

BUILDING
DEMOCRACY:

THE JOHNSON YEARS



a paper delivered to the
Irish Labour History Society,
13 October 2012

by
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Introduction

The twenty years from 1912 to 1932 were the most tumultuous in modern Irish history. From the Home Rule Bill of 1912 to the formation of the Fianna Fáil government in 1932, Ireland went from being a region of the United Kingdom to a Free State. It had gone through a military uprising, a political convulsion, a war of independence and a civil war, not to mention executions, imprisonments, kidnappings, lockouts and general strikes.

That span of twenty years encompassed the greatest revolution in Irish life since the Flight of the Earls three hundred years earlier, and set Ireland on a course that has proven irreversible and irresistible. Above all, these were the two decades in which Irish democracy was built, the foundations laid and the institutions of an independent republic created. They were the “Johnson Years”.

Labour’s Indispensable Role

The Labour movement played an indispensable role throughout those two decades, firstly in achieving independence and then in creating a functioning democracy.

Leader Tom Johnson was indispensable in fashioning the Labour movement as a fit instrument for the accomplishment of those two tasks. In the Pantheon of Irish Labour Leaders, Johnson would take his place as the “Indispensable Leader.”

Without him, the Labour movement, both industrial and political, would have been much diminished, if not reduced to irrelevance. Indeed, the independence movement would itself have been weakened, perhaps crippled, if not for two key achievements. Johnson ensured that Labour would be a vigorous, responsible and loyal ally of Sinn Féin up to 1922, and then a pioneer and partner in creating the new state up to 1932 – when its democratic credentials were set in stone by the peaceful passage of power from Cumann na nGael to Fianna Fáil.

The struggle for independence went through different phases and was conducted by various organisations, but because freedom from British rule had ultimately to be fought for militarily and pursued politically, many of the organisations and individuals who participated in other aspects of the struggle have, for understandable reasons, been ignored or reduced to footnotes in the history of the times.

As we celebrate the centenary of the Labour Party, it is appropriate that the contribution of the Labour Movement should be elevated from the bottom of the page and given a chapter of its own, and that the man who made it possible should be rescued from obscurity and honoured as a national leader who was a great Labour leader.

Ten Milestones

History shows that the struggle of a colonised people seeking to rid itself of the coloniser is made up of many parts which mutually reinforce each other; civil disobedience, for example, being as important as military resistance.

That interdependence can be seen if the main developments between 1912 and 1932 are retraced. From the perspective of Labour's contribution, the following milestones stand out:

1. The radicalisation and mobilisation of the urban working class, from the formation of the Irish Transport and General Workers Union, to the 1913 Lock Out and the creation of the Citizen Army.
2. The Rising, in which Connolly and the Citizen Army played a central role.
3. The transformation of the trade union movement into a mass organisation. This culminated in the 1918 anti-conscription campaign which, organised and led by Labour, inflicted the biggest ever political defeat on British authority in Ireland.
4. In the 1918 general election, national unity

was maintained as a direct result of Labour's decision to step aside in favour of Sinn Féin, a strategy that led directly to the formation of the First Dáil and the adoption of the Democratic Programme, itself drafted by Labour.

5. The securing of recognition for Irish independence at the Socialist International Congresses during 1919, and the conversion in 1921 of the British Labour movement to the cause of Ireland. This conversion drained Lloyd George's government of the moral authority to conduct war on Ireland and the political will to continue it in the face of domestic and international opposition.

6. The systematic undermining of the British war effort via the organisation of civil disobedience. This was achieved through general strikes and the strategic sabotage of Britain's capacity to wage war, as per the Railwaymen's or "Munitions" Strike, the dismantling of the British state apparatus in Ireland through support for the transfer of allegiance by local authorities to the Dáil, adherence to the Republican Courts and compliance with the tax collection system as established by the Dáil.

7. One indispensable contribution by Labour to the creation of Irish democracy, was its participation in the 1922 general election, which thereby legitimised the creation of the Irish Free State and enshrined respect for the will of the electorate and the rule of law as the fundamental principles of Irish democracy.

8. The creation of a functioning parliament by providing an opposition for its formative years, fashioning its rules of procedure and legislative processes, and ensuring that parliamentarianism would be the central plank on which Irish democracy was to rest.

9. Labour engineered the political end to the Civil War by masterminding the entry of Fianna Fáil into Dáil Éireann in 1927.

