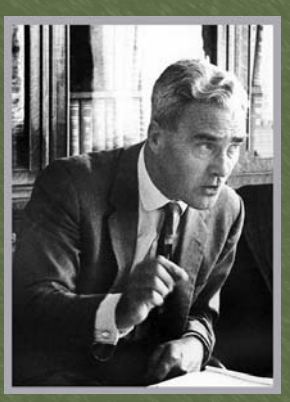
SNAPSHOTS:

FIVE DAYS IN







LABOUR PARTY HISTORY

Essays originally published in The Irish Times, 1978

By Brendan Halligan

SNAPSHOTS:
FIVE DAYS OF LABOUR PARTY HISTORY

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No. 1
The Triumph of the Green Flag:
Friday, 1 November 1918

William O'Brien

Fifteen hundred delegates jammed the Mansion House. It was a congress unprecedented in the history of the Labour Movement in Ireland. Or, in the mind of one Labour leader, in the history of the Labour movement in any country in Europe. The euphoria was forgivable.

The Special Conference of the Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress (to give it its full name) was truly impressive, both in terms of its size and the vehemence with which it opposed the conscription a British government was about to impose on Ireland.

But it was nothing compared to what happened four days later. Responding to the resolution passed by the Conference, Irish workers brought the economic life of the country to a standstill. It was the first General Strike in Ireland.

Its success was total, except for Belfast. Nothing moved. Factories and shops were closed. No newspapers were printed. Even the pubs were shut. The political effects of this great display of unity and solidarity were immediate. The British Government was forced to abandon its plans to impose conscription on Ireland.

The 23rd April 1918 will be chiefly remembered, wrote the *Irish Times*, as the day on which Labour realised its strength. And we shall not hurriedly neglect that lesson, prophesied William O'Brien, when opening the Annual Conference four months later.

Yet by the year-end, Labour was to make a decision on its role in Irish political life based on a realisation of its weaknesses rather than on its strengths. It was to be a decision that, even to this day, is regarded as the most controversial in the party's history.

A controversial decision

Labour was about to decide to stand aside and permit Sinn Féin to contest the 1918 General Election without any opposition from Labour or trade union candidates. That decision was to shape the nature of Irish politics for the rest of the century and to assign a minor political role to the Irish working class.

If the banners were to go forth (as O'Brien entitled his autobiography) Labour was about to fold the red flag and to unfurl the green.

The anti-conscription campaign had put Labour at the head of the struggle against the British government, largely for the reason that no other organisation could have mounted the opposition to conscription on so vast a scale and with such telling effect. Buoyed up with this success, Labour decided to contest the General Election expected before the year was over.

It would not be its first electoral contest. Parliamentary by-elections had been previously contested, though without success. There had been successes however, at local level and it seemed only logical there should be an attempt to repeat this at national level.

In any event, the Irish Trade Union Congress was also, at the one and the same time, a political party. This unique character had been bestowed upon it by Connolly at the 1912 Annual Conference in Clonmel, when he had persuaded the delegates to incorporate the political representation of Labour amongst the Congress's objectives.

He had regarded it as one of his life's greatest triumphs and the Congress now operated under the long title of "The Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress". The Congress was the party; the party was the Congress; the two were one in a sort of mystical union.

But in the intervening years the political side of this dual organisation had not been developed. There was, for example, no separate machinery for fighting elections. And the times did not lend themselves to the mundane task of building a political machine.

There had been a succession of titanic events: the 1913 Lockout, the outbreak of the 1914 World War, the 1916 Rising, the growth of the independence movement, the expansion of the trade unions themselves and, lastly, the anti-conscription campaign.

Neither had there been time for formal politics in the electoral sense. The last General Election had been in 1912. But now the time had apparently come. The 1918 General Election was at hand and it would give Labour its first opportunity to engage in normal politics on a nationwide basis and to seek electoral support for class politics.

The enhanced prestige of the Labour Movement, arising from the success of its anti-conscription campaign, heightened the expectations of Labour's future role in Ireland. Giving his Presidential Address at the Annual Congress held in Waterford during August, William O'Brien was ecstatic:

"The power and the influence Labour can exercise on the future of Ireland will be not one whit less great or less effective than will be the power and influence of Labour in any other country", he said.

However he was realistic enough to warn the assembled delegates that on the political front, not enough progress had been made because the War had brought political activities, like elections, to a standstill.

"We are apparently face to face with the renewal of battle on the political field and the resumption of elections, both National and Local", he told the delegates, and so they must build up an election machine, elaborate on political policy and electoral programmes, while completing the structure of the Labour Party.

"In the organisation of our political machinery we shall be helped by the great hosts of new voters who have come upon the new register."

In fact, the electorate had been increased from 700,000 to nearly two million, because of the extension of the franchise, particularly to women. It would be the first truly democratic election in Ireland's history.

And the aim of all this activity?

"We must secure Labour representation, independent, able, strong efficient and constructive on all public bodies, both national and local." There was not only to be a General Election, but Local Elections as well. Hence the need for progress on both fronts.

Keeping up the momentum of the anti-conscription campaign, the Conference decided to draw up a manifesto for the General Election, as well as a new constitution, and to present both to a special Congress by year-end. There was no denying their appetite for participatory democracy.

Manifesto

Six weeks later the Manifesto was published. "We must support our Trade Unionism by our politics … Hence it is that the Irish Labour Party announces itself as a combatant in the coming electoral struggle", ran the first of three messages.

It appeared simple and clear cut as a message, but it was not. In the minds of the authors, trade union and political activity were not to be seen as complementary. Trade Unionism was to take precedence – from its strength would flow political power. This particular analysis was to have a critical bearing on the decision to step down from politics six weeks later.

The Manifesto stated clearly that "whatever part Labour is destined to play in the political life of Ireland, its part in the industrial and economic life must always take precedence, since in Ireland, as everywhere else, economic power must precede and make possible political power". It is a belief that has persisted in the Irish Trade Union Movement to this day, and it was as false then as it is now.

Next, it admitted that, "the predominant issue" before the electorate "would be one not of Labour's choosing". There was no attempt to deny realities.

"We would have preferred", came the second message, "that the entry of organised Labour into the political arena had been to fight on questions directly connected with the social and economic conditions of the people … The realities of today are the War and its reactions. Amongst these reactions, Ireland's national claim stands out, boldly demanding satisfaction".

That was a tricky one, for, unlike Sinn Fein or Carson's Unionists, the Congress party embraced both Catholic and Protestant workers in the one movement. And it could not simultaneously satisfy the differing political aspirations of both. The formula used on the issue of self-determination was ingenious.

"We adopt the principle", said the Manifesto, "of the Russian Revolution, supported as it is by pronouncements of President Wilson, the right of all peoples to self-determination. We mean that Ireland … shall have the right to decide on its own form of Government".

This invocation of the Russians and the Americans was not enough. In the North, the Declaration was taken to be too pro-nationalist and, in Belfast, the Trades Council refused to put forward Labour candidates because of it.

The last major statement of policy in the Manifesto dealt with the issue of abstention. On this, Sinn Féin was making all the running, having declared that their elected numbers would refuse to attend Westminster. Instead, they would set up an independent parliament in Dublin.

Once more Solomon-like qualities were demanded of Labour's leaders. On the abstention question, the Manifesto declared that the National Executive had decided by unanimous vote i.e. Green and Orange had agreed, "that the members of the Irish Labour Party shall not attend the House of Commons".

This was not what it seemed at first sight. The reason for abstention was not the Sinn Féin principle of Ireland's right to self-determination but rather Labour's protest against conscription, which the Manifesto condemned as a "Declaration of War on the Irish Nation". To go to Westminster in these circumstances would be "moral surrender".

Meanwhile, candidates were chosen by the Dublin Trades Council for four Dublin constituencies, amongst them James Larkin, then in New York, from where he cabled his acceptance of the nomination. This pleased at least one group in the nationalist camp, the Parliamentary Party. They saw their opposition divided between Sinn Féin and Labour and their prospects of success correspondingly enhanced.

By the same token, Sinn Féin became highly alarmed. Labour participation in the election might needlessly lose seats to the Nationalists and so damage the claim to self-determination.

De Valera claimed their enemies were trying to get Labour and Sinn Féin opposed to each other and to put them in different camps. As an inducement to unity, he foretold that Labour would have a better chance of its aspirations being achieved in a free Ireland rather than in one tacked on to Britain.

