

Origins and Significance of the Community and Voluntary Pillar in Irish Social Partnership*

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Abstract: The Irish social partnership is comparatively unusual in the way that corporatist bargaining also accommodates community and voluntary sector organisations. This paper examines the origins and significance of the Community/Voluntary Pillar (CVP) in relation to a fiscal and social crisis and a crisis of legitimacy for the political elite. It identifies some key driving forces in the pillar and explores the case of one in particular – the Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed (INOUE). While sceptical of accounts that are dismissive of the Pillar, the paper acknowledges that its influence has waned since the fiscal and unemployment crises have subsided.

I INTRODUCTION

The Irish model of social partnership is comparatively unusual in the way that it accommodates the involvement of farmer associations and community and voluntary sector organisations. Like other countries, Ireland has had some previous experience with tripartite governance (during the 1970s) although, since 1987 when this type of arrangement re-commenced, a

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more sophisticated model embedded traditional actors more firmly in a strategic consensus and drew in a wider spectrum of interests (O'Donnell, 1998; O'Donnell and Thomas, 1998). This paper explores the entry, context and significance of one of these new actors, the community voluntary pillar (CVP), whose inclusion in social partnership might, from certain perspectives, seem anomalous. For the organisations involved, this was a landmark in a process of evolving participation taking several years. A number of organisations active in the fields of anti-unemployment work, social welfare campaigning and community development had emerged during the 1980s against a background of economic and political malaise. Not aligned to political parties they became quite politicised in their understanding of their role and potential. From the late 1980s, they began a process that changed their status from external critics to critical participants in what was increasingly dubbed social partnership. This eventually culminated in the "Community Pillar" in October 1996, when the Taoiseach (Prime Minister) John Bruton invited a number of organisations to form a group for the purposes of joining in formal talks on a new Social Partnership Programme (Partnership 2000) that winter.

Against a background of debate on the significance of social partnership more broadly, which tends to make few references to the CVP at the national level, and explorations focused solely on local, area based and development partnership initiatives, this paper takes a national level focus. It is suggested that the national origins of the CVP and its entry to social partnership lie in a fiscal and economic crisis and in turn a crisis of legitimacy and governance. Moreover, this crisis was not capable of being resolved through social partnership based on "conventional" social partners alone and the initial model had its own legitimisation deficits in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Ultimately, that crisis passed and the subsequent role and significance of the CVP was altered, and in some respects diminished.

The paper addresses these themes in the following sequence. First, it sets out the economic and political context for the social partnership process that began in 1987. Second, it identifies the circumstances leading to the innovation of the community and voluntary pillar and the processes of its creation. Finally, it looks at the case of the Irish National Organisation for the Unemployed (INOUE), one of the initial driving forces within the CVP and its pathway into Social Partnership. The focus is mainly on the earlier period to the late 1990s. Conclusions on the case of the INOUE in this phase cannot necessarily be applied to other components of the Community Pillar or to the more recent phase.

The paper is sceptical about grand-theoretical portrayals of social partnership (or the CVP within it) and its influence on the economic wonder of

the Celtic Tiger. Nor does it engage directly in debate on the implications of social partnership for democracy generally. However, it does point to the need to address such questions in concrete rather than speculative ways. The paper may be relevant to wider issues, such as ways in which “third sector” organisations become involved in policy processes at national level and what outcomes we can expect from such involvement. In contrast to other countries where the “third sector” is either independent (USA) or given a defined role in delivery (Germany), or largely peripheral (UK), the case of Irish social partnership has revealed another possibility. The paper tries to avoid the kind of generalisations of a negative and positive kind that characterise discussions of the pillar’s role in social partnership. The process is viewed neither as regime transformation “by” civil society nor Thatcherism in corporatist drag. The content and conclusions flow from research that attempts to explore the CVP’s role empirically, combining documentary and interview material. A series of face to face taped interviews with some 25 leading figures from the Community Pillar and numbers of others outside the Pillar inform the paper. However, only a subset of these interviews, particularly with past and present leading INOU figures are drawn on here and, even then, only in an illustrative way.

II WHY EXAMINE THE COMMUNITY PILLAR?

The significance of the community pillar is a relatively minor theme in discussions of social partnership at the national level in Ireland. At one level, discussions of social partnership tend to revolve around corporatist paradigms in which the comparative focus is on union-employer-state relationships (Hardiman, 2000, 1998, 1988; Rhodes, 2001; Baccaro and Simoni, 2004). A theme in this debate is where to place Ireland in terms of industrial relations models ranging from corporatism to liberal pluralism. The term competitive corporatism (Rhodes, 2001) has gained currency in distinguishing between neo-liberal or social corporatist characterisations in the Irish case. In this comparative industrial relations context, the “local” dimension refers to industrial bargaining/partnership at the level of workplace, firm, industry or sector and is very important in comparative discussion of corporatism. The extent and significance of local partnership in this context is the focus of some critical debate in relation to the Irish case (McCartney and Teague, 1997; Roche, 1998; Roche and Geary, 1998).

