
**LIFE
AFTER
FIANNA
FÁIL**

by Brendan Halligan

Life After Fianna Fáil

Address to the AGM of the Dublin South East Constituency Council Labour Party

21 November 2011, Mansion House, Dublin

By Brendan Halligan, MEP

I cannot help marveling at the strength of the Labour Party in Dublin South East when I recall what it was like when I first joined the Labour Party Head Office on the 1st of May 1967 as Political Director.

I was immediately thrown into the Local Elections, which took place eight weeks later at the end of June. The results in Dublin were a triumph for Labour, with the party winning thirteen Council seats out of a total of forty-five, just two behind Fianna Fáil and two ahead of Fine Gael. But the only one of the twelve wards in which Labour did not win a seat was here in Dublin South East, where we now have two Dáil seats in a constituency of four, and Fianna Fáil have none. What a change.

Two years later, in 1969, I was busy as a young General Secretary trying to organise the party's Annual Conference in Liberty Hall and needing all the help I could get from volunteers to make it happen. A young bearded architectural student from UCD, with a mop of hair, and an army of friends, undertook to erect the stage set, which was the most elaborate of its kind to be used up to that point and which had been causing me nightmares. While I had people to design and build it I had no staff to erect it. I took that young man at his word and the job was expertly done without any fuss. The stage set looked superb when it was completed with minutes to go before Conference opened.

Ever since, I have been in Ruairi Quinn's debt and have counted him as a friend. For that reason, and many others besides, I was delighted to accept the invitation to talk after the AGM on "Life after Fianna Fáil". I particularly wanted to congratulate Kevin Humphreys on his election and the constituency campaign team which produced one of the best results ever in the Labour Party's history. I hope my presence here is testimony of the high regard in which I hold this wonderful constituency organisation.

Historical context

Being here I cannot help thinking of history and of its relevance for the topic I am to discuss - for it was here in the Mansion House that the independent Irish state was established and the Irish parliamentary tradition was born. The First Dáil met here on 21st January 1919.

And I can't help thinking either of how history came to be rewritten and how a distorted version of events can come to have an unduly negative influence on contemporary politics, which is even more serious at this juncture in the life of our country. Especially when there is such a strong correspondence between what happened in the General Election last March and what happened in the General Election of December 1918.

In December 1918 the political party that had dominated Irish politics for over half a century was wiped out and never recovered. A new political force took its place and gave rise, in time, to both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. Last March, Fianna Fáil was almost wiped out and the question arises as to whether it will go the way of the old Parliamentary Party and, if it does, the further question arises as to what will replace it.

I think the answers depend on a clear understanding of the historical context in which we find ourselves. To help achieve that, we need to undo some of the historical revisionism that has influenced our understanding of Labour's place in Irish political history and distorted our understanding of ourselves as a political movement.

We should start with the allegation made by many historians, and numerous propagandists, that Labour was told by Sinn Féin, and specifically by De Valera, to stand aside in the 1918 General Election and that the party did so without resistance or complaint. As a consequence, or so the story goes, Labour suffered electoral damage from which it has never recovered.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

Labour's decision not to contest the 1918 General Election was taken here in this very building, first by the Executive of the Trade Union Congress and Labour Party, which had been deliberating the matter for some weeks, and then by the delegates to a Special Conference assembled here for the very purpose of debating Labour's involvement in a long awaited general

election. The proposal not to put up candidates in that election was recommended by the Executive and overwhelmingly adopted by the delegates after vigorous debate.

The initiative for the proposal to refrain from contesting the general election had come from the most powerful trade union figure of day, William O'Brien of the ITGWU, and the most influential political figure in the Labour movement, Tom Johnson, the man who two months later drafted the Democratic Programme of the First Dáil and who went on to become the first leader of the Labour Party.

No significant figure opposed the Executive resolution during the Conference debate and the delegates voted in its favour by a majority of two to one. The rationale was clear as is obvious from the verbatim reports of the debate; it was to allow the Irish people to have a clear cut choice on Irish independence.

In the minds of the delegates the general election had, in fact, become a plebiscite on Irish independence and it was overwhelmingly carried by the people in what was a virtually unanimous decision in the geographic area now covered by the Republic – with the exception, it should be said, of the Rathmines and Rathgar constituency.

Succes in first two elections

Two years later, Labour decided to support the Anglo-Irish Treaty in deference to the people's decision to ratify it and the party put up candidates in what was the first ever election to Dáil Eireann under the Free State constitution. Far from being punished by the electorate for having abstained from the 1918 and 1922 General Elections the party recorded a result that was not to be equalled in strength for a further fifty years and it repeated that performance in the Local Elections which took place soon afterwards.

These results refute the history that has been transmitted to us by conventional historians.

But if the party did so well in those initial elections in the early twenties why then did Labour not go on to develop its strength? I believe the answer is that Labour suffered from the objective and unavoidable circumstances of the times; in short, from a combination of the dominance of the national question and the political effects of the rural ethos dominating Irish society. Both placed limitations on the growth of the political Labour movement.

But Labour used its limited political strength to shape Irish politics forever in a way that is still largely ignored but which should cause us to reflect on how to use the much greater strength we enjoy today. By entering the first Dáil of the new Free State, the Labour Party ensured that parliamentary democracy would be given the chance to establish itself.

We provided an effective opposition which is indispensable to making a parliament function on the basis of popular legitimacy and respect for the rule of law.

Five years later, in 1927, Labour convinced the newly formed Fianna Fáil party that it should enter Dáil Éireann and thereby ensured that parliamentary democracy would be entrenched in the new Ireland and would become the enduring feature of the new state.