10. Finally, Labour supported the accession of Fianna Fáil to power five years later, thereby bringing the formative era of Irish democracy to an end and allowing conventional party politics to take root and flourish.

Tom Johnson

These ten milestones mark the path to freedom. Without them, that path would have longer and more arduous, perhaps unsuccessful. At each step of the way Tom Johnson played a central and crucial role, one which is difficult to define, for to use the term as it is conventionally understood, he was only Leader of the Labour Party for the five years from 1922 to 1927.

More accurately, he would be best described over the longer period from 1912 to 1932 as a Leader of the Labour Movement as a whole, both industrial and political.

In truth, he played multiple roles, each being appropriate to the time and the task. He was, successively, a trade unionist, a trade union organiser, an officer and then official of the Congress, a paid political organiser, a parliamentarian and a statesman.

He was a gifted draughtsman with the pen and a meticulous administrator with a punctilious respect for procedure. In personality, he was modest and personally unambitious, genteel in many ways, a teetotaller and non-smoker who abhorred gambling, always impeccably dressed.

He was also a bundle of contradictions: an intellectual who became a political activist, a pacifist who supported revolution, an Englishman who became Irish, while remaining very English, but essentially a very moral man who at the age of ninety died in what one obituary described as “reduced circumstances”, the man who made the Labour movement and Ireland what they are, and who could have made more of both had history been kinder.

Johnson was born two years before Larkin in Liverpool, in a house only four hundred yards apart from Larkin’s.

Like most sons of manual workers he left school at the age of twelve, but like most bright young men of his era, went to night classes and educated himself. He became a convinced socialist in the process, but also became, as a result of his education, a white-collar worker.

He started work in the fishing industry, which brought him to Irish fishing ports, like Kinsale where he met his wife Marie, the daughter of a Cornish miner and political radical. Eventually, he settled in Belfast selling animal feeding stuffs and immediately became embroiled in the trade union and co-operative movements.

The complexity of his personality becomes evident from the double life he led in Belfast. To the business community he was Tomas Ryder Johnson but to the broad Labour movement he was Tom Johnson, a simple disguise which served him well from 1892 to 1918.

During that quarter century, he lived the life of a salesman or commercial traveller; that was his livelihood. But he also lived the life of a trade unionist and political activist; that was his life’s vocation.

He joined the National Union of Shop Assistants, became a delegate to the Belfast Trades Council and stood unsuccessfully as a Labour and Home Rule candidate for the Belfast Corporation.

His reputation became such that it was on him that Larkin called when he came to Belfast to organize the dockers and carters; Johnson subsequently got involved in the 1907 strike. It was on him that Connolly called when he came to Belfast to organise on behalf of the Socialist Party of Ireland; Johnson befriended and financed him.

A National Leader

He came onto the national stage in 1911 when he began advocating the creation of a separate Labour Party in Ireland at the ITUC annual conference, which was successfully accomplished the following year when the Congress, on the proposal of Connolly, expanded its remit to include political objectives, thereby establishing the Labour Party.

He and his wife came to Dublin to assist Larkin and Connolly during the 1913 Lock Out, and he toured Northern England seeking financial and moral support for the Dublin workers, the first of his excursions into England on behalf of Irish Labour. He was elected to the Congress executive and became its chairman, a fortunate choice by the delegates – as he was in office for the Rising.

One of his major contributions as chairman was to bring Larkin closer into the fold and to manage the shift of power from the craft to the general unions without disrupting the unity of the Congress. Another was to preserve that unity when partisan passions ran high over reaction to the outbreak of the First World War.

He wisely recommended the deferral of the 1915 Annual Conference and bought time. It was just as well, since the Rising presented an even greater threat to working class unity, North and South.

In the face of this challenge, Johnson emerged as a Leader. Connolly was dead and Larkin in the United States. In addition, most trade union leaders were imprisoned, including O'Brien; Liberty Hall was in ruins, union records destroyed or impounded, and the membership demoralised and bewildered.

Johnson filled the vacuum and took charge. He helped repair the ITGWU and then insisted on holding the Congress annual conference in the immediate aftermath of the Rising.

His daring was rewarded; his great powers of conciliation bound nationalists and unionists together, and he furthermore completed the transformation of the Congress from an association of craft unions into a national organisation genuinely representative of the working class.

Membership exploded from 1917 onwards, and was an integral part of the national resurgence following the Rising. He created a working alliance with Bill O'Brien, the acting General Secretary of the ITGWU, that was to be the fulcrum around which everything in the Labour movement revolved for the following two decades.