A meeting was held between both parties. Labour wanted to contest four Dublin constituencies and fifteen in other parts of the country. But a week later, Sinn Féin endorsed candidates for three of the Dublin constituencies. That was putting it up to Labour. Secret negotiations continued throughout October with the Sinn Féin representatives even presenting a form of oath to the Irish Republic incorporating the special requirements, as they saw it, of Labour candidates.

But events have their own momentum. In the European theatre, the War had turned with great suddenness against the Central Powers. First Turkey capitulated. Then Austria collapsed and signed an Armistice. The German Army was on the retreat. Ludendorff was deposed. The end of the "war to end all wars" was imminent.

Special Congress

In the dramatic circumstances, the daily tottering of thrones and the births of new Republics as Tom Johnson was to describe them, the Sinn Féin Árd-Fheis was held on the two days immediately prior to Labour's Special Congress. At the Árd-Fheis the pressure on Labour became intense. Seán T. O'Kelly, later to be President of the Republic, asked Labour "to stand aside to allow the election to be fought on the clean issue of Ireland versus England".

On the morning of the Special Congress two days later, the National Executive met and decided, with only two dissentients, to recommend that the Labour Party should withdraw from the forthcoming General Election.

This was to be done "in the hope that the democratic demand for self-determination, to

which the Irish Labour Party and its candidates give their unqualified adherence, will thereby obtain the freest chance of expression at the polls". Sinn Fein could have asked for no more.

Tom Johnson, Treasurer of the Congress, and an Englishman, the main drafter of the democratic programme of the First Dáil, and four years later to be the first Leader of the Labour Party, was given the task of introducing the statement to the Conference. He had probably drafted most of it anyway. His explanation for the *volte face* was difficult to follow.

Six weeks before, he said, when the National Executive had decided it was in "the best interests of Ireland and Labour" that a number of constituencies should be fought by Labour candidates, there was little sign of an early peace.

So the dissolution of Parliament would take place during the war and be succeeded by a second election to be held in peacetime.

In the period between the two elections, the party was to have used the time for active educational propaganda to ensure that the Irish Republic – he was quick to qualify that by adding, "if such were to be the form of government determined upon by the people" – would be a Workers' Republic, not an imitation of those Republics of Europe and America "where political democracy is but a cloak for capitalist oligarchy".

But the sudden collapse of the Central Powers had decided that the election now upon them was to be the "Peace Election" and not the "War Election". The world would judge Ireland's claim at any Peace Conference by the degree of unanimity made at the polls on the demand for self-determination.

The Executive believed the workers of Ireland "would willingly sacrifice, for a brief period, their aspirations towards political power if thereby the fortunes of the nation can be enhanced". This drew applause, and it was obvious the Executive had judged the mood of the Conference correctly.

But there came a dissenting voice from the floor almost immediately.

D.R. Campbell of the Belfast Trade Council said he found the distinction between a "War Election" and a "Peace Election" to be too subtle to understand but the effect of the decision would be to "leave the field open to the Nationalists and Sinn Féiners in the South and to give a walkover to the Conservative crowd in the North".

The Nationalists claimed that the national question transcended working class issues, which should be left in abeyance. This was too much of a somersault for him.

His voice was an influential one. He had been chosen to seek the representation of Ireland at the upcoming meeting of the Socialist International and had succeeded by securing the support of the Russian Government after a meeting with Litvinoff.

The other major objector was Cathal O'Shannon, who argued that the absence of members of parliament in the Irish delegation at the Socialist International would diminish Irish influence.

Another delegate said Ireland would be the only country at the International, with the exception of Turkey, without socialist members of parliament.

But such considerations were of little interest to the delegates. John Cronin of the Limerick Trades Council put it best. No matter how powerful they might claim Labour to be in Ireland, they could be fairly certain that the great bulk of Labour supporters would vote for one political party or the other. Organised bodies of Labour down south had stated they would vote Sinn Féin against any man.

That was that. Johnson, in replying, underlined the Executive's dilemma, caught as it was between the competing and contradictory claims of the North and South. Had the North put up candidates, the Executive decision would have been different. If the South had responded differently (no constituency outside Dublin had selected Labour candidates) the decision might have been different.

"If the Party did not follow the lead, the Executive was not foolish enough to run its head against a stone wall". If they fought in these circumstances, the outcome could "be damaging to the prestige and authority of the Irish Labour Movement".

The resolution was carried by 96 votes to 23 and the announcement of the result was received with much applause.

The acclaim was not universal. The *Irish Times* the next day likened the proceedings of the Congress to a chapter from Alice in Wonderland. And its analysis of the impact of the decision was as percipient as ever.

"It is significant that the Congress, by a swift and complete change of mind, had decided to withdraw all its candidates for Irish seats at the next General Election. The decision will operate, of course, in favour of Sinn Féin and against the interests of the Parliamentary Party, for it will avert three-cornered contests in several constituencies. Sinn Féin will win the next election with the help of Irish internationalism, which applauds the fall of the Tsar and the downfall of the Russian Church. Sedition and Bolshevism will go hand in hand to the polls".

A price to pay

Three weeks later, the British Parliament was dissolved. Sinn Féin won the subsequent election as forecast and the First Dáil was assembled, with Labour on the outside looking in. From its birth the new assembly was without any effective working class voice or influence and the Irish Labour Party remained the smallest socialist party in any European state.

By its decision on 1 November 1918 to sacrifice itself in the national interest, the Labour Party ensured the continuing triumph of that narrow and conservative ideology over the internationalist and humanitarian beliefs of socialism. And it has lived with the consequences ever since. It has been a bitter price to pay for doing the right thing.

- End -

No. 2
The Day Labour almost came to Power:
Tuesday, 16 August 1927

Tom Johnson

It started with the assassination of Kevin O'Higgins. On Sunday morning, 10 July 1927, the Vice-President of the Cumann na nGael government was gunned down on his way to Mass. The killers were never caught.

The Dáil met two days later in solemn session to pass a vote of sympathy to the widow and family of the assassinated Minister. In his speech, President Cosgrave gave a hint of what was to come. This crime would fail in its object, he said. The Government would meet that form of terrorism as it had met all forms of terrorism and would not falter until every vestige of it was wiped out from the land.

Eight days later, Cosgrave introduced three bills without notice, one that was to amend the Constitution, a power the Dáil then enjoyed. Johnson, as Leader of the Labour Party, objected immediately to the manner in which the bill was introduced and indicated Labour's opposition. The second stage was set for the following Tuesday, 26th July.

As Cosgrave saw it, O'Higgins was assassinated precisely because he was Vice-President. It was not an act of hatred or revenge, but an organised crime and others, more hideous and violent, could follow. The state and public safety were endangered. Both had to be protected. Hence the emergency legislation.

But for Labour, the package of three Bills meant something else; the attempted suppression by the Government of a rival political party. One of the Bills would have prevented Fianna Fáil, then only one year old and still refusing to take their seats in the Dáil, from standing in an election. The danger was that the Government could push De Valera back into the physical force movement.

Labour's Opposition to the Bill

A week later, with the Public Safety Bill before the Dáil, the Annual Conference of the Labour Party and Trade Union Congress was opened by its President, Senator T.J. O'Farrell. His remarks epitomised the great chasm that had opened up between the Cumann na nGael government and its Labour opposition.

The Bill to amend the constitution would abrogate the safeguards for individual rights, he declared, "and we who have been advocating constitutional methods of making political changes are smacked in the face with this Bill".

Labour's opposition to the package was relentless. The personal bitterness between Cosgrave and Johnson became intense. When the Minister for Education accused Labour deputies of making capital out of the death of O'Higgins, Johnson uncustomarily lost his cool.

"Withdraw, withdraw," he demanded over and over again.

Cosgrave refused to allow the Minister to resign. He accused Labour of opposing the legislation without being prepared to accept responsibility for dealing with the political crisis.

Enraged, Johnson withdrew his colleagues from the chamber shouting "Liar, liar, liar!"

As he left, Cosgrave continued to taunt him that Labour was afraid to accept responsibility. Jim Everett of Wicklow followed his Leader out of the House whistling *The Girl I Left Behind Me*, to the intense annoyance of Ministers and Officials and to the delight of the press, as they recorded the following day.

This political enmity between Cosgrave and Johnson was now in its zenith. Cumann na nGael, with forty-five deputies elected that June, was the largest party in the Dáil. But Labour, providing the opposition from the beginnings of the Free State, had twenty-two. Bill Norton had won a By-Election a year earlier and before that again Labour had claimed 15% of the vote in the Senate Elections.

