate the importance of the ‘national question’. Its narrative of post-independence history depicted Fine Gael as national quislings, the heirs of those that had compromised Ireland’s independence during the Treaty negotiations and acquiesced in the partition of Ireland by virtue of the tripartite agreement of 1925 arising from the Boundary Commission report.

Few opportunities were lost to stress the revolutionary credentials of Fianna Fáil's leaders and to present the party as the custodians of the 1916 tradition. All but two of the party's first seven-member executive had fought in the Easter Rising, and every member of that executive had fought in the War of Independence and on the republican side in the civil war. Such national records, integral to party morale and self-image, helped Fianna Fáil to frame its political lineage in terms of a much longer resistance to imperial rule. It enabled the leadership to dampen criticisms of its anti-republican legislation and lack of progress in ending partition. However, the incomplete nature of the nationalist project, with partition institutionalised in the 1921 and 1925 agreements, also made the example of 1916 a problematic one for a governing party committed to constitutional politics.

Following long periods in office, Fianna Fáil made inroads with voters traditionally associated with its main rival, Fine Gael. By the 1960s, the party had secured substantial backing amongst the wealthier professional classes, a trend institutionalised by the establishment of TACA, an organisation that, amongst other things, facilitated businessmen meeting ministers over dinner for a fee. Over time, policies converged and the divide between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael became increasingly superficial. Party realignment did not occur, however. Following the 2016 general election, Fianna Fáil turned down an historic offer from Fine Gael leader Enda Kenny to join forces when parliamentary arithmetic suggested that only such a combination could offer stable majority government. Fear of being absorbed or overshadowed, and of leaving a vacuum on the opposition benches, inhibited a new departure through uniting the two major 'civil war' parties.

Fine Gael

For much of the period under consideration in this book, Fine Gael's time in office constituted relatively brief interludes between prolonged spells of Fianna Fáil governance. In 2016, the party for the first time took office for a second consecutive term – though this was with little more than a third of the parliamentary seats – in coalition with a motley crew of independents, and reliant on the sufferance of old rivals Fianna Fáil from the opposition benches.

Though some members trace the party's origins to Michael Collins, implying that he was its first leader, Collins was killed a full decade before the establishment of Fine Gael and eight months before its predecessor, Cumann na nGaedheal.¹⁷ The pro-Treaty Sinn Féin from which many Fine Gael leaders emerged rapidly transformed into a conservative party that favoured membership of the British Commonwealth.¹⁸ The two splinters in Cumann na nGaedheal during the 1920s

both stemmed from disillusionment with the party's level of republicanism and with its Northern Ireland policy. These defections, combined with an influx of ex-unionists and former Home Rulers, significantly altered the character of the party.¹⁹ Far from being the stepping-stone that Collins had envisaged, the Treaty rapidly developed into an end in itself, with security becoming the major plank of policy. By 1948 support for Fine Gael had dipped below 20 per cent and its parliamentarians, increasingly part-time amateurs who treated politics as a hobby, were as likely to reside in the law library as in Leinster House. The party's second foundational name – the United Ireland Party – was quietly dropped in later years.

During its first couple of decades, Cumann na nGaedheal and its successor Fine Gael were considered the party of the large farmer, successful businessmen, the Protestant minority and the upper middle classes. The brief spell at the helm of a five-party coalition Government from 1948–1951 reinvigorated Fine Gael and, by declaring a republic, facilitated a rebranding of the party so that it no longer orientated itself on articulating the Commonwealth cause. Subsequent attempts during the 1960s and 1980s to rebrand Fine Gael as a social democratic party never succeeded in replacing its support base, which remained primarily conservative and relatively well-off financially.

Labour

Traditional wisdom has suggested that Labour's decision not to contest the seminal 1918 general election condemned it to the political periphery thereafter. As a newly enfranchised nation affirmed its political allegiances through the ballot box for the first time, Labour stood aloof. When it re-emerged as a choice on the ballot paper, most of the electorate had already committed themselves to either pro- or anti-Treaty wings of Sinn Féin. Fianna Fáil's expansion during the 1920s and 1930s, based on a dynamic socio-economic programme couched in radical republican language, succeeded in making the Labour Party's programme appear incomplete and insufficiently national. Labour offered mild-mannered opposition within the Dáil, prompting taunts from Seán Lemass in 1929 that 'so long as they cannot be accused of being even pale pink in politics they seem to think they have fulfilled their function towards the Irish people'.²⁰ Despite – or perhaps because of – the party's moderation it proved remarkably sensitive to red-baiting, so that when, during the 1940s, Seán MacEntee accused the Labour Party of harbouring communists, the party obligingly split in two. A brief flirtation with radical slogans during the late 1960s – all the more peculiar coming from the socially conservative party leader Brendan Corish – proved ill-fated. Under the banner of 'the seventies will be socialist', Labour briefly

tried to cast off its conservative image before reverting to its default position when it failed to result in significant electoral gains.