If one single event could be considered decisive in bringing the independence movement into being, however, it was, unquestionably, the anti-conscription campaign of 1918.

Up to this point, Ireland had been exempted from the conscription introduced in Britain in 1916, but the manpower shortage became so great on the Western Front that early in 1918, a desperate British government decided to risk the expected reaction and announced that conscription would be extended to Ireland.

The reaction was even more virulent than expected, but was generally disorganised, except for the intervention of the Labour movement, which became the *de facto* leader of the campaign. Johnson had played a leading role in the Belfast campaign until his cover was blown and his English employers discovered that Thomas Ryder Johnson, their respected employee, and Tom Johnson, the trade union agitator, were one and the same person. He was immediately dismissed on grounds of disloyalty.

But he became an immediate hero in the Labour movement and in nationalist circles, thanks to the publicity generated by Bill O'Brien's astute use of the sacking. As a consequence of O'Brien's equally astute

management of subsequent events, Johnson was appointed paid secretary of the “Mansion House Committee” organising the national campaign against conscription.

He moved to Dublin, set up home there, and from that moment on was a national, as well as a Labour leader.

Johnson was an organiser of genius, as was O’Brien, and at the end of April they extended the campaign by organising a general strike, the first of its kind in Europe. They had enticed the Executive to convene a special delegate conference of the Congress, at which it passed a resolution calling for a general strike. Held only four days later, its success was such that within three days, the British government abandoned its plan for conscription.

This victory, as stunning as it was complete, transformed the independence movement from an elitist into a mass movement and created an unstoppable momentum which led to the clean sweep by Sinn Féin in the general election at the end of the year. Labour had organised and led the campaign – but it was Johnson who had masterminded its success.

The Labour Leader

With that mission accomplished, Johnson became a paid organiser of the Congress, on O’Brien’s insistence. Since the British government had committed itself to a general election by the end of the year, one of Johnson’s first tasks was the creation of the election machinery and drafting the political programme with which to fight it. Single-handedly, he wrote an election manual, the Party programme and a new Constitution, which gave meaning to the decision to establish a political party. He also travelled the country organising the Trades Councils.

All this, starting in September, was to be completed by the beginning of December, when yet another special delegate conference would endorse the constitution and programme. He

was well advanced with his plans when the political scene, in Ireland as in Europe, was dramatically and unexpectedly transformed.

In mid October, the German High Command told its government it could not win the war and that it should seek an armistice, which was done without delay. The armistice was signed on the 11th of November, and a war that had seemed interminable was suddenly and abruptly over. With the end of the war, a long promised Peace Conference became imminent.

Since it was expected to settle the fate of nations, it was immediately evident that the impending general election would become a plebiscite on Irish independence, and that the outcome could decisively influence the Peace Conference in any adjudication on Ireland’s claims for independence.

So it was believed, at the time. This line of reasoning led to intense negotiations between Sinn Féin and Labour about presenting a united front in the general election. Time was short, the general election was little over a month away, and a special conference of the Congress was scheduled to open in early December. Reading the mood of the union membership and of the country at large, Johnson and O’Brien decided that in the interests of national unity, Labour should rescind its earlier decision to contest the general election.

Johnson wrote a position paper that was accepted at very short notice by the Congress Executive on the morning of the special conference. When it opened, it was he who moved a motion recommending the adoption of the Executive’s recommendation, and it was his reasoning that won over a substantial majority of the delegates.

By any standards this was a momentous decision. Many have damned it as cowardly capitulation, others as a hard-headed acceptance of the inevitable, and some as romantic self sacrifice in the national interest. The motivation

of Johnson and O'Brien, however, is clear enough from what they said and wrote at the time. They were moved by the national interest, and all their actions over the following two years were consistent with that stance.

As for Johnson, he had again accepted the responsibility of providing leadership and he formulated and spelt out the reasons why the electoral strategy should be reversed.

In truth, at this moment of history he was indispensable – as there was nobody else with either the ability or the authority to carry the day. He was one of a tiny few who had grasped the implications of what had happened with the victory of the Allied Powers.

The acceptance of his position opened the door to the Sinn Féin election victory, and the creation of the First Dáil. The new body proclaimed the independence of the Irish Republic, and adopted a Democratic Programme, mainly drafted by Johnson himself.