No wonder then, that O'Farrell could go on to say at the Conference that the political situation in the Free State was such that at any time Labour could be called upon to assume Government.

"We have every reason to hope for the return to power of a Labour Government at the next election". That, perhaps, was pushing it too far. But something was clearly happening.

The economic policies of the Government had displayed a callous indifference to poverty and the suffering it created.

Opposing Cosgrave's re-election as President of the Executive Council two months earlier, Johnson gave as Labour's reasons a whole catalogue of inequities: the reduction of old age pensions, the row over wage rates on the Shannon scheme, "a starvation wage standard" he called it, the reduction of civil service wages, a rent act favouring landlords, the refusal, time and time again, of the Government to accept responsibility to end unemployment, and the withdrawal of home assistance leaving thousands on the verge of starvation.

The Minister for Industry and commerce, Paddy McGilligan, personified the classical *laissez faire* philosophy of Cumann na nGael.

It was not the Government's responsibility to find work. There was only so much money at its disposal, he explained.

So, "people may have to die in this country and may have to die through starvation". These were the matters, together with the "sell-out" on the Boundary Commission, which made it imperative for Labour to oppose Cosgrave.

But with Fianna Fáil remaining outside of the Dáil because of their refusal to take the oath, opposition to Cosgrave was a matter of form, not substance. The new party had to be cajoled into the Dáil.

Hence Johnson's blazing anger at what he saw as a crude attempt to crush De Valera at the very moment the Fianna Fáil leader was trying to complete the delicate manoeuvre of entering the Dáil and thus normalising politics once and for all.

So, the day after he had walked out of the Dáil, Johnson came back in again and on the order of business, hounded Cosgrave once more, demanding a withdrawal of the smear against his party and declaring that Labour would be prepared to accept the responsibility of government of the country without the powers in the Public Safety Bill.

It seemed a crazy statement. With only twenty-two deputies, how could Labour form a Government, especially when the forty-three Fianna Fáil deputies refused to take the Oath of Allegiance to the King and their seats in the Dáil? But events moved over the next two weeks with a speed that caught everybody – except Johnson – unawares.

Cosgrave relentlessly pushed his legislative package through the Dáil, which sat through the night of 3rd August.

De Valera, in desperation, called a meeting of all the opposition parties to decide on a means to defeat the Bills. Johnson curtly refused to attend. The only way to defeat the legislation, he wrote back, was to vote against it in the Dáil.

De Valera got the message when only Jim Larkin, representing the Workers' Union of Ireland, turned up at the meeting. A week later, on 11th August, a midnight announcement from Fianna Fáil Headquarters told a startled world that their forty-three deputies would take their Dáil seats. And the oath?

"An empty political formula which deputies can conscientiously sign", said the statement, on an issue that had been at the centre of a bitter and needless Civil War.

Taking their seats in the Dáil

Later that morning, every one of the forty-three Fianna Fail deputies presented themselves at Leinster House. First to arrive were the whips, Seán Lemass, Gerald Boland and Frank Aiken. They were met by Tom Johnson and Captain Redmond, Leader of the Irish National League – in effect the remnants of the old Irish Parliamentary Party.

The two leaders introduced the Fianna Fáil whips to the Clerk of the Dáil and to the Ceann Comhairle, Michael Hayes, a deputy from the National University constituency, and the man who was to undo Johnson at the climax of the drama.

The following day was a Friday in mid August, but the Dáil was still in session. The forty-three Fianna Fáil TDs took their seats.

By now it was common knowledge that Labour was prepared to form an alternative government with Redmond's party and that Fianna Fáil was willing to vote for the coalition. The newspapers speculated that Johnson could muster seventy-four votes to seventy for Cosgrave.

On the order of business after Question Time, Johnson rose and asked Cosgrave if he proposed to do anything in view of the change in the composition of the Dáil. For the first time since 1922, the chamber was truly representative of all parties; its benches were crammed with deputies, the galleries packed with spectators, the streets outside crowded with people. It was an historic occasion. Irish democracy had come of age. "I do not know the meaning of that question" Cosgrave replied acidly.

Cosgrave did not propose anything. But Johnson did. He announced he would move that the Dáil would meet the following Tuesday and that there would then be presented a motion of "no confidence" in the Executive Council. It is to Cosgrave's credit that he replied with humour. "I am not to be taken as agreeing to that motion". The newly-seated Fianna Fáil deputies said nothing.

The no-confidence procedure was a clever device on Johnson's part, because under the Free State Constitution, a Government which lost such a motion could not dissolve the Dáil. It would have to resign and be replaced from the existing deputies.

Over the weekend Johnson issued a statement reiterating what had become the central theme of Labour Party policy: "a Government from outside the two contending sections of the Sinn Féin split should hold office for a period sufficiently long to clarify the political atmosphere resulting from the Treaty split and the Civil War".

It was a noble ambition.

It was assumed, accurately, that Fianna Fáil would support a Labour-led government. After all, De Valera had been in and out of the Labour rooms in Leinster House all day Friday.

The National League was also assumed to be ready to participate in the new Government. When one of its deputies resigned the whip to support Cosgrave, the intentions of the National League, although still officially secret, were obvious.

All the newspapers speculated on the possible composition of the new Cabinet. Johnson was to be President (as the Taoiseach was then called) as well as Minister for Justice. William O'Brien, the General Secretary of the ITGWU, was to be Minister for Finance, and Richard Corish, the Minister for Defence or Local Government, depending on which newspaper you read.

When the Dáil met on Tuesday, 16th August, the crowds again filled the streets around Leinster House and packed the galleries. The expected result was now 72 – 70 against the Government. Labour was one deputy short; T.J. O'Connell being in Canada at an educational conference.

Desmond Fitzgerald, father of Garret FitzGerald, returned from a serious operation in London for the vote in order to provide a full muster for Cumann na nGael, in contrast with the depleted ranks of the Labour Party and the National League.

An independent farmer was undecided, although all eleven members of the Farmers Party, bitterly opposing Labour, had indicated their support for Cosgrave.

Despite the drama of the occasion the speeches were dull. Johnson was pedestrian in repeating Labour's argument that both civil war factions should be put on the political sideline for the good of the nation. He invited them to join together, for what divided them he asked, except their attitude to the Treaty?

Captain Redmond pompously informed the House that all his seven deputies would support the motion. Sean T. O'Kelly spoke for Fianna Fáil in Irish. He was their only participant in the debate.

"Ta's ag gach éinne sa Dáil cad é an tuairm atá againne i dtaobh Rialtais seo an tSaorstat".

That was putting it mildly. Accordingly, he said, they would not speak in the debate but they would vote for Johnson's motion.

The Government's goose was cooked. Or so it seemed. But seldom has a political prophecy proven so wrong.

Johnson wound up the debate he had opened, replying caustically to an independent deputy from Cavan, O'Hanlon, who was editor of the Anglo-Celt, and who had said, "I cannot possibly give my vote to put at the head of this State an Englishman". Indeed, Johnson was an Englishman. But that did not prevent De Valera and his party from voting for him.

When the motion was put to the House and the deputies had called out "Tá" and "Níl" in the normal manner, the acting chairman intoned "I think the motion is carried". So did we all, commented the *Irish Times* next day. It is the nearest Labour has ever come to power as the majority party in Government.

The Elusive Alderman Jinks

A division was immediately challenged and then there was consternation. Where was Alderman Jinks, the National League deputy, who a short time previously had been in his place in the Dáil behind Redmond, his Leader?

A frantic search was conducted, but too late. The Sligo deputy was missing. The doors of the chamber were locked, the vote taken and the hitherto undecided independent voted for Cosgrave.

When the votes were counted there was a sensation. Each side had 71 votes, the only tie in the history of the Dáil until then. The Ceann Comhairle had a casting vote. How would he use it? He gave his reasons.

"In the first place, the vote of the Chairman should, I think, always be given in such a way as to provide, if possible, that the House would have an opportunity for reviewing the decision arrived at.

Secondly, the status quo should, if possible, be preserved. Further, a motion of "no confidence" in any Executive should be affirmed by a majority of Deputies and not merely by the casting vote of the presiding officer of the House. I therefore vote against the motion. The figures consequently are: For the motion 71; against the motion 72. I accordingly declare the motion lost".