Five years further on, in 1932, the Labour Party again exercised its independence of choice when it supported the formation of a minority Fianna Fáil government and brought De Valera to power for the first time.

In retrospect, that decision in 1932 was as significant as those of 1918, 1922 or 1927, but one we prefer to ignore. It could be argued that we helped to create a Frankenstein monster, which is still with us, even if enfeebled.

Ten years after putting De Valera in power the party well realised what it had done when, in 1943, Fianna Fáil unleashed a witch hunt against Labour led, no less, by the deputy from this constituency, Seán MacEntee.

The wheel turned full circle when Labour helped unseat Fianna Fáil in 1948 and again in 1954, a cycle that was to be repeated in 1973, 1981 and 1982 and now, again this year. That cycle was punctuated, of course, by the decision in 1992 to coalesce with Fianna Fáil.

A complicated relationship

So, as we can see, our relationship with Fianna Fáil has been a complicated one. We helped create this Fianna Fáil monster, then couldn't control it. Its very existence was proof of the primary importance accorded by the electorate to the national question over social and economic issues. At least this was true up to the retirement of De Valera. After that, Fianna Fáil began to morph into the party of economic growth, modernisation, of sound management, while Ireland began to urbanise and secularise.

Fianna Fáil constantly adapted to these changes to the point where its original *raison d'être* had vanished completely.

Ending partition and restoring the Irish language had been abandoned by a Fianna Fáil which first became the "Party of Reality" and then the "Party of Power". It then became the "Party of Property" and convinced a good portion of the Irish electorate that it had found the key to eternal growth. Very few listened to alternative voices, such as Labour, which won only 10% of the vote in each of the three elections prior to the General Election last March.

In that election, the collapse of Fianna Fáil support, following the implosion of the economy, was as great as the collapse of the Parliamentary Party in 1918. Yet the history of that time serves as a warning that electorates can be fickle and, on the face of it, irrational.

The shift in votes between 1922 and 1927 was continued on into 1932 and had strengthened to the point that by 1933 Fianna Fáil had won an overall majority. The people rejected those who, ten years earlier, had brought the state into being

and had established law and order in the face of anarchy and treason.

In 1933, gratitude was, as ever in human affairs, in short supply. The Labour Party too suffered in that process and its parliamentary strength fell from twenty-two seats in the general election of 1922 to only five in 1933, the election which ushered in the De Valera era.

Turning to an untried political party with half-baked economic policies was an irrational choice by the electorate in the midst of a world economic depression and it is prudent to ask if history has lessons for Labour in the aftermath of this year's General Election when the world finds itself mired in another Great Depression.

I believe it has.

I think the first thing to say is that Fianna Fáil has not gone away. They still have a rump of a fifth of the vote and as the Presidential and Dublin West elections demonstrated that could be augmented by a sizable quantity of votes if the circumstances were right.

The future of Fianna Fáil depends primarily on two factors: the propensity of the electorate to forget rather than forgive the economic catastrophe that party brought on the country and, secondly, the willingness of the electorate to endure the pain of dealing with the catastrophe and of absolving the current government of the responsibility for the tough economic measures that have to be taken.

The problem for the Labour Party is that the popular memory is short and public gratitude is scarce. The more immediate problem for the party is the media, which has effectively become the permanent opposition and has become populist, relentless, ruthless and merciless, and may well erode the very consensus on which the current reform programme is based.

The situation is all the more serious when the state broadcaster, both on TV and radio, is as bad as the worst elements of the tabloid press owned by Fleet Street or Wapping. To survive,

we need to counteract this malign demagoguery. We need talk over the head of the media to the electorate and constantly explain, with a John Hume like devotion to repetition, that we are not responsible for the catastrophe and, hence, are not to blame for the pain that will have to be endured for years to come.

If we lose that battle for the mind of the electorate it is more likely that the vacuum created by loss of support for us and Fine Gael will be filled by some weird combination of Sinn Féin, left wing radicals, populists and political con men.

The Party to watch out for

The irrationality of 1933 could be repeated at the next election.

The party to be watched is Sinn Féin rather than Fianna Fáil. To me, it seems reminiscent of the Fianna Fáil party in 1933: economically illiterate, politically naive, socially conservative, parochial in outlook, religious in its devotion to the cause, self righteous in its beliefs, convinced of ultimate success and contemptuous of its opponents.

It has the same level of devotion and organisation that first brought De Valera to power in 1932 and kept his party in government for sixty-seven of the following seventy-nine years, a record unequalled in any other western democracy.

The question is whether "Life after Fianna Fáil" is to be "Life With Sinn Féin". Are we heading into another period of political dominance by a single party that is tantamount to one-party rule masquerading as a parliamentary democracy?

If history is anything to go by then the answer is disquieting and can only be "yes".

After all, Fianna Fáil support over the past eight decades never fell below forty per cent and sometimes reached fifty per cent of the vote. The danger is that this half of the electorate is just as capable of supporting a newer form of populism

as it was of supporting the old, particularly if egged on by an equally populist media led by the national broadcaster and the English tabloid press.

So, the future does not look good from a Labour perspective, the present show of strength could be no more than a brief interlude in an otherwise barren history. Four times in the past the Labour Party was punished by a majority of the electorate for going into government and doing its duty: in 1951, 1957, 1977 and 1987. It seems inconceivable that the next general election in 2016 will be any different in terms of quality or outcome.

Fianna Fáil will hardly disappear but it will have become a mere rump of the party from which it originally sprang. Both Fine Gael and the Labour Party will resume their customary role as a responsible but irrelevant opposition. The future will belong to a new form of mindless populism.

Hardly a future to be relished.

A publication of:
Scáthán Press
www.brendanhalligan.com

edit/design: Cyberscribe.ie