But in the Irish context, when “local partnership” is discussed, it usually has nothing to do with industrial relations but refers to local community development and programmes operating under EU or government auspices

such as LEADER groups, local development partnership companies and community development groups. Local partnership in the latter context has been an intensive area of activity in Ireland over the past 15 years whose comparative context is very distinct from that of corporatism and industrial relations. While industrial relations has diverged from the UK standard since the 1980s, there is much in Ireland to compare – in relation to local or community development partnership models – with the UK and other EU states (Chanan *et al*, 2000). The difficulty is that the CVP is usually discussed in relation to the latter alone and discussion tends to become dominated by local issues (Rush, 1999; Powell and Geoghegan, 2004). Conversely, when considered in the corporatist context, the CVP is possibly viewed as anomalous in that community and voluntary organisations deal almost exclusively with government. In that sense they are not strictly “social partners” participating in a bargaining process that the government facilitates as with employers and unions (Hardiman, 2000, pp. 301-4).

There is some justification for exploring the industrial relations and local development agendas separately. However, the national level significance of the CVP can be missed unless the account is situated in a wider perspective of state-civil society relations and a historical perspective. This article takes the view that the origins of the CVP and its inclusion in the process of national level social partnership can be fruitfully explored in the context of a crisis for the political elite and for liberal representative politics in the face of deepening social malaise. The instigation of social partnership not only served to address the underlying economic and social problems which the political elite had failed to resolve, but also provided an institutional mechanism to alleviate a political crisis of legitimacy. The origins and influence of the CVP are tied up with attempts to address the underlying social and legitimisation crises. Ultimately, its fate too would be shaped by the resolution of these crises. Nevertheless, while the political elite has regained much lost ground, social partnership has not only continued but its institutional supports have been strengthened. Indeed, in practice, social partnership is now embraced by most of the political establishment.

Some commentaries have viewed CVP involvement as either undesirable and undemocratic (O’Cinnéide, 1998/9) or grievously undermining the independence of “civil society” (Meade, 2005). The view here is that the participants in the pillar had few other options but to participate in the initial period, made some noteworthy gains for a time but were increasingly constrained to operate with great patience and perseverance in order to maintain any influence in the process. Moreover, several associations and organisations in the CVP have often been obliged to go through difficult internal debate in order to maintain coherence, recognition and relevance to

other participants. Yet the unhappiness among those who have been excluded from the arrangements and the eagerness of others to get in suggests that the outcomes are not clear-cut.

III A CONTEXT OF CRISIS

Industrial Expansion and Crisis

Ireland was still a predominantly agricultural country in 1961, with 42 per cent of male employment in agriculture. Opening the economy in 1958 to trade and foreign investment changed this, but the process was slow and new jobs were cancelled by secular decline in the numbers occupied in farming (Hannan and Commins, 1992, Teagasc, 2004). Total employment only grew by on average 0.3 per cent annually while non-agricultural employment grew by 1.3 per cent between 1960 and 1990 (NESC, 1993, pp. 3).

Ireland's belated economic expansion was only a qualified success as imports seriously impacted on the formerly protected indigenous industry while non-agricultural industry made few inroads abroad (O'Malley, 1992). Initially policy only drew foreign investors in the form of branch plants in mature industries (textiles, footwear, clothing, plastics and light engineering) and later in pharmaceuticals and electronics, but investors were attracted by low wages and taxes, and plants were confined to semi-skilled production stages. Furthermore, against expert advice proposing fewer, more sustainable growth centres designed to generate positive spillovers, government policy in the 1970s favoured geographical dispersion of investment. Although this is defended on the grounds that it helped rural communities at a time when the CAP favoured larger farmers (Hannan and Commins, 1992), there is a case to answer as to its sustainability and the impact on traditional industrial centres. The foreign sectors too – albeit not as badly as indigenous industries – were hit by the oil shocks of 1973/4 and 1979 and many proved unsustainable.

A key policy reversal was signalled in the 1982 Telesis Report (NESC, 1982) that called for a turn towards high-value-added investment typically in large population centres with a critical mass of high-skill and educated labour, but it took considerable time for the latter shift in policy to take effect. Total employment in the foreign sector actually declined in the 1980s as the benefits of this strategy were overshadowed by closures in older sectors (O'Malley 1992).

Population grew rapidly (15.6 per cent between 1971 and 1981) in a context of high marriage and fertility rates and a reversal of net emigration. Investment in post-primary and tertiary education, minimal to start with,

expanded from the late 1960s. In the 1980s, therefore, Ireland had a rapidly growing young and increasingly educated generation, but as yet insufficient investment to employ it fully at home. Government policy of increasing public sector employment in the late 1970s was a sign of desperation in the absence of a critical mass of new investment and was short-lived. By the mid-1980s, therefore, emigration was beckoning even to the most highly qualified graduates and the net outflows of the late 1980s had become alarming.

While inflation began to decline in the late 1980s, unemployment ratcheted upwards. Taxation was already perceived as a millstone around the neck by wage earners, who had mounted major protests in 1979. Yet government deficits and borrowing were still required and the national debt was so large in the 1980s that interest payments to service it made cuts in social spending inevitable.

Fiscal, Legitimation and Governmental Crises

The elaboration of a system of social partnership was a long time in coming about and may be viewed as the last resort of the political elite, which had failed to respond to the fiscal crisis that had been welling up since the early 1970s. The concept of fiscal crisis has been in the international literature since the aftermath of the first oil shocks (O'Connor, 1973) and usually also entails a legitimisation crisis (Habermas, 1976; Held, 1982). Such a crisis in Britain gave political expression to the new paradigm of neo-liberal economics and neo-conservative politics, with an electoral mandate in 1979. Ireland too was faced with a serious fiscal crisis and a deepening crisis of political legitimacy. By contrast with the UK in the 1980s, Ireland lumbered from election to election with what seemed – from a right or left perspective – as half-measures, aptly summarised by Lee (1989, Ch. 7) as “drift”. Others go further, noting that political decision-makers made errors that accentuated the fiscal crisis (Honohan and Walsh, 2002). Indeed, the period of centralised wage bargaining in the 1970s has frequently been held up as part of the problem of drift and one reason why there was a return to decentralised bargaining in the 1980s.