What better way to describe this sensational ending than the *Irish Times* of the following day?

> "There have been many dramatic incidents in Free State politics during the last six or seven years: but yesterday's developments in Dáil Éireann eclipsed them all. They were without parallel in the history of Parliaments, and the story of how President Cosgrave's Government was saved from defeat by the casting vote of the speaker is a theme for the writers of thrilling novels rather than for the staid record of political events".

The most crucial element in the tied vote had been the disappearance of Alderman Jinks. He later explained he had left the Dáil because he didn't want to vote either way and had simply taken the train home to Sligo.

He hadn't been kidnapped, as legend has it. At least that was his story, however improbable. But more importantly, from Labour's point of view, where was T.J. O'Connell, soon to be the Party Leader? Why wasn't he brought home from Canada? That's the bigger mystery.

The aftermath was cruel. Johnson never spoke in the Dáil again because the following week Cosgrave won two by-elections with increased majorities and dissolved the Dáil.

In the ensuing general election his party won fifteen extra seats and he was re-elected President of the Executive for another five years.

But for Johnson it was a personal disaster. He lost his seat and never regained it.

That loss, sadly, can be attributed in part to the intervention of Jim Larkin and his supporters in the September election.

They had stayed out of the June contest, which to some extent accounted for a good Labour result in Dublin.

The September losses, obviously, were not totally due to the tragic split in the Labour Movement, which was to keep Larkin out of the party for another fifteen years. But it was a major contributory factor. Had Larkin been within the party then, Labour would have been stronger politically, and the casting vote of Professor Hayes would not have been needed.

If Johnson had become President of the Executive in 1927 it would have undone to a great extent the damage caused by abstaining from the 1918 election. It would also have introduced a set of political alternatives along class lines in competition with the sterile Fianna Fail/Cumann na nGael (Fine Gael) confrontations which froze Irish politics for the rest of the century.

Additionally, it would have been a powerful boost to Labour's electoral fortunes. Lastly, it would have given this country the best Head of Government in its history, even if he was an Englishman.

Tuesday, 16th August 1927 was not just a day when fortune cruelly robbed Labour of the chance to make itself a major party. It was the day Civil War politics were made permanent and given precedence over class issues. It was a day when everybody lost.

- End -

No. 3
Why Labour put De Valera in Power
9 March 1932

William Norton

It was a hung Dáil. No party held an overall majority and Labour, with independents, held the balance of power. As the *Irish Times* commented on 23 February, 1932, "Labour is in the key position and can make or unmake Governments". It was about to do both.

De Valera's new party had emerged as the strongest force in the Dáil only six years after its foundation but, with seventy-two seats, was still five short of an overall majority. Despite its ten years in office, Cumann na nGael had done well, losing just five seats but slipping into second place with fifty-seven seats. Outside the two main parties there was a bloc of twenty-four deputies, of whom thirteen were independents, with four belonging to the farmers. Labour had seven members, the lowest ever in the party's history.

It had been another disastrous election for the Labour Party, far worse than the dismal performance in the second 1927 election. Six seats had been lost, including that of the Party Leader, T.J. O'Connell. Yet this tiny Dáil representation was to be used with intelligence and flair, and with an impact unequalled in any subsequent Dáil. In fact, those seven deputies were to play a role equalled only in importance by those Labour Deputies who, in 1923, had elected to make the infant democracy work by acting as its first opposition.

On the 9th March 1932, the Labour Party was to be instrumental in ensuring that, for the first, and only, time in the history of the Free State, power was to pass peacefully from one Government to another, without violence or social convulsion. It was to be the final act in its role as midwife to parliamentary democracy in Ireland.

By February 1932 Labour's opposition to Cumann na nGael had become total, if not obsessive. The Government still refused to accept any responsibility for unemployment.

At the first Annual Conference of the re-organised party in July 1931, the Chairman, William Norton, had singled out the outstanding social evil of unemployment as the main theme of his address. He had advocated the establishment of publicly owned corporations as the economic answer and had defended the concept of "publicly owned industries".

But this ideological hostility between Labour and Cumann na nGael had been intensified by other events only four months prior to the election.

Just before the re-assembly of the Dáil, in the previous October, the Government had announced its Constitution Amendment Bill, intended to give complete and absolute power to the Executive Council (the Free State Government) to revoke all the articles of the Constitution that were inserted for the protection of the rights and liberties of the citizens.

The Bill provided for military courts and allowed any Minister, on his own certificate, to make anything done by anyone an offence. There was to be no constitutional protection to which to appeal.

The Bill was rushed through the Dáil, being introduced on Wednesday 14 October, and being passed through all stages by Friday by means of closure motions.

It was then introduced and forced through the Senate the following day, Saturday the 17th. In justification for these extreme measures and extraordinary procedures, it was argued by the Government that the activities of gunmen, the intimidation of jurymen and witnesses and the failure of the Gardaí to secure convictions in the Courts had made it essential to protect the rule of law.

Labour opposed this drastic onslaught on civil liberties, but at great cost. Two deputies, Daniel Morrissey of Tipperary and Richard Anthony of Cork City, refused to vote in accordance with a party decision to oppose the Bill and supported the Government, being acclaimed by an *Irish Times* Leader as "the two just men".

They were both expelled from the party. Morrissey went on to become a senior figure in Cumann na nGael and a Minister in the first Coalition Government. Anthony eventually returned to the ranks of Labour. But the damage to the party organisation and to its ability to win Dáil representation in both Constituencies was grievous in the long run. It was another split, added to that of the Larkin/O'Brien feud. And it confirmed the party in its determination to get rid of Cumann na nGael.

So, the decision on the formation of a new Government had, in a sense, been made by events. Shortly after the election, discussions were held in the Fianna Fail headquarters in Upper Mount Street between Mr De Valera and Labour representatives, headed by William Norton. Agreement was not difficult.

7-Point Programme

Twelve days after the election, the Administrative Council, together with the newly elected Deputies and Senators, agreed on a seven-point programme of policy for the new Dáil sessions.

The first two points emphasised Labour's independence as a party and stated clearly the

party would neither seek nor accept office in the new Government. The last two indicated that Labour would not contest the position of Ceann Comhairle but would put forward Deputy Paddy Hogan of Clare as Leas Ceann Comhairle.

The three points in the middle of the statement went to the heart of the matter. Point three said Labour would co-operate with and give support to the new Government on matters such as "unemployment, housing, widows and orphans pensions, transport" and industrial and economic development.

Point four repeated Labour's opposition to the Oath of Allegiance to the British Monarch, which deputies were theoretically required to take before taking their seats. It also emphasised that the party wanted the question of the land annuities re-opened with the British Government.

And lastly, the party wanted the restoration of constitutional guarantees for the individual citizen, which had been removed by the outgoing Cumann na nGael Government.

The same meeting decided that William Norton, winning Kildare for the first time, should be Leader, since the outgoing Leader, T.J. O'Connell, had lost his seat.

All this lead inexorably to one conclusion. Labour would not support Cosgrave. Five years previously the Labour Party had attempted to form a coalition to oust Cumann na nGael and had failed by one vote in a dramatic end to a no-confidence debate. It was outraged by that Government's indifference to the unemployment problem and callous social policy. And it was angered by its policy on civil liberties.

The Annual Report for 1932 puts it well:

> "The Labour Party was forced to accept a serious responsibility. They could assist Fianna Fail or Cumann na nGael to form a Government. It was decided they could not decide the latter, particularly on their record in regard to unemployment. Among other reasons, their refusal to accept responsibility for the provision of work for all for whom private enterprise was unable to cater, made it impossible for our deputies to support Cumann na nGael. As a result of the acceptance by Fianna Fail of the responsibility for catering for the unemployed and other assurances received from them, the Labour Party decided to support Fianna Fail in forming a Government".

Discussions took place between Labour and Fianna Fáil, at which De Valera promised to tackle the unemployment and housing problems and to formulate a scheme of pensions for widows and orphans (who received nothing at that time). As a result, the Labour Party decided to support Fianna Fáil in forming a Government and to vote for the Bill to remove the obligation on Deputies to take the Oath of Allegiance.

When the new Dáil met on 9th March, 1932 it did so on the proclamation of Eoin McNeill, the Governor General, "in the name of His Majesty the King". The first business was the election of a Ceann Comhairle.

Fianna Fáil immediately moved the nomination of Frank Fahy, one of their members, in place of the outgoing Professor Michael Hayes. It was a highly controversial move, politicising the position of the Chair. But Labour voted with Fianna Fáil and Fahy became Ceann Comhairle.