With his wife, he attended its inaugural meeting on the 21st January, at which this generally unemotional man wept tears of joy, as he always admitted, when the Democratic Programme was read out.

There is little doubt that he, O'Brien and Cathal O'Shannon had been deeply involved with Collins and other Sinn Féin leaders in the preparations for the Dáil's opening meeting, and that cooperation took on a new urgency as the Labour leadership prepared to represent Ireland at the Congress of the Socialist International scheduled only a month later in Berne.

The political significance of this Congress was self-evident. If the Irish were accepted as a national delegation, it would confer a form of international recognition on the Irish Republic proclaimed by the Dáil.

Due to the political and diplomatic skills of Johnson, who placated the misgivings of

the British Labour representatives, recognition was forthcoming and, indeed, endorsed late in the year at a subsequent conference of the International in Amsterdam. De Valera, in his capacity as President of the Irish Republic, thanked Labour for its service to Ireland.

The War of Independence

During the War of Independence itself, Labour took its international activities a step further by waging a protracted campaign to win over the British Labour movement to the cause of Irish independence. If that could be achieved, then the damage to the British war effort would be greater than any defeat in the field, not least because of the British Labour Party's increased influence in the House of Commons following the general election.

Indeed, its support was indispensable if the war was to be sustained indefinitely. That was the Achilles Heel of Lloyd George and his government, which Johnson, with his insight into English politics, understood. His strategy was to detach the British Labour movement from the united front prevailing in Westminster and Whitehall.

At the height of the Black and Tan terror, he persuaded them to send a Commission of Enquiry to Ireland, which he assisted in its enquiries.

When its report was published and presented to the British Labour Movement, the effect was devastating; even the inherently conservative Trade Union Movement was won over.

Johnson travelled throughout Britain addressing thousands of Labour supporters, distributing hundreds of thousands of leaflets and brochures setting out Ireland's case for independence. The campaign reached its grand finale at a packed meeting in the Albert Hall in London, a building which to this day symbolises the British establishment.

Truly, the war had been taken inside the enemy's camp in a textbook example of psychological warfare, one which has never been properly studied, and still less acknowledged.

From that point onwards, a protracted terror campaign conducted in the name of the British people would have led to a constitutional crisis in Britain and the success of Johnson's campaign partly explains why Lloyd George and his ministers buckled and, in reality, sued for peace and prepared to abandon Ireland.

Johnson was indispensable in bringing this about; he was, after all, demonstrably English in demeanour and manner of speech. He knew what to say and how to say it. And as an insider, he could say things to an English audience that no Irishman as an outsider could say. He was indispensable to success.

The Labour movement had other weapons to hand, as the 1918 general strike had demonstrated. It could organise large-scale manifestations of popular resistance, which it did with another general strike in 1921 during a mass hunger strike of IRA prisoners, many of whom were active trade unionists. The release of the prisoners was a defeat for the British government on a par with its humiliation on conscription.

In addition, Labour engaged in the sabotage of the British war effort when the railway men refused to move munitions or armed men throughout the country, a strike conducted with rare intelligence and subtlety by Johnson and the Labour leadership. The disruption of supply lines is a classic military tactic, one that Labour employed to great effect.

On top of its psychological war within Britain and its sabotage of the British war effort within Ireland, the Labour movement participated in the progressive dismantling of the British state administered from Dublin Castle.

At municipal elections in 1920, which Labour had contested, it became the second-largest party on the island, a result which provides a tantalizing glimpse of what Irish politics could have become if it had not been for partition and the civil war.

Labour representatives supported, in some cases instigated, the transfer of allegiance by local authorities from the British Crown to Dáil Éireann, itself a little-studied phenomenon. Furthermore, the party's representatives switched allegiance to the Republican Courts and cut off taxes destined for the British revenue – diverting them to the Dáil.

The cumulative effect of these assaults on British authority was of inestimable value to a struggle, which was arguably the most comprehensive and coherent mounted by a colonised people against the colonizer. The Labour leadership understood what it was doing and did it well. It is a story yet to be fully told.

Yet throughout this extraordinary period, when he was organising relief, going in and out of jails pleading for clemency, and even being arrested himself, Johnson remained true to the core pre-occupations of the trade union movement.

It was the poverty he had seen on the streets of Limerick that really impelled him to become a Labour activist and it was on poverty and unemployment that he focused the attention of the movement throughout the War.