The immediate context for the initiation of social partnership in 1987 was a unique political crisis. A newly installed minority government of Fianna Fáil (FF) was promised the support of Fine Gael (centre-right) the main opposition party, provided that FF introduced new austerity measures designed to control spiralling state debt and deficits and restore balance to the public finances (the so-called Tallaght Strategy). Such centre-right consensus had been previously lacking and had contributed to a growing sense of malaise in the political elite during the 1980s that not only threatened economic sustainability but also widened the “legitimation gap” that was opening between the political elite and the wider society (Larragy, 2002).

Fine Gael's policy was a double-edged sword not only for Fine Gael, who risked much by it, but also for the incoming FF Government, which was "damned if it did and damned if it didn't" address the fiscal crisis there and then. However, responsibility for the cutbacks would fall on the government party and could cost dearly in a subsequent election. The prospect of further electoral attrition for Fianna Fáil was not to be treated lightly. This led them to grasp the lifeline of proposals made by the National Economic and Social Council (NESC), (NESC, 1986) as a basis for a new type of social pact between employers and unions.

The traditionally conservative Fine Gael and new right Progressive Democrat (PD) opposition were then quite sceptical about this strategy (MacSharry, 2000). Moreover, the survival of social partnership was not inevitable – Fianna Fáil were forced into a coalition with the Progressive Democrats in 1989 after a snap election went wrong. Fortunately for Fianna Fáil, the PDs lost a considerable number of seats and were limited in what they could impose by way of terms. Had they been stronger, the story might have been otherwise.

The key difference, in relation to the new social partnership arrangements, unlike the 1970s experience, was that centrally moderated wage bargaining from 1987 would be co-ordinated with austerity measures. The trade union leaderships were prepared to buy into this approach: free collective bargaining had failed to raise wages in real terms in the 1980s, union membership was in decline (Roche and Larragy, 1984) and the prospect of a UK-style defeat by the new right was (following the miner's strike) viewed without relish.

Thus, the turn to social partnership, which ended the "drift", was not a decisive ideological paradigm-shift into neo-liberal "slash and burn" economics by the political establishment so much as an institutional or policy-making paradigm-shift. Cutbacks had already been in train since 1982, only disguised by inflation. Honohan *et al.* (2002) see in the launch of social partnership a determination by unions and employers to set aside social class antagonism, for the time being, in favour of a joint effort to remove barriers to employment growth. Initially, the new institutionalism was to facilitate a period of sharp fiscal correction. Far from spearheading a confrontation with the unions, however, the government sought the incorporation of state and civil society in the form of the trade unions and employers in a new consensus. The inclusion of the farmers too was indicative of the fact that the agenda was already wider than the management of industrial relations. These novel elements of the model that began to emerge can perhaps justify the characterisations of "competitive" or "liberal" corporatism.

IV FORMING THE COMMUNITY PILLAR

Seedbeds of the Community Pillar

The 1980s saw both a mounting crisis of unemployment, urban and rural development, rising levels of income deprivation and social marginalisation affecting all age groups. Hence, the institutional model of governance was not yet complete or “legitimate” in the view of many until it was eventually extended in the mid-1990s to include the voices of marginalised sections of society as articulated via the community and voluntary sector. In the meantime the brunt of the effects of the economic and fiscal crisis were felt among the growing numbers of unemployed, others on low income who depended on social welfare and groups who depended on the state for services. Below, some of the origins of three key strands of opinion in what was to become the Community Pillar are examined.

First, during the 1980s, as employment growth was stagnant, unemployment rose to crisis levels and the extent of social marginalisation was arguably unprecedented. In the 1991 census, unemployment was 233,890 (16.8 per cent) – high by comparative standards in Europe, with a high percentage of long-term unemployed. In urban areas there were substantial problems of economic and increasingly social marginalisation and many “black spots” with catastrophic levels of unemployment and poverty (NESC 1997, 51ff; 85ff). The issue of unemployment provided the basis for the emergence of organisations for the unemployed during the 1980s and at national level of the establishment of the Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed (INOUE) in 1987. The INOUE was sociologically rooted in the unemployed and its agenda was defined around the goal of full employment and, pending that, the protection of the rights of the unemployed and income maintenance. One of the main defensive issues to emerge from interviews and in the literature of the INOUE, was the prevention of “workfare” schemes and punitive measures being proffered at the height of the crisis and into the early 1990s.

Second, rural life was also characterised by unevenness and inequality. While there was unemployment in rural towns and villages, there was considerable out-migration both to larger urban locations and abroad in the 1980s. Age profiles of rural areas typically exhibited the highest proportions of elderly people, but also moderate young dependency rates. As agricultural employment declined there were serious difficulties in fostering alternative types of rural development activity. Certain areas, typically in the west, north-west, border and midlands, were particularly vulnerable due to declining population in the employment age group.