Then came the fateful nomination for the President of the Executive Council, as the Taoiseach was known under the 1922 Constitution.

De Valera was proposed by Michael Kilroy and Oscar Traynor. The two nominating speeches were cursory, almost formal. Two independent deputies next rose to indicate they would vote for De Valera, the first noting that there would be only one nomination for the position. The second was James Dillon, later the Leader of Fine Gael.

W.T. Cosgrave, in effect the architect of the Free State, followed another short interjection by an independent. With a party of only fifty-seven deputies and faced with the certain opposition of Labour, and the bulk of the independents, he was finished.

Yet he handed over power to the man who had opposed him in arms without rancour and with considerable dignity.

Norton's speech

Norton spoke next and was the last speaker. His was the only real speech in the debate. He was unrepentant and immediately went on the attack. His first words were:

> "If we sit in this Parliament today, a Parliament representing the Irish Free State, we do so because the workers of Ireland during the troubled years through which we have passed rallied around the national cause and made it possible for this nation to win the measure of freedom it has won".

Norton then set the scene to explain Labour's decision to unseat Cumann na nGael and endorse Fianna Fáil.

> "In that struggle, the workers of Ireland did not join merely for the purpose of exchanging one capitalist for another. They joined in that struggle in the belief that the new Irish nation would give to the plain people of the country a better measure of social justice than had been obtained under the alien capitalist system which they had sought to destroy".

The hopes of the workers had been enshrined in the Democratic Programme of the first Dáil. For ten years the Labour party had pleaded with Cumann na nGael to honour that programme but, continued Norton, "we have pleaded in vain".

He dismissed Cumann na nGael to the shadows of history with a contemptuous farewell. "As far as the Labour Party is concerned … they can bid adieu to the outgoing Government with no feeling of regret whatever and with no kind wishes for their early return".

Then he addressed himself to the incoming Fianna Fáil administration, which at least promised the hope that it would tackle the social and economic problems facing the workers. There were 80,000 unemployed. He asked for the development of native industry. On housing, he requested a national housing authority to build 40,000 houses to rescue people from "the dens of ill-health in which they are condemned to live".

Then he added a key demand of the Labour Party, a pension scheme for widows and orphans "so as to remove from this State the reproach that it is one of the few nations in Europe where a scheme of pension is not provided".

This was a demand later to be met by Fianna Fáil and was a real and tangible gain arising from Labour's support of Fianna Fáil. Lastly, he asked for the introduction of worker participation in the industrial development programme – a policy demand that was to lie dormant for over forty years.

When it came to the vote, the result was eighty-one for De Valera and sixty-eight against, a majority of thirteen. Two "independent Labour" deputies voted for Cosgrave. If the Labour Party had decided to support Cosgrave he would have remained President with a slim majority, but a majority none the less. By its decision on 9 March 1932 the Labour Party had put an end to the most conservative government in the state's history.

But it had done more. It had enabled the popular will to be given effect in the Dáil by bringing the largest party to power. Any attempt to stop Fianna Fáil at that point by a coalition would most likely have led to serious unrest and would have endangered De Valera's strategy of getting away from the politics of the gun.

So the decision to support a minority Government from the outside was, from a

national point of view, a wise one, not least in terms of the social advances secured from the new Government.

But for all that, the 1932 election was a depressing confirmation of the enduring passions of the Civil War. In popular terms, Labour had been pushed into an electoral backwater. Its social and economic policies had been considered of little relevance by an electorate still gripped by the fever of nationalism and oblivious to the prevalence of injustice, poverty and emigration. It was 1918 all over again.

But if 1932 was the high point of civil war politics, it was also the great lost opportunity. At first sight, the alliance of Labour and Fianna Fáil was a natural one. Both drew their support from the lower classes and the agreement between De Valera and Norton had shown that Fianna Fáil's conservative nationalism could be tempered to good effect by the reforming zeal of the Labour Party.

But the alliance was short lived, and it was not Labour's fault. Eleven months later, De Valera, impatient with his minority position, called another election and gained the extra five seats needed for a clear majority. Nevertheless, Norton seconded his nomination as President on behalf of the Labour Party.

Again in 1937 Labour supported Fianna Fáil when De Valera was returned one short of a majority, but this time Norton warned that Labour would pursue its own policy on vital social and economic issues. The following year, Labour abstained on the vote for President for the first time. Norton explained that "as a protest against the deliberate misrepresentation and scurrilous attacks on the Labour Party by Fianna Fáil in the recent election we do not propose to vote for the motion" of the election of De Valera.

The saga was over. A period of twelve years of co-operation between Labour and Fianna Fáil had ended. And with them, the prospects of developing a modern state freed from the sterile nationalism and divisions of the Civil War.

Still, the 9 March 1932 was a day on which the red flag had proudly flown.

- End -

No. 4
Giving the Kiss of Life to Fine Gael
Wednesday, 18 February 1948

James Everett, Leader of National Labour

De Valera had done it again.

Forced into a minority position in the Dáil, as in 1932 and 1937, he had repeated his past tactic of going to the country for the second time within a year and, as twice before, had come back with a comfortable majority.

In 1944 his hold on government appeared impregnable. He had just proven his political touch to be as sure as ever. His stature as a world statesman was ensured by his masterful handling of Ireland's neutrality. He simply dominated his contemporaries, on either side of the House.

In the Dáil, the Fianna Fáil benches were docile and disciplined and with seventy-five deputies, they were by far the largest party. Across the floor of the chamber sat a dispirited and disunited opposition. Fine Gael's national vote had slumped by a third in two elections and its parliamentary representation was at its lowest ever.

To their right, on the Labour benches, the situation was even worse. The Labour movement was having its own civil war. There were now two Labour Parties and the divisions between them were bitter and deep.

A divided party

It had all been so different just a short while before. Good fortune, as ever, had deserted Labour at the very moment it was needed most.

In the previous General Election in 1943, Labour had won the largest national vote in its history, a vote so large that it was not exceeded until 1969. And it had been no flash in the pan either. The Local Elections beforehand had registered Labour gains all over the country and the party had gone into the general election in buoyant mood.

The Party's share of the national vote went up spectacularly, from 10% to 16%. Unfortunately, it did not translate into a proportionate number of seats, a perennial Labour problem. With seventeen deputies, however, the parliamentary party had doubled in size over night.

The country plainly was wearying of De Valera's rule and Labour was drawing in the disaffected vote. Fine Gael, on the other hand, looked a spent force, losing thirteen seats.

It was at this heady moment in Labour's history, based on a more secure foundation than the advances of 1927 that the Larkin/O'Brien feud broke out again. Or rather, reached its apogee.

Their personal enmity had split the Transport Union twenty years before and had led to the breakaway Workers Union of Ireland, not only keeping Larkin and his followers out of the Irish Trade Union Congress, but out of the Labour Party in consequence.

This division had robbed Labour of its natural support, particularly in the Dublin area, and accounted for the party's weakness in the capital, which gave it an uncharacteristically rural composition for a Labour Party.

As his life began to draw towards its close, Larkin sought to return to the official Labour movement.

O'Brien, however, was just as determined that he should not. Larkin was readmitted against O'Brien's wishes, but, rather than acquiesce in a democratic decision, he led his powerful Transport Union out of affiliation and set up his own rival party and trade union movement.

All this was too good an opportunity for De Valera to miss. He dissolved the Dáil and was rewarded by winning nine extra seats and, thereby, the majority he desired. But Labour was shattered. It lost nine seats. The breakaway party, known as National Labour, won four. For Labour it was a defeat even more humiliating that the second 1927 election.

For De Valera it was victory, but it was a pyrrhic victory, not least because of the Fianna Fáil campaign against Labour. The red smear had been used widely, the return of the Larkins, Big Jim and Young Jim, to party membership being used as justification. None of this had been helped by allegations from National Labour that the party was being infiltrated by communists.

The red smear campaign left a legacy of burning resentment against Fianna Fail and turned Labour into fierce opposition against the party it had helped to power in 1932.

Even without the episode of character assassination, there were sufficient other reasons for Labour to switch from support of De Valera, to neutrality and finally to all-out opposition. Once the party of ordinary people, Fianna Fáil had gradually became identified with the new moneyed interests.

During the war, De Valera had imposed a wages standstill order, which had cut incomes in real terms. He had introduced legislation

interfering with trade union rights, some of it later found to be unconstitutional.