He repeatedly drew the attention of government ministers to the necessity for remedial action, leading a delegation into the Dáil during the Truce to argue his case.

There is little doubt that the impotence of Labour in the face of such terrible suffering made him and comrades like O'Brien utterly determined to be part of an independent Irish parliament. When the Treaty was approved

and elections set for the Third Dáil Éireann, the Labour movement quickly determined that it too would accept the Treaty and contest the general election, not least because this Dáil would act as a constituent assembly, drafting the constitution of the Irish Free State.

This was arguably an even more important decision than that made in 1918. It reinforced the legitimacy of the Irish Free State, confirmed the supremacy of the will of the people and enshrined respect for the rule of law as the foundation on which Irish democracy was to rest.

It also, of course, marginalised those forces that refused to accept the Dáil's decision to ratify the Treaty. Without the presence of Labour as an independent force between the pro- and the anti-Treaty forces, the Civil War would have been even more bloody and divisive.

In fact, Labour forced itself into what was a pact between Collins and De Valera – not to have a contested election at all – but an agreed share out of the seats. Labour's insistence on standing was deeply resented, especially by the De Valera faction, and it took great courage simply to stand as a candidate in the face of widespread intimidation and death threats.

Johnson set out Labour's position on acceptance of the Treaty and conformity with its requirements, in particular, the obligation on members of the Oireachtas to take an oath of allegiance to the British crown. His rationale on the oath was prosaic and bedded in common sense. It was no more than a condition for admission to parliament and carried no obligations to the monarchy anymore than it did to the capitalist system. It was a formula, and no more.

Leader of the Opposition

The Labour Party did better than it expected in the general election, winning eighteen seats out of a slate of nineteen candidates.

Johnson was unanimously elected Leader of the Parliamentary Party, self-evidently a new position.

With the parties in the Dáil adapting themselves to the Westminster model of parliament, and with the pro-Treaty representatives in the majority and the anti-Treaty deputies absenting themselves, Johnson immediately took on the additional role of Leader of the Opposition.

He took to parliament as to the manner born and the very first proceedings of the Third Dáil are an extraordinary testimony to his instinctive grasp of parliamentary procedure.

The immediate task was to devise Standing Orders, which was done in jig time by a committee of which he was a member. Legislative procedures had to be devised and the responsibilities of Ministers and the rights of members defined. In all of this, Johnson was the leading opposition spokesman.

The main business of the Third Dáil was the adoption of the Free State constitution, which was presented to the members in draft form. Although Johnson and the Labour deputies argued for changes to the draft, even employing direct excerpts from the Democratic Programme, none was accepted.

The Cumann na nGael government was determined that the Treaty would be respected to the letter, the rationale being that the British should be given no excuse for delaying the withdrawal of their army, their police force and their civil administration. Hence no extraneous material would be incorporated into the Constitution. Nevertheless, despite their negative posture, relations between Labour and the Cosgrave government were proper, correct and civilised.

Things took a turn for the worst, however, when the Cumann na nGael Deputy, Seán Hales, was assassinated and Pádraic Ó Maille, the Leas Ceann Comhairle, injured on their way

to the Dáil on 6 December, 1922. In retaliation, the government executed four republican prisoners, one being drawn from each province.

The reaction of Johnson and the Labour deputies was one of outrage at what they regarded as judicial murder, and bitter exchanges followed in the Dáil that permanently soured relations between Labour and Cumann na nGael. The conduct of the Civil War did little to improve matters. Before and during that dreadful conflict Johnson, tried to mediate between the two sides but had to admit in the end that not even his great powers of persuasion could bring the two together.

Yet, throughout the Civil War, the work of the Dáil went on and, despite threats to their lives and outright intimidation, and against a background of assassinations, kidnappings and arson, the Labour deputies refused armed protection and carried out their duties as representatives of the people.

When the Constitution was adopted and the Treaty entered into force, the Irish Free State came into existence. Another general election ensued, but this time, Labour lost seats as Civil War politics became entrenched. Nevertheless, Johnson continued as Leader of the Opposition and from that point until the second election of 1927, he was at the peak of his career both as a political leader and parliamentarian.

It was known that he read every piece of material put before the Dáil and researched his own speeches and the pronouncements of the party. He spoke on every issue appearing in the Dáil order paper, always informed, reasonable but resolute. He was, by common acclaim, the ultimate parliamentarian and he set the style and culture of the Dáil that endures to this day.