During the 1950s and 1960s, the party reorganised within Northern Ireland, garnering modest electoral success before being eclipsed by the Northern Ireland Labour Party. Within the Dáil, Labour deputies articulated some of the most radical republican positions on Northern Ireland, though these were eclipsed during the 1970s by the influence of the party's iconoclastic spokesperson, Conor Cruise O'Brien. Condemned to be the mudguard of its senior coalition partner, the electorate have never rewarded Labour for participation in government. During the 1990s and again in the 2000s an engorged Labour Party demanded and received the Foreign Affairs portfolio but on both occasions the party suffered huge losses. The 'Spring Tide' of 1992 went out five years later when the party lost half its parliamentary seats while in 2016 its Dáil representation collapsed from thirty-seven seats to just seven following another five-year coalition with Fine Gael. During the later coalition, party leaders Eamon Gilmore and Joan Burton fell on their swords in response to a haemorrhaging of support for Labour.

Minor parties

Most other parties, like meteors in the sky, shone briefly and brightly before breaking up in the inhospitable political atmosphere. Noteworthy amongst these are the agrarian Clann na Talmhan and republican Clann na Poblachta, both of which participated in the inter-party Government of 1948–1951. In more recent times, the Progressive Democrats (PDs) and Democratic Left (DL) wielded disproportionate influence in their respective coalitions before being absorbed into Labour (DL) or disappearing altogether (PDs). While only once in government (2007–2011), and with no relevant ministerial portfolio, the Green Party has played little role in the devising of Northern Ireland policy but, significantly, is organised on an all-Ireland basis. On the rare occasions that parties, such as Aontacht Éireann, were formed to emphasise the Northern Ireland problem they failed to thrive. Independent Fianna Fáil, however, endured for three decades due to the personality and organisational mastery of its founder, Neil Blaney, and its bailiwick of Donegal, the most northerly county in the Republic.

Sinn Féin

Sinn Féin is an unusual party that has flitted in and out of electoral politics but is key to any appreciation of Irish government policy towards Northern Ireland. Until relatively recent times the party vacillated between dormancy and occasional

electoral intervention on an abstentionist basis. It was only in 1997 that Sinn Féin managed to elect a representative willing to take their seat in Leinster House. Moreover, while in many ways a new force in parliamentary politics, the party claims the oldest political lineage. Sinn Féin has endured many splits, factions and transformations. Eclipsed by its early progeny, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, the party has now become a major force in both parts of Ireland, as near-permanent members of the Northern Ireland executive and as a major opposition party in the Republic. Despite being a legal political party, Sinn Féin had the distinction of being banned from radio and television in Ireland for virtually all of the Troubles and for the last half-dozen years of the conflict in the United Kingdom. The Irish Government's ban extended not only to party representatives and spokespeople but also to ordinary members irrespective of the topic they discussed.²¹

Conclusion

Devising the Irish Government's Northern Ireland policy has been the purview of remarkably few parties. Only four parties participated in government during the Troubles and these administrations have been very much dominated by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. While for the purposes of this book, Northern Ireland policy is defined in terms of the actions of successive Taoisigh and their cabinets, it is important to note that such policies are not devised or implemented in a vacuum but rather react to, and interact with, a whole range of factors and actors. These include the views of domestic public opinion, opposition parties and senior civil servants, while external restraints include the position of the British Government and international actors such as the European Union and United Nations, not to mention economic considerations. While bi-partisanship on Northern Ireland has frequently been the order of the day, this should not be interpreted as meaning that there has been a consensus. This, as we shall see, could not always be achieved at the cabinet table, let alone within political parties or society at large.

Notes

- 1 Coulter, *Ireland*, p. 4.
- 2 Kiberd, 'Inventing Ireland', p. 21.
- 3 *Dail Debates*, 2/11 (6 December 1923).
- 4 Chubb, *The Government and Politics of Ireland*, pp. 236, 249.

-
- 5 Chubb, *The Government and Politics of Ireland*, pp. 240, 250.
 - 6 Gallagher, 'The Oireachtas'.
 - 7 See Desmond, 'A Larkinite in power'.
 - 8 Chubb, "Going about persecuting civil servants".
 - 9 See chapter 5.
 - 10 Hillery's candidature for the seven-year presidency was unopposed in 1976 and 1983 due to a consensus between the major parties.
 - 11 See Mair, *The Changing Irish Party System*.
 - 12 Independents of various hues constituted the next biggest grouping following the 2016 election while the largest parliamentary party not rooted in the civil war (Labour) won only seven seats.
 - 13 Garvin, 'Political cleavages'.
 - 14 Kirchheimer, 'The transformation of the Western European party systems'.
 - 15 Coakley, 'The election and the party system', p. 240.
 - 16 Hannon, *Taking the Long View*.
 - 17 Fine Gael was formed in 1933 as a merger between Cumann na nGaedheal, the Centre Party and the National Guard, a militant organisation with fascist overtones popularly known as the Blueshirts. Eoin O'Duffy, the mercurial leader of the Blueshirts, was selected as Fine Gael's first leader. After a year at the helm, he stepped down as Fine Gael leader and founded the fascist National Corporate Party, before organising a brigade to fight for Francisco Franco in the Spanish civil war. It is clear that O'Duffy's foundational leadership of Fine Gael embarrasses the contemporary party. On the Fine Gael website, reference is made and pictures provided of all party leaders, with the solitary exception of O'Duffy. See 'History of Fine Gael'. Available at www.finegael.ie/the-party/history-of-fine-gael. Accessed 11 December 2017.
 - 18 See Regan, *The Irish Counter Revolution*.
 - 19 Ó Beacháin, 'The dog that didn't bark', pp. 46–47.
 - 20 *The Nation*, 19 October 1929.
 - 21 See Corcoran and O'Brien, *Political Censorship and the Democratic State*.