On the industrial relations front, 1947 was an epoch-making year, as the *Irish Times* Annual Review described it. Many wage claims had been lodged before the Labour Court. Consumer Prices went up by 10% in a year and there was a national bus strike, amongst others.

In October, De Valera introduced a wide range of food subsidies in an attempt to keep down prices, but wages and prices were to be controlled at existing rates. If the unions did not agree then he would bring in legislation. To pay for the subsidies he imposed new taxation, mostly on working people.

Speaking at the Irish Trades Union Congress, Norton said that workers were suffering from a disunited movement. Indeed they were, for, by this time, O'Brien had taken his union out of the Congress as well and had set up a rival trade union organisation.

A new Republican party emerges

The disaffection with De Valera took on an unexpected form. A new republican party emerged, led by Seán Mac Bride, a former Chief of Staff of the IRA, who accused De Valera of betraying the ideals of the republican movement. In November, Clann na Poblachta, as it was christened, won two bi-elections and its leader entered the Dáil.

Suddenly it was a new ball game. In Newmarket-on-Fergus, on the last day of the year, De Valera announced that the Government proposed to fix the 4th February as polling day.

"Everybody has received full notice," he said. "The issue is really this; whether we should have a government such as we have had for the past fifteen years, a government which works as a team or whether we should have a government made up of representatives of a number of different parties".

It was a precise and accurate analysis of the central issue before the people. Indeed, it was to be the only issue in the ensuing election.

The parties began a five-week campaign, for which they were all prepared. At the beginning of the New Year, Labour had chosen forty-one candidates and was putting the finishing touches to its election manifesto, which came out on the 4th January.

It sought the national ownership of the railways and the flour milling industry, the establishment of a national credit institution to provide cheap money for employment schemes, legislation to facilitate the purchase of ground rents and a contributory social insurance scheme.

It was a minimalist position, accepting a role for Labour that would merely help to make life less harsh for those it aspired to represent. It most certainly was not a programme of socialist transformation, but was a sensible and pragmatic approach to the possibility of getting into power for the very first time.

Norton, who was to spend most of the five-week campaign in his own constituency, as was normal for him, signalled Labour's attitude towards a possible coalition. Attacking the cuts in workers' living standards and continuing emigration, he warned that, "the people would not permit this torture to continue".

Three days later, John A. Costello for Fine Gael declared that for the better part of fifteen years the country had been governed by a docile party machine under what was, in essence, a dictatorial leadership. It was to be the Fine Gael theme.

On the same day, Mac Bride attempted to defend his party against the red smear which was, by now, in full flood. "We have been accused of being Fascists, Communists and gunmen, but we are not any of these. We are Irish Nationalists and Catholic and Christian", he declared.

Labour's own Civil War

He was not the only one worried about the communist tag. In the middle of the campaign, Labour's civil war erupted. The leader of National Labour, James Everett, speaking from the fastness of his own Wicklow constituency, attacked Norton for harbouring communists in the Labour Party, presumably the sons of Larkin and Connolly, who were both candidates.

The alarm of Bill Davin can be gauged from his instant reply. If Everett could name these communists then Labour would give him the opportunity to prove his case before a civil or ecclesiastical court.

Norton, on one of his rare excursions outside Kildare, left nobody in any doubt as to where Labour stood by attacking "the pernicious doctrine of communism" while, appropriately enough, addressing a meeting in Ennis, the heart of De Valera's own constituency. He pledged the Labour Party would use all its strength to ensure that communism would not "stain the political or religious life of the nation".

As if that were not enough, he argued that the best bulwark against communism was the implementation of the Labour Party policy providing guaranteed employment at decent family wages and the provision of decent homes at reasonable rents.

It was not enough. Everett attacked him again. It was, after all, part of the *raison d'être* of the National Labour Party to eradicate communism from the Labour Movement. He was not to be so easily diverted.

Norton's priorities lay elsewhere, however. He said the Labour Party would welcome the assistance of any progressive party in forming a Government which was prepared to implement a vigorous policy to expand production, eradicate emigration, combat prices and to provide a plan for social security. In other words, Labour would enter Government.

Speaking in a downpour at the Final Rally in Dublin, he forecast that Labour would occupy a commanding position in the new Dáil and would use it to force the incoming Government to carry out the main elements of party policy.

It must have been music to the ears of the two thousand Party faithful who stood listening. When it was suggested the weather was too bad for all the candidates to speak, the crowd insisted the meeting should continue. It did.

The National Executive of the Trade Union Congress underwrote Norton's position with a public advertisement calling on workers to vote Labour because a Fianna Fáil victory would mean a "victory for the wealthy bosses who have publicly appealed for boss financial support" for that party.

Indeed they had, sixteen of them, an elite group of Ireland's new industrial class. Congress said a Fianna Fail victory would be "a victory for low wages and high prices".

But there was no Fianna Fáil victory. De Valera failed to secure the overall majority he again sought. He was in a minority of eleven, but not necessarily out of Government.

The *Irish Times* painted a possible scenario. "Fianna Fail can reasonably expect to obtain the votes of the National Labour Party and probably two independents. De Valera could then be elected on the casting vote of the speaker", as he was so charmingly described. That eventuality would be "humiliating in the extreme" for De Valera.

But something even more humiliating was in store for him. An alternative Government was being pieced together.

There was never any real doubt within the Labour Party as what was to be done. Norton had made that clear throughout the campaign. Campaigning in Kilkenny, which voted a week after all the other constituencies because of the death of a candidate, and with the national

outcome beyond doubt, young Jim Larkin said it was the duty of the opposition to put the Government out.

The official party paper, the *Irish People,* headlined an article, "Labour will agree to act in coalition Government and put people's decision into effect". The people's decision lay in the combined opposition vote of 770,000 compared with 550,000, for Fianna Fail. It seemed conclusive enough, on that simplistic basis.

Labour had done well, winning six additional seats, with Jim Larkin and Roddy Connolly among the newcomers. National Labour had increased its representation to five deputies. But Clann na Poblachta, which had predicted for itself not less than forty-five seats, was returned with a depressing total of ten. De Valera had, at least, blunted their attack.

As history shows, he had destroyed them. Fine Gael added only one seat to their previous total of thirty. In addition, there were seven deputies from Clann na Talmhain, four Farmers and eight Independents. A truly motley collection.

But the prospects of putting De Valera out of office after fifteen years were irresistible. Fine Gael never hesitated. When Norton indicated that its Leader, General Mulcahy, was unacceptable as Taoiseach because of his Civil War record, he stood down and John A. Costello was drafted in his place. Free of any Civil War involvement, he was the perfect choice for another reason; his acceptability to Seán Mac Bride, his colleague at the Bar.

For Mac Bride, the nominee for Taoiseach was "a man of honour, of integrity, and of ability", as he described him in the Dáil debate.

James Dillon formed a bloc of Independents with Oliver Flanagan operating as whip. Mulcahy held a meeting with the other party eaders and Dillon in Leinster House on Friday 13th February, five days before the vote for Taoiseach.

That same day, Norton was re-elected Leader of the Labour Party. The following day John A. Costello was formerly agreed as nominee for Taoiseach at a meeting in the Mansion House.

The Administrative Council met jointly with the Parliamentary Labour Party and authorised Labour's participation in Government.

The party issued a statement saying that Labour's participation in an inter-party government would enable the party to implement its election pledge to promote a policy of full employment, control and reduce prices, improve the social welfare system and repeal the taxation imposed in the supplementary budget the previous winter. The Dublin Trade Union Council supported this decision.

But all was not yet secure. National Labour had not attended the opposition talks in the Mansion House, indeed the *Irish Times* was still quite convinced their five deputies would vote for De Valera. But James Everett, for all his attacks on his former Labour colleagues, had made up his mind long before.

The Decisive Quintet

The National Labour Party met with officials of the breakaway trade union Congress the night before the Dáil assembled and, despite some pro-Fianna Fáil sentiments from their union colleagues, "*the decisive quintet*", as the *Irish Times* called them the next day, declared for Costello and coalition.

It was all over. De Valera's sixteen-year rule was at an end. When the Dáil met on Wednesday 18th February, De Valera's nomination for Taoiseach was defeated by seventy-five votes to seventy.

Costello, proposed by Mulcahy and seconded by Norton, was elected Taoiseach by seventy-five votes to sixty-eight. Norton became Tánaiste and was joined in Cabinet by his colleague, T.J. Murphy, and by his counterpart, Jim Everett.