One of the few hopes in the late 1980s was Europe. The 1987 Single European Act (SEA) and completion of the internal market would provide

Ireland with a great opportunity to position itself as the gateway to Europe for foreign investors while threats to industry were by now limited as there had been such a shakeout in the Irish economy already. However, it was still a very peripheral country with very poor infrastructure and, of course, the Irish state was debt encumbered. The SEA in 1988, set the stage for radical shake-up of the Structural Funds aimed at reducing regional development disparities in Europe. Their objectives of supporting infrastructure, regional development, economically deprived regions and localities and tackling long-term and youth unemployment suited Ireland's needs. In 1989, the EC provided for a doubling of resources for the Structural Funds, in what was subsequently known as the first of the Delors packages. Ireland as a whole was designated an Objective 1 region, which ensured that Ireland received priority status. Over the two subsequent periods, Structural and (after Maastricht) Cohesion funding – between 1989 and 1999 – would amount to an EC contribution of €11 billion.

The reform of the Structural funds involved new processes of consultation and a “partnership approach” between the Commission, the Member States, and national, regional and local authorities. The structural funds provided a critical source of investment in public infrastructure at a time when Irish governments could not. It also promised improved administration, simplified procedures, and better monitoring. The new decision-making and consultation procedures created scope for consultation with the community and voluntary sector. This was a very important issue in generating another current of opinion in what later became the Community Pillar. The Community Workers Co-op (CWC) was closely involved with urban, rural and communities of fate through its wide network of paid or voluntary community workers. The CWC developed considerable expertise and ideas in relation to the deployment of Structural funds coming under various operational programmes. It was here, perhaps, that the seeds of a connection between local and national level partnership were planted. The agenda of the CWC was to build on the principles of local community level participation with aspirations to a radical reshaping of democracy at the national level.

Third, income poverty had become a major focus of attention since the early 1970s and the situation appeared to worsen in the 1980s. In those days the debate was much simpler than it is now. Poverty was deep whether conceived in relative or absolute terms. In conditions of relatively sluggish GNP growth from 1981 up to the late 1980s, mean disposable incomes actually declined in real terms (Layte, *et al.* 2000, p. 166). In these circumstances, the persistence of relative poverty had none of the ambiguous implications it does today: people were both relatively and absolutely poorer. Moreover, that poverty was strongly related to unemployment, which had been consistently

rising since 1981, pointed to the connections between growth, employment, unemployment and income distribution. Finally, the report of the Commission on Social Welfare (1986) pointed out that social welfare payments were simply “inadequate” in alleviating poverty, let alone in addressing more ambitious redistribution goals. The Conference of Religious in Ireland (CORI) Justice Commission, in particular, took hold of this issue and made it a key driver in the agenda of the emergent CVP. It built its intervention in social partnership around the issue of income maintenance and tackling poverty, highlighting income inadequacy at every point and lobbying for a basic income for all. Interviews with CORI representatives revealed the importance of its “analysis” rather than its “representativeness” in defining its role in social partnership.

By the late 1980s, therefore, several sections of “civil society” had responded to different facets of the crisis – chiefly unemployment (INOUE), marginalisation of local communities (CWC) and income poverty (CORI). Before long these driving forces and other organisations would seek to widen social partnership and bring these issues to its centre.

To Enter Partnership?

There was a lengthy period before a community sector pillar was eventually constituted in social partnership. Before the elements of what later became the community pillar were to opt for entry, they first had to be convinced that it was worth the trouble. They had just developed effective voices but would these voices be silenced on participation in the new institutions? One apparent fact that attracted their attention was that the new tripartite system (plus farmers) was concerned with far more than centralised wage bargaining. It was also having an impact on taxation policy and emitting signals to government on social spending and income maintenance levels such as how to respond to the 1986 Commission on Social Welfare Report. The shaping of each agreement was closely supervised by the Department of the Taoiseach and underpinned by a prior process of deliberation at the NESC in which social partners actively participated in wider policy discussions. This was a matter that the CORI and INOU were greatly concerned about.

It was apparent too that these discussions were not simply tokenism. It was the Programme for Economic and Social Progress (PESP, 1990) that first announced a proposal to instigate local area partnership companies, which would require involvement of local community organisations all over the State. Yet few of the actors in the national partnership process had much to say on the subject. Prefigured in a NESC report (1990), it appeared to have been put on the agenda by the Taoiseach’s department in its capacity as go-

between with the EU on the matter of how to deploy the largess of the Structural funds. This issue was of considerable importance to the CWC.

Unemployment, while viewed by the social partners and government as a major problem, was not yet being directly addressed through social partnership talks by 1990. Independent calls for a national forum of state and civil society were mounting and would ultimately yield the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF). The latter, when it came about in 1993/4, provided a training ground in social partnership for representatives of the unemployed, marginalised, poor and other discontented constituencies. Moreover, it yielded some innovative policy proposals and provided encouragement that much and more could be achieved through fuller participation in deliberative institutions such as the NESC and Social Partnership – where the “real action” appeared to be.

A further issue was the widespread resistance to the admission of potentially disruptive and demanding “lefty” elements who were sceptical in any event. Such resistance came not only from within the state but also from among existing partners, as is acknowledged by those interviewed on both the CVP and statutory side. Even sections of the trade union pillar had resisted the creation of a new pillar – perhaps a backhanded acknowledgement of the value of getting a foot in the door. The INOU was always convinced that it had a moral right to represent the huge section of the working class that was not “at the table” along with their employed brothers and sisters. It was only a matter of time before it was persuaded as to its tactical merit.