The achievements of the Third Dáil are astonishing; the whole paraphernalia of a modern state was created *de novo*, most of which stands to this day. Just one example suffices; the Ministers and Secretaries Act of

1924 determined the role and responsibilities of ministers and their relationship with the civil service with such precision that it still serves as the basic architecture of the state. Johnson was involved in all this work of creation and the outcome is one of his greatest legacies to those of who followed, and who take it all for granted.

But Johnson was also the leader of the Parliamentary Party, never an easy role when individual TDs believe they alone are responsible for their election and owe no more loyalty to the party than is convenient for them to concede.

Parliamentary parties are not chosen by the leader or the party executive, but are the product of a random process of selection. Johnson found it difficult to wield the disparate group of men he inherited as parliamentary colleagues into a cohesive political force.

The disunity became so great that he resigned as Leader in 1925, only three years after accepting that position.

His colleagues were stunned, of course, and realising that Johnson was indispensable as leader, refused to accept his resignation. Instead they promised to reform and insisted he take a two-week holiday. It is more than likely that after thirteen years of non-stop activity, he was suffering from mental and physical exhaustion and needed a break.

Almost Prime Minister

He returned to continue the task of creating the new state and to complete the even tougher challenge of consolidating Irish democracy.

That required De Valera and his followers to concede on the Treaty but without losing too much face. Johnson and O'Brien had nudged De Valera towards an acceptance of political realities as soon as the Civil War was over and by the beginning of 1927 all that remained was for Fianna Fáil, De Valera's new break-away party, to swallow hard and take the last step

towards de facto recognition of the Free State, in short, to take the oath of allegiance to the King of England.

In the June general election Labour did exceptionally well and won twenty-two seats, a number not to be reached for another forty years.

Fianna Fáil established itself on its first electoral outing, obliterating what remained of Sinn Féin, yet De Valera still refused to take the Oath of Allegiance and his party was refused entry to the Dáil chamber when they presented themselves. An impasse had been reached as Fianna Fáil refused to submit to reality.

As often happens, history made up their minds. Kevin O'Higgins, the Minister for Justice, was assassinated just after the general election in June, 1927.

Johnson's reaction was to get approval from the parliamentary party to go into coalition with Cumann na nGael in order to preserve democracy. Cosgrave declined the offer, a lost opportunity that is another of those tantalizing "might-have-beens". Instead,

Cosgrave struck out on his own and introduced a package of draconian legislation that threatened civil liberties and to strangle the infant Fianna Fáil unless its candidates took the Oath.

Johnson was outraged by these manoeuvres, but he brusquely brushed aside De Valera's attempts to procrastinate, told him to take the oath, wrote him the formula for getting off the hook - like the one he had used himself in 1922 - arranged for the Fianna Fáil deputies to be admitted to Leinster House and oversaw their physical entry into the Dáil chamber.

When they were seated, the full membership of the Dáil was assembled for the first time since De Valera and his followers had walked out after the Treaty vote. It was one of those historic

moments for which adjectives are superfluous.

Johnson summed it up by immediately pointing out to Cosgrave that his government no longer commanded a majority of the Deputies, which was mathematically true. He announced he would table a motion of no confidence, a conventional Westminster ploy, which Cosgrave said he would accept.

To the informed observers, this meant the end of the Cumann na nGael government, because as part of the process of coaxing Fianna Fáil into Dáil Éireann, it had been agreed by Johnson and De Valera that Fianna Fáil would support a minority Labour-led government. This was a formula that had appealed to De Valera because it would exact revenge on Cosgrave.

Johnson saw the agreement as a means of introducing a cooling-off period in the battle between the two wings of what had been Sinn Féin. This strategy made sense from a national perspective, while conferring benefit on the Labour movement, a most desirable outcome.

The interval between the announcement of the no confidence motion and the actual vote, however, proved fatal. Support for the proposition dribbled away; Deputy O'Hanlon from Cavan said he couldn't vote for an Englishman and Alderman Jinks from Sligo sensationally absented him as the vote was called.

Whereas Desmond FitzGerald came back from London to vote despite being in recovery from heavy surgery, Labour's T J O'Connell was away at a conference in Canada.

When the vote was taken, it resulted in a tie. The Ceann Comhairle cast his vote in favour of the status quo, and the motion was lost. Cosgrave soon after called another election and this time the Labour Party did poorly, compounded by the disaster of Johnson losing his seat, which he never regained.