Within a year the rift between the two Labour parties was healed amicably. They were working together happily in Government and Larkin and O'Brien had both left the scene. It should have been the start of something big.

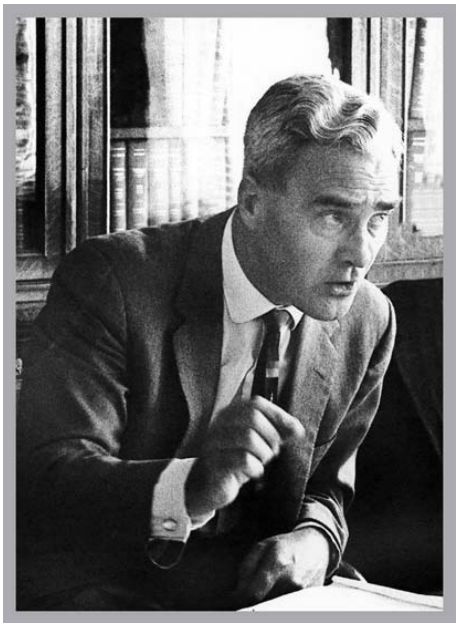
But it wasn't, not for Labour. Nine years of coalition politics lay ahead which were to end in a decision by the party's Annual Conference never again to try the experiment. But for Fine Gael, it was the beginning of the way back. Within two elections, their vote was back over 30% and they had swallowed up minor parties and independents.

Power did them no harm at all. It ensured their survival over the long run and gave them the foundation on which to build the party of today. Unwittingly, Labour was the architect of that process. The party undermined itself by its decision to vote for Costello.

The 18 February 1948 was the day Labour gave Fine Gael the kiss of Life.

– End –

No. 5
The Day the Party Died
Sunday, 13th December 1970



Brendan Corish

Brendan Corish's face said it all. Live from a special TV studio in Wexford, he looked devastated.

The 1969 General Election, which was to have been Labour's breakthrough, was clearly a disaster. Far from the thirty seats that the *Irish Times*, amongst others, had predicted, it was obvious as the election night wore on that the party would come out of the election winning less seats than it had started out with.

Both the party and the media should have predicted some of these losses.

Clare, for example, had returned a Labour Deputy only because Paddy Hogan had been Ceann Comhairle since 1951. But after his death in 1968 it was obvious the seats were gone. The by-election result was proof of that.

Next door in North Tipperary, Paddy Tierney, the IRA veteran and long-serving deputy, had been ousted at the Selection Conference and, in retaliation, had done nothing to help those who had rejected him. The seat was lost by a whisker.

In Kildare, Norton's stronghold, it was worse. His son and successor in the Dáil was out of the party. His expulsion and resignation had dead-heated. To compound matters, the branch organisation had split in a separate row and an independent Labour candidate had run against the official ticket. The seat went by 800 votes.

In the adjoining Laois/Offaly constituency, Davin's old seats had been recaptured in the 1965 Election, but it was a brief triumph. The new deputy had fallen ill soon afterwards and had even lost his County Council seat in 1967. He didn't contest the 1969 Election and the new candidates polled badly. The seat was lost too.

That was four seats gone, but the losses did not end there.

A series of disastrous results

There was a disaster in Cork, mainly due to the ruthless gerrymander of the constituencies engineered by Kevin Boland just prior to the election. The city, which had been a five-seater, returning Sean Casey as the Labour deputy, was carved into two three-seaters. Labour's overall city vote actually went up, but Fianna Fáil took two seats in both constituencies, with Fine Gael taking the third. Labour got none.

Out in the county, Paddy McAuliffe had his entire hinterland cut off by Kevin Boland and was planted in Eileen Desmond's redrawn constituency. He obligingly moved into new territory, but lost after twenty-six years in the Dáil.

Eileen Desmond lost too, mainly as a result of an appalling transfer from her running mate, made worse by the fact that on the first count, the party had more votes than a quota.

Next door in Waterford the same thing happened to Tom Kyne, who only got a half of his running mate's first preferences. The seat fell to Fianna Fáil and Kyne lost for the first time in seven elections.

These last two losses were widely regarded as "own goals". It had been a decision of the Annual Conference to force every sitting deputy to take at least one running mate. What had seemed sensible at the time was now seen as naive and self-defeating.

In all, eight seats were lost outside Dublin. The constituencies read like a roll call of traditional Labour strongholds: Kildare, Cork North East, Mid Cork, Cork City (two constituencies), Clare, North Tipperary, Waterford, and Laois/Offaly.

No wonder Corish looked inconsolable as the losses piled up.

The "Munster Mafia", the backbone of the Parliamentary party from its inception, was decimated. A series of unconnected events had conspired to inflict a grand defeat on the party at what was to have been its greatest hour. In each of the eight constituencies, purely local considerations had determined the outcome of the election, but no matter how disparate those reasons were, on election night they added up to a national pattern. It was defeat.

It was no use pointing to the national vote standing at 224,000, the highest in the Party's history. It was seats that counted. It was no use claiming that the PR system had been grossly distorted and that with seventeen percent of the vote the party had only won twelve per cent of the Dáil seats, the most disproportionate result ever. It was no use. It was seats that mattered. It was defeat.

But in Dublin it was different. Coming from only one deputy in 1961 to five in 1965, (Cluskey, O'Leary and O'Connell amongst them as newcomers) Labour had doubled its representation to ten seats. And it could have been more but for the Boland gerrymander which had put in four-seaters all over Dublin city, thereby grievously blunting the proportionality effect of proportional representation, as had been intended.

New strength in Dublin

All the outgoing Dublin deputies were re-elected, and with them came Barry Desmond, Noel Browne, winning for the first and only time as a Labour candidate, and the multi-coloured trio of Conor Cruise O'Brien, David Thornley and Justin Keating.

For the first time in the party's history, the balance of power in the Dáil party had swung in Dublin's favour, which now outnumbered the rest of the country by ten seats to nine.

From the election studios in Bolton Street counting centre, the two Trinity dons, Conor Cruise O'Brien and David Thornley, were jointly interviewed on TV as new Labour deputies and asked if their candidatures had contributed to the defeat of their rural colleagues. I

t had, after all, been a re-run of the 1943 red scare campaign. Fianna Fáil had denounced the new socialist policies of the party as an "alien philosophy" and had questioned the credentials of the new wave of socialist intellectuals.

The Taoiseach had conspicuously toured the convent circuit, emphasising his Government's theological and political orthodoxy and contrasting it with Labour's suspect new commitment to "revolutionary socialism".

The two Trinity deputies protested in vain against the allegation that either the new policies, the no-coalition strategy of the party or their exotic Dublin candidates had anything to do with the loss of so many rural seats. But it was no good. Notwithstanding Labour's advance in the capital, the year of "The New Republic", Labour's campaign slogan, was a disastrous failure.

That is now the media saw it. That is how the public reacted. And that too was how the party outside Dublin judged it. Many in Dublin saw it that way too. Returning from the RTÉ election studios in the early hours of the morning, I found the Head Office dark and deserted. The staff and the many previously enthusiastic volunteers had gone. There were no celebrations.

Overall, the party had dropped three seats as against the twenty-one won in 1965. Fianna Fáil with a static national vote won seventy-five seats and Mr Lynch was hailed as a vote getter equal to De Valera at his best. For him, 1969 was a triumph.

For the Labour Party, 1969 was a turning point in its history far more important than 1918 or the split in the early forties. For the Labour Party, 1969 was the end of the most exciting and promising experiment in fifty years of Irish politics.

Central to the Labour Party of the sixties had been two simple propositions. Firstly, that the party would not go into coalition with either of the two conservative parties. Corish had threatened to go to the backbenchers if that happened.

The second was the belief that socialism was the only answer to Ireland's intimidating range of social and economic problems. Belief is too mild a word. In Corish, the party had a most unlikely evangel. Middle aged, Catholic, rural, yet he presented a new message of hope with passion and conviction.

To a young urban generation, turning in revolt against the staid conservatism of an unchanging Ireland, here was the answer. They flocked into the party in their thousands, particularly in Dublin.

A "New Republic"

At the 1967 Annual Conference he had asserted an open and uncompromising commitment to socialism, calling on the party to build a "New Republic".