It has been noted that there was a crisis of legitimacy in the political elite, and the political situation remained fluid in the 1990s. There were clear signs that government coalitions – as became the normal pattern from 1989 – were open to influence from the substantial part of the electorate that felt economically and socially “disenfranchised” provided they could find a vehicle to channel it. These factors would seem to have played some part in persuading the new voices of the socially excluded to seek participation and in breaking down the resistance of existing partners.

Pillar Comes Together

The Community Pillar, as constituted in the 1996 talks, comprised 8 bodies, one of which the (Community Platform) was an umbrella acting for several further groups (Figure 1). These organisations had varied philosophies and practical agendas, although there was common ground in the context of the depth and extent of disadvantage prevalent at the time. While highlighting shared concerns, they retained their own distinctive analysis and critique of current policies, and their separate identities, even when in social partnership.

The “Community Pillar” formally came into existence between the

Figure 1: *Structure of the Community Pillar and Platform in the Negotiations for Partnership 2000 in 1996*

<i>Community Pillar members</i>	<i>Community Platform members</i>
1. Conference of Religious in Ireland*	1. Conference of Religious in Ireland
2. Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed*	2. Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed
3. National Women's Council of Ireland*	3. National Women's Council of Ireland
4. Society of St Vincent de Paul*	4. Society of St Vincent de Paul
5. Community Platform (a group of organisations – see column 2)	5. Community Action Network
6. National Youth Council	6. Community Workers Co-operative
7. Irish Congress of Trade Unions Centres for the Unemployed	7. European Anti-Poverty Network [Ireland]
8. Protestant Aid (PA)	8. Focus on Children
	9. Forum of People with Disabilities
	10. Gay and Lesbian Equality Network
	11. Irish Commission for Prisoners Overseas
	12. Irish Rural Link
	13. Irish Traveller Movement
	14. One Parent Exchange Network
	15. Pavee Point

* Organisations both in the Platform and recognised in the Pillar in own right.

drafting of the NESC Strategy of autumn 1996 and the negotiations for the Partnership 2000 agreement that ensued from it later that year. Government proposed the separate *Community Pillar* as a mechanism for regulated access to social partnership for those associations wishing to be part of the process. An alternative mechanism, favoured by the CWC, was that the *Community Platform*, which they had initiated, would constitute the new “social partner” and, as a bottom-up entity, offer more independence at the table. In the event, both the Pillar and the Platform operated but the Platform was, as far as the State was concerned, just another member of the Pillar. In any event, the Platform had fifteen member organisations and constituted one of eight associations recognised by Government as making up the Pillar. But some of the other seven organisations with independent membership of the Pillar were also members of the Platform (Figure 1). In a sense these organisations could show solidarity with the Platform while maintaining the right to vote separately in the event of a split over the terms of a Partnership deal or policy matter. However, the clumsiness of how the Pillar was constituted also suppressed fissures that would later surface.

The main driving forces in the Pillar from the outset were the INOU, the CWC and CORI. Other organisations became more central after a time, in particular the National Women's Council (NWCI) and St Vincent de Paul Society (SVP). As noted above, the INOU, CWC and CORI were key elements that emerged in the 1980s and later became the dynamos of the nascent CVP. Each of these organisations was defined by critical responses to aspects of the social malaise of the 1980s. However, the particular focus in each case was distinct and different. For the CWC, involvement in social partnership at national level grew out of its critical focus on the allocation and use of EU Structural Funds through operational programmes promoting local development in deprived and marginalised communities. The CWC articulated a distinct view on matters of local empowerment through co-operation and participative democracy. They also aspired to apply this philosophy in the Pillar and in Social Partnership. The question of how far the CWC could go with this amid the realpolitik of contending state and market actors was not so sharply posed in the early 1990s as it would later become.

The CORI Justice Commission had quite a different set of pre-occupations. The Justice Commission was initiated in the early 1980s at a time when many were critical of the Church's obsession with private morality and an absence of any economic critique of capitalist morality. Its focus was on economic and social justice in several areas, particularly income deprivation. In the immediate term CORI sought to have the Commission on Social Welfare (1986) recommendations on minimum levels of payment implemented. In the long term, CORI sought to replace the current system of tax and welfare with a Basic Income system that was both work neutral and family-formation neutral. The persistent focus of the CORI on income mechanisms gave it an enduring basis for a critique of income maintenance policy measures and frequent opportunities to intervene in the context of high profile events such as the Budget and social partnership talks. When unemployment eventually fell in the latter half of the 1990s, CORI was undaunted. Indeed it gained a higher profile in that it could focus attention of the widening relative income disparity between large welfare dependent sections of the population and the newly prospering sections of those in employment.

Matters were otherwise for the third key organisation in the nascent Community Pillar – the INOU, which provides the focus for discussion below. In some respects, the INOU's story is the kind that could be told about the other Pillar participants and Pillar as a whole. In other respects it records only the particular experience of one component in the Pillar. It is hoped that even on the basis of a short account it will be possible to question some generalisations about the Community Pillar, either to the effect that it jeopardises democracy or that it simply incorporates the dissent that might

otherwise be expressed. Empirical examination of these stories may eventually yield a different account that complies more with a view of this interface of social actors and the state that has the merit of nuance.