The loss was attributable to two civil wars. The first was that within Sinn Féin. The electorate polarised between Cosgrave and De Valera. This became the pattern for all subsequent elections and condemned Labour to the role of a minor party for the next eighty-five years.

The second was a civil war within the Labour movement, centred around a battle for control of the ITGWU between Larkin, the man who had founded it, and O'Brien, the man who had saved it.

Expelled from the Labour movement, Larkin reacted like a wounded lion and flailed all round him, going so far as to put up candidates against the Labour Party, something he had not done in the June election.

In Dublin County, where Johnson had a precarious footing, young Jim Larkin stood against him and Big Jim even campaigned openly against him, to the point of following Johnson around the constituency and heckling him in public, such as at a meeting in Rathfarnham.

It was fratricide, the political assassination of one comrade and brother by another, a sorry tale, and a sad end to a career that was in full bloom.

The Larkins later regretted what they had done, but their remorse could not undo the fatal blow they had dealt to the man who had been the leader of the Labour Movement for the previous decade in which Irish democracy had been born.

Putting Fianna Fáil in Power

As could be expected, Johnson took some time to recover from the shock of defeat, but re-entered the Oireachtas two years later as a member of the Senate, and served as a member until its dissolution by De Valera in 1936. The Senate suited his scholarly temperament and, most importantly, provided an income, which the Labour movement did not.

One last task remained – and that was to set Irish democracy in stone.

This was done in 1932 when the Labour Party, even more diminished in size after the general election, nevertheless held the balance of power and used its five votes to elect a minority Fianna Fáil party. It was 1927 in reverse. Johnson was involved in the negotiations formulating the pact with Fianna Fáil and was essential to its completion.

The new government took office solely on the authority of the Irish people as expressed by the votes in Dáil Éireann. No shots were fired. There was no mutiny. All the institutions of the state: the Army, the Gardaí, the Civil Service, the Judiciary and Local Authorities, all remained loyal to the constitution. The transfer of power was as peaceful as it was complete. Fianna Fáil would go on to rule for sixteen unbroken years in office, and Fine Gael and the Labour Party to decline almost to the point of extinction.

Johnson had another thirty-three years to live when he left the Senate, but in truth his race was run when he suffered defeat at the hands of Larkin, his former comrade, a man born in his own city and with whom he had worked in the Lock Out.

All political careers, it is said, end in tragedy, never more true than in the case of Johnson. From being one vote away as Leader of the Government, he was cast out of the chamber he had graced and reduced to the rank of citizen. No fall could have been more cruel or complete and none less deserved.

Over twenty years he had been at the centre of things. By any objective evaluation, he had proven himself indispensable to his adopted country, to the Labour movement he had joined as a young idealist and to the national movement he had served so loyally.

On each occasion when circumstances demanded creativity and courage, Johnson had

responded and provided what nobody else could have done. We need only consider his leadership in the aftermath of the Rising, the anti-conscription campaign, the decision to abstain from the general election and representation in international affairs, the acceptance of the Treaty, creating a functioning parliament and creating the state, ending the Civil War and entrenching democracy.

From the Labour perspective, he, more than any other individual, constructed a national trade union movement and created a political party at local, national and international level. To create out of nothing is the hardest of all tasks. This he accomplished, repeatedly and successfully.

His enduring legacy is undoubtedly ideological.

He understood that the ultimate logic of revolution is representative democracy, with all the limitations that it imposes. Progress is, therefore, to be accepted as iterative and gradual, the product of intellect, political intelligence and organisation. He put his thoughts together in his booklet "The Nation Organised," which is forgotten today but which still unconsciously influences the hundreds of Labour representatives who serve the party at local and national level, and who painstakingly secure improvement after improvement for the people they represent.

He ensured that the Labour Party would not be reduced to a party of protest, impotent and irrelevant, looking in from the outside instead of being where it matters, inside the chamber. To adapt the words of the poet Horace, if you want to see his memorial just look around you.

He lived to see the torch handed from Norton to Corish, the leader who in the sixties ushered in the modern Labour Party. Perhaps that was his best reward. He sought no honours, and was given none, not even by the Labour movement he had created.

In this centenary year, as we proclaim the past and protect the future, we can pay belated homage to the man who made our Labour movement and our state what they are. Let us elevate Johnson from the footnotes of history and place him in the Pantheon of Labour and Irish history as that "indispensable Leader" who laid the foundations for Irish democracy.

- END -

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