The following year a special conference was held on the development of policies. In 1969, conference delegates crammed into a crowded

Liberty Hall and unanimously passed ten different policy documents covering virtually all aspects of economic and social life. It was intoxicating and exciting.

The party was exuberant. It believed it could break the old mould of civil war politics. It was convinced it would replace the politics of clientelism with, as Michael D. Higgins termed it, "the politics of policies".

"It must be heaven to be in the Labour Party", said an *Irish Times* editorial. It was. The seventies were to be socialist. For them, 1969 was no failure. On the contrary, a new Labour Party was being built, and with success.

But Brendan Corish came from a longer tradition. His father, Richard Corish, had worked with Connolly to end the Pierce's lock-out in 1911, had defied the 1918 ban on Labour candidates, and had been the only Labour deputy in the second Dáil.

For twenty-one years he had been Labour mayor of Wexford. Corish himself had been the first ever Labour candidate to win a by-election. He had a long Labour lineage.

Becoming Leader in 1960, he had nursed the party through the sixties on an aggressive no-coalition strategy and had doubled the Dáil seats. But, now, after this third election, his main concern became how to save what he had helped to build.

If the 1969 trend continued, Labour might simply become a party of the pale and the traditional Munster and South Leinster strongholds would fall one by one. The failure of Fine Gael lower preferences to transfer to Labour had been critical in 1969. At least five seats had been lost as a result. More would follow in subsequent elections.

In a sense, the problem was how to hold on to Dublin, while saving the country. A rethink of strategy was necessary.

For some it couldn't come too quickly. Jimmy Tully, the powerful Meath deputy and man who had originally moved the no-coalition resolution at the 1957 Conference, was now determined to reverse it. At a secret session of the 1970 Annual Conference, he moved for the abandonment of the 1969 policy documents and an end to the strategy of "no coalition'.

Other resolutions sought to re-affirm or amend the electoral posture. By getting delegates to agree to defer their decisions until the following Conference, Corish bought time.

A new crisis

But not for long. Four months later, the Fianna Fáil Government was plunged into the most serious constitutional crisis in the state's history.

The Taoiseach demanded the resignation of two key Ministers. They refused. He sacked both. A third Minister resigned. The Fianna Fáil party appeared split from top to bottom. The Dáil was in uproar and the country in ferment. Conspiracies and cordite were whiffed in the air. It was, particularly for those in Leinster House, a disturbing, if not frightening, time.

Fianna Fáil was a threat to democracy. Within Labour, some changed their minds on coalition, amongst them Corish and O'Leary, (who had moved the successful no-coalition resolution at the 1967 Conference). A consensus grew amongst an influential group within the Parliamentary Party and Administrative Council that it would be better for the nation if Fianna Fáil were put out of office.

But what of Labour's continuing commitment to go it alone? Was this not merely ensuring the continuance of Fianna Fail in Government? It was.

At the end of May, when the Party organisation had first been alerted to the possibility of a snap election, that eventuality had been accepted, for it would have been

impossible in the circumstances to have convened a Special Conference to change the go-it-alone policy, and Conference alone had the authority to do that.

The question had arisen and had to be answered. Did Labour have the responsibility of providing the electorate with the possibility of an alternative Government?

Over lunch in the National Gallery restaurant Corish and his intimates decided the answer was "yes". The Administrative Council would be asked to pass a resolution summoning a Special Conference. It, in turn, would be asked to authorise Labour's participation in government.

But events inside and outside the Dáil moved at such a pace that the analysis could not be communicated properly to the party. The threat of a General Election hung over everybody's head as Mr Lynch staggered from crisis to crisis.

Suddenly his government seemed doomed. Fine Gael moved a "no confidence" motion in Jim Gibbons, the minister central to the Fianna Fáil split. It was reasonable to predict that some government back bench deputies, particularly Charlie Haughey, would vote for the motion, or, at least, abstain. In these circumstances it was prudent to prepare for a General Election.

It would be too risky to wait for the 1971 Annual Conference, scheduled for January, which might prove too late. Hence the need to go ahead with the first ever Special Conference of its type. So in early November, on the day after the "no confidence vote", which Mr Lynch won easily in the end by seventy-four votes to sixty-seven, Corish asked the Administrative Council to agree with his proposition. It did so unanimously.

While Mr Lynch had obviously regained mastery over his parliamentary party, it was clear he was awaiting the outcome of two by-elections that were scheduled a month later.

On the basis of these results, he could call a snap General Election. That thought concentrated the minds wonderfully. The Conference was summoned for Sunday 13th December in the City Hall, Cork. If there were to be a January election, then Labour would be ready one way or the other.

Twelve days after its decision to convene the Conference, the Administrative Council met again and endorsed a lengthy policy statement that set out the reason for the change in electoral strategy.

Interestingly, the statement did not deal directly with the two reasons really causing the re-assessment – the widespread loss of rural seats in the previous election and the dangers posed by the arms crisis.

Instead, it focused on the "strong probability that no party in the seventies will secure an overall majority in Dáil Éireann because shifts in electoral support are eroding the traditional bases of the two main parties".

If that judgement were correct then, it went on, there was an obligation on Labour to re-examine its electoral strategy of the sixties.

Amendments to the statement were accepted from branches and unions, which were to lead to procedural chaos at the Conference itself. But for everybody, the issue was simple; for or against coalition. For many it was simpler still; for or against socialism. The air was thick with accusations of betrayal and sell out. Corish, long the hero for all, now became the villain for many.

But he was not a man to hide behind others. At his own request, he moved the motion on behalf of the Administrative Council. The seconder chickened out and a replacement was hurried in. Little wonder.

The Conference, held behind closed doors, was a bruising, and often brutal, confrontation. Noel Browne rose to his feet as Corish revoked

his promise to go to the backbenchers and screamed "hypocrite, hypocrite, hypocrite".

While the votes were being taken on the amendments, delegates opposing the coalition left en masse, shouting betrayal. Some who remained hurled insults back at them, others implored the departing delegates to stay and vote.

For a while it seemed the Conference would break up in disorder, but the final vote was put on the Administrative Council Resolution and carried by 396 votes to 204. It authorised the Party Leader to enter into negotiations to put Labour into Government. The go-it-alone policy was dead.

It is sometimes said that had those who left stayed in their seats this motion would have been lost. It is hard to say. But it would, like Waterloo, have been a close run. In retrospect, it would have been the best thing for the party had the motion been defeated.

The Consequences of Coalition

The decision to end the no-coalition strategy had been good for the country, but bad for the party. It expelled Fianna Fáil from office and saved democracy, but it also set Labour on a path of continuous electoral decline and compromised its socialist image by association with Fine Gael. And to that party it gave what Corish had prophetically called, "the kiss of life".

For many in the Labour Party, going into government was the kiss of death.

Cruise O'Brien, Keating and Thornley all lost their seats in the post-coalition election and their political careers were ended with a cruel abruptness.

Corish was unhappy and ill during his period as Tánaiste and was glad to retire as Party Leader in 1977. The personal votes of O'Leary and Cluskey continued to decline as Labour lost out in Dublin.

In subsequent elections the rural seats were won back and held, but in Dublin, the Labour advance was not just halted but repulsed. This has proven to be the biggest miscalculation of the 1970 decision.

For all its debate about coalition, the Labour Party of the late sixties failed to recognise that it was in itself a coalition; urban and rural, the old labourites and the new socialists, the cautious middle aged and the impatient young.

The reaction to the 1969 election smashed that coalition, and from that cleavage flowed consequences that, while foreseen, were either risked or ignored. The left drifted out of Labour, their loss led to new rival parties being formed. On the right, Labour has ceased to be the vehicle for progressives and liberals. Dr Fitzgerald and his new Fine Gael fill that void.

And so the impetus of the sixties was lost in the City Hall, Cork. Those who had decided to change their minds on coalition did so for good reasons; in Corish's case for honourable reasons. Democracy had to be saved and Fianna Fáil removed from office.

But whatever the reasons, the Cork decision pushed Labour into a backwater, opened the way for new parties on the left, and launched Fine Gael on a process of expansion where, within a decade, it was virtually rivalling Fianna Fail in organisation, élan and hunger for power.

In a sense, the Cork decision was an echo of 1918 all over again, or even of 1922, when national concerns had overridden party considerations.

A former official of the party wrote of 13th December 1970, that it was the day the party died. But it was, more accurately, the day history repeated itself. When faced with the choice between national and party interests, the national had won out. And Labour lived on, waiting for history to turn.

- End -

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