V IRISH NATIONAL ORGANISATION OF THE UNEMPLOYED

The INOU was founded in 1987 when a number of local groups and some national organisations came together to form a national organisation. The founding conference followed an almost unbroken series of monthly increases in numbers on the live register between January 1981 and December 1986 (from 86,000 to 245,100). Some time later it appointed Mike Allen – made redundant by a company in Galway in 1983 – as its General Secretary. Allen, in his own account, stresses that it was unemployed people who established the INOU (Allen 1998, pp. 3-4). The following discussion draws on recorded and transcribed interviews carried out with five leading INOU figures spanning the history of the organisation from the 1980s to the present.

From the outset, the INOU concentrated on mobilising the unemployed:

In the beginning it was about mobilising unemployed people to politically assert their rights and demands, so it was about trying to organise strong local groups, gear them up to be campaigning, lobbying organisations, a lot of street campaigns, demos, stunts, you know, on the ground stuff.

Initial hopes for success along this route gave way as protests failed to happen on any significant scale. In late 1992, following a major organisational effort, against a background of 300,000 unemployed, they could only mobilise 3,000 for a march demanding the right to work. One conclusion drawn was that mobilising the unemployed failed because there was no positive element in the unemployed identity:

I suppose models that we were looking at in terms of mobilising civic society (were) the black movement in the States, the women's movement, the disability movement. I think what we were learning was that unemployed people didn't necessarily self identify with unemployed movements so we were not going to get much (with a) mass participation (...) strategy and we had to rethink that a bit.

Without abandoning campaigns and protesting, the INOU increasingly made policy inputs to government and, although supported by some trade unions, they were critical of the latter for not achieving any gains for the unemployed in social partnership. They were probably unique in maintaining the policy goal of full employment at the time, not only in comparison with policy-makers and the trade unions, but also with other organisations in the community/voluntary sector. They viewed campaigns for a basic income as indicative of an “end of work” thesis, which they rejected as a distraction from full employment. Here there was a clear difference with the CORI focus. The INOU were particularly critical of the first agreement, the 1987 Programme for National Recovery (PNR):

... the underlying assumption in that agreement (was): ‘we don’t particularly need to talk about unemployment in any real sense but it will come right as a result of what we are doing here (through) some sort of undefined process.

The next deal, the Programme for Economic and Social Progress (PESP) agreed in 1990, also posed the issue of participation. But the INOU decided not to seek to participate in talks then either, although it was debated. As one informant noted:

... we weren’t strong enough: if we were there, we weren’t sure what we would be pushing for and if we didn’t get it, we didn’t know what we would do... you wouldn’t have been strong enough to be in there, in that ring.

Instead, they sought to engage with the trade unions, which promised to articulate the interests of the unemployed and to listen to the INOU in the PESP talks. Later, however, when the INOU became participants (in 1996), they observed the limits of the earlier strategy. While the trade unions actively engaged in the wage and related negotiations, the INOU negotiator noted:

... once it moved off wages, there was nobody in government buildings except for (named ICTU official) and one or two other people.

While this could be seen as class betrayal, said one respondent, the INOU reading was more mundane:

... It would be rare that somebody would deliberately ‘do you in’, but simply by your absence your interest isn’t put forward, and you see that when you are at the table yourself!

Initially the INOU, like other organisations, developed a more active dialogue with certain government departments rather than with the formal partnership framework:

We had established quite a good working relationship at a policy level with Social Welfare around areas where we had common interests, where they were trying to get people back to work, and we were saying: "this won't work and that will". Obviously there were areas of conflict, where they were trying to knock people off the dole. But, where there was common ground, we developed quite good relationships, at a political level to some extent and, more significantly, at senior civil servant level, so that their people would talk to us about programmes they were developing.

The British experience under Thatcher and the threat of US style "Workfare" coming to Ireland was fresh in the minds of the INOU. They saw their role in part as defending against coercive approaches to active labour market policies:

(These ideas were) constantly on the agenda from government's point of view and I suppose it is (...) a negative (...) way of stating the achievements of the INOU. But, certainly, one of the achievements was that there were programmes – I think absolutely, definitely – that would have been introduced into Ireland, to no good for the people who had to go through them, if it hadn't been for the presence of the INOU.

In the event, a few years of capacity building took place before the INOU actively sought to be involved at the partnership table. Two key policy developments paved the way. First, the 1992 Joint Oireachtas Committee (i.e., representing both houses of parliament) on Unemployment, while short lived, for the first time invited organisations of the unemployed and other related bodies to make presentations, as equals, as the INOU saw it, alongside the traditional social partners. It was established in response to calls for a forum on unemployment from the INOU and others and was their first real hearing. While the Joint Committee folded with the fall of the FF/PD coalition in 1992, and had no substantive policy effect, it generated a short public debate on the controversial and then hot topic of "Workfare". More significant perhaps, from a governance perspective, it furthered the campaign for an independent Forum on unemployment – possibly emulating the Anglo-Irish Forum of the mid-1980s – an idea that had been mooted much earlier, but was taken up increasingly by the INOU.

Second, following the collapse of the FF/PD coalition, the incoming

FF/Labour government set up the NESF in 1993. This was a much more ambitious and wider body than the Joint Oireachtas Committee. The non-governmental sector were formally represented as members alongside elected parliamentarians and government officials under an independent chairperson, and at a remove from the Oireachtas. The NESF also included representatives from the “traditional social partners”. Unlike its predecessor, the NESF has survived, through a process of evolution, and has since become a significant partnership institution, as noted above. The initial NESF had two broad strands to address – unemployment and social policy. The INOU identified the NESF as the central focus for its activity and made a very full intervention in its first report on the ending of long-term unemployment (NESF, 1994).

The experience of participation in the NESF strengthened both the public standing of the INOU and its confidence that it could hold its own in the central social partnership arenas. Also, the INOU had utilised the NESF to work out a range of policies in dialogue with other policy actors, much of which was now in a published NESF report, which it could use as a basis for participation in partnership. It began to seek recognition of its status as legitimate representative of the unemployed. The trade unions could not claim to represent them adequately because unemployed people were usually not union members.

Of course, the INOU were not representative of the majority of the unemployed in any formal sense, but they were the only dedicated organisation of unemployed people and they were very conscious of their accountability to the many local activist organisations that created and supported them. They adopted a corporatist view of social partnership and justified their place in representational terms on behalf of some 20 per cent of the working population who were neither employed nor represented by the trade unions. They saw themselves as different – in this sense – from other community and voluntary sector organisations that began to seek social partnership status around then and as having a more clear-cut case.

The pragmatic engagement of the INOU in Ireland resonates to some extent with developments in European employment policy, as expressed in the Delors White Paper of 1993, the so-called Essen Process from 1994, the provisions in the Amsterdam Treaty Title on employment, and later the European Employment Strategy. Ireland was one of the member states more receptive to these developments in the mid-1990s and promoted them under its presidency prior to the Amsterdam Treaty. It is probably fair to say that the INOU had a non-trivial influence in shaping the thinking of government over that period.

By 1994 a new Rainbow coalition of Fine Gael, Labour and Democratic Left had replaced the FF/Labour coalition. The incoming Taoiseach, John

Bruton, had been lately persuaded of the merits of social partnership. He did not see a special case for the INOU, but was disposed towards having a mechanism to include the community and voluntary sector more widely in the process. It is sometimes contended that the CVP were admitted to the talks in 1996 without any prior involvement in the preparatory process. This is not quite correct: in 1995 representatives from each of the INOU and the National Women's Council were appointed as government nominees to the National Economic and Social Council (NESC). The INOU utilised this opportunity fully to influence *Strategy into the 21st Century* (NESC, 1996), which formed the basis for the partnership talks that autumn. This was important to the INOU:

We had a very fast learning curve ourselves in NESC I suppose but it did make us realise very quickly how important NESC was and how that Strategic document was the negotiations to some degree not just the framework for it. ... It was more strategically important than we thought it had been to be on NESC.

The INOU pathway into Social Partnership was, of course, a means to more concrete ends, and being a social partner was not an objective in its own right. It was always seen as a double-edged sword. Indeed, the INOU almost left social partnership at the first hurdle when a Partnership 2000 proposal to implement the recommended minimum social welfare rates of the 1986 Commission on Social Welfare was pulled at the final stage of negotiations. This was a critical test because one of the justifications for the INOU being in the talks was precisely the failure of the unions to deliver this demand in the previous deals and was pursued not only in the Partnership talks but also at the preliminary stage of NESC deliberations. If the INOU now failed to deliver, participation in Social Partnership would be effectively discredited. So close to the wire did this issue go that Secretary General Allen was literally walking in the doors of the national TV station to broadcast the INOU's rejection of the package when he got word from government conceding the demand. This was a landmark in the INOU's own terms, although strictly speaking the deal would have gone ahead even if the INOU rejected it. It is not clear exactly what other Pillar components would have done – they might have stayed in.

It is not precisely clear what prompted the last minute concession but it is more than possible that a good deal of tick-tack went on between the ministries of the Taoiseach, Tanaiste, Finance and Social Welfare – after the INOU position was known. Moreover, Fine Gael, Labour and Democratic-Left, respectively, headed up these departments, which probably helped. It is

possible that the state of public finances was beginning to look better than was let out in the talks. A consensus may have emerged that there was more to be gained on the political front by conceding the point and taking credit for what would probably be affordable in any event – a general election was due in 1997. This, rather than the notion of a strong bargaining hand on the part of the INOU, seems more likely. Nevertheless, without the INOU to beat a loud drum about it, the concession might not have been made. In the short term at least, the entry tactic worked.

This episode should not overshadow the range of other matters that the INOU had pursued actively in the NESF, the NESC, and the Partnership talks, which were subsequently tied into Partnership 2000. These included moderating the policy approach through active labour market policies that were supportive and not punitive. They won commitments on the development of a local employment service (LES), expanding Community Employment (CE) and the continuation of the relatively generous Back to Work Allowance (BTWA) schemes. It was on these more technical fronts that the INOU brought a consistent influence to bear. This gave social partnership a moderating influence on policies that the government were developing to move more people from welfare to work. The INOU can with justification claim that they persuaded civil servants of the merits of a more supportive active labour market regime. This cannot be discounted: in the middle of 1996, investigative research was carried out by the CSO on live register claimants, under cover of the Labour Force Survey, and had been widely publicised in the media as proof that many on the dole were making fraudulent claims. While there were many voices calling for a hard line, this issue was handled in an even-handed way in *Partnership 2000*.

This outline does not deal with subsequent developments. But obviously, when unemployment began to decline rapidly from 1996, the context for the INOU changed too. In time, its impact would lessen as a result of this. While continuing to address a range of issues in relation to income maintenance, active labour market policies, the treatment of the unemployed at social welfare offices etc., the INOU has developed a more extensive service role. By 1997, the INOU representatives of the unemployed had made sustained interventions over the best part of a decade, they developed considerable expertise, and a credible on-the-ground presence. They were active in developing a European network of similar organisations and learned about policy alternatives to what was happening across the water. They had a very articulate leadership that repudiated the culture of blame that neo-liberals attach to the unemployed. They went into social partnership because that was “where the action was” at the time, and because other methods yielded little success.

VI CONCLUSIONS

Some commentaries – mostly by economists – have focused on the question of whether social partnership had any impact on phenomenal growth rates achieved in the 1990s (Baccaro and Simoni, 2004; O'Donnell and O'Reardon, 2000) and most of them have concluded that it has not. This paper is less concerned with this type of economic question than with identifying some of the effects of participation by the CVP. For instance, Irish society, despite the increase in total and average income and the ending of large-scale unemployment and the effective achievement of full employment, is clearly at least as unequal today in terms of relative income as it was in the early 1990s. Are these outcomes that the INOU and other organisations involved in the community pillar process could have done something more to avoid had they, for instance, adopted a different strategy? It would be tempting to say they were incorporated into a neo-liberal project, but we do have to be wary of easy generalisations and of anachronistic statements about missing the mark on the equality agenda. Moreover, the impact of the INOU, and the CVP as a whole needs to be seen in conjunction with that of the trade unions in social partnership. A neo-liberal policy would involve labour market de-regulation, the subordination of organised labour, depression of wages and possibly a “shaking out” of manufacturing and related areas of employment where unions were strong and productivity lagging. But one does not need to be an apologist of social partnership to notice that that path was not pursued as the foundation of the boom years of the 1990s.

Others have asked whether social partnership and the CVP, in particular, compromised representative democracy by placing influence in a few hands without clear lines of accountability (O'Cinnéide, 1998). In examining the record of the INOU in retrospect, it is difficult to see how it might have harmed representative democracy. It would be hard to justify a conclusion that the CVP participation in social partnership was any threat to representative democracy on the basis of the evidence of the INOU. On the other hand it would be unfair to imply that the CVP was simply incorporated by the state, particularly in the context of the very difficult issues and decisions it took and the tactical successes it had. A fairer characterisation, it seems, is that the CVP had a legitimate role in the context of social partnership. On a range of issues affecting the unemployed and welfare-dependent population the CVP took up a challenge in a way that was permissible and even laudable in a democracy and helped offset the imbalance of power that otherwise would exist in the institutions that were set up. They contributed to more moderate policy outcomes than might have emerged without the institutions of social partnership and without their participation in these institutions. Irish

unemployment policies of the 1990s were influenced by these developments. The INOU and by extension the CVP can take credit for moderating the policies adopted by Irish governments in the 1990s on unemployment and for defending the position of unemployed people on social welfare. It cannot be credited with the achievement of full employment – though that was eventually more or less achieved – but it can be credited for believing it was possible when nobody else did, and for adopting the role of protecting the interests of unemployed people in the context and achieving it.

The moderating influence exercised by the CVP should not be viewed in isolation. It needs to be emphasised that its influence operated within the institutional context of social partnership that, in turn, was resorted to by government in order to address a serious fiscal crisis and crisis of legitimacy among the political elite that flared up over a definite period. The CVP influence has lessened in recent years and it may not easily regain the degree of influence that it had while unemployment and fiscal crises were major issues and it has had to adjust to a less prominent role. Indeed, in many respects the problem of legitimacy, which faced the political elite, has passed into history, while the community pillar now face a dilemma as they are no longer able to confer legitimacy to the extent that they once were and may risk redundancy.

The prospects for the community pillar's significance are not yet clear. There have been significant departures from it and new entrants to it. Moreover, much depends on the thinking of government, as it is no longer as constrained to liaise with the CVP as it was. From this direction, claims have been made for the significance of the Pillar in a "problem-solving" model of social partnership, the implication being that it will be business as usual. This view may minimise the actual significance of the Pillar in the past in conferring legitimacy at a time when the political elite badly needed it. At a moment when unemployment was a hot political issue and governments were depending on garnering marginal voters, it paid to listen to the organisations representing the unemployed and community sector associations. On the other hand, it is seems obvious that there is a hierarchy of social partners in the Irish model and the CVP is somewhat subordinate in bargaining power terms in a model that might be characterised as "competitive corporatism" (Roche and Cradden, 2003, p. 86).

To say that the community pillar lacks strategic bargaining power is not to deny any influence to it but to acknowledge that such influence has waxed and waned. And the Pillar's possibilities for achieving visible effects may depend on the political significance of bringing the standpoint of voiceless and vulnerable sections of society into the frame. The main "bargaining chip" the CVP has in social partnership is whether it rejects or signs off on a deal. But

just how far they could “play it” depends on the political context – or what such a rejection might cost a government in popularity. That chip had an impact in the context of negotiating *Partnership 2000*, when the threat to reject the pact resulted in a last minute concession by Government. But the threatened rejection of *Sustaining Progress* in 2002 by a section of the Pillar resulted only in that section’s expulsion from the partnership process. Times have evidently changed.

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