

Labour and the Irish Political Party System: a suggested approach to analysis.

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IN the politics of the Irish state only three parties have been able to maintain substantial electoral support for more than a decade. Two—Fianna Fail and Fine Gael—stem from the same Sinn Féin party which in the years immediately after 1916 became the vehicle of the Irish independence movement. Their original leaders re-established independent Irish parliamentary institutions in the first Dáil of 1919.¹ Their participation and disagreement in the subsequent debate on the Anglo-Irish Treaty determined the basic cleavage in the Irish political party system. These leaders and the parties they founded continued to dominate Irish politics for the next fifty years; they were the poles around which two large groupings of opinions, interest and loyalties clustered. The third, the Labour Party, has always played a subsidiary role; its activities, in Professor Chubb's phrase, have "never seriously impaired the bi-polarism of Irish politics."²

This curious combination of Labour weakness and persistence has never been explained adequately. Political scientists indeed have scarcely bothered to try. The most recent major group study of European political parties is content to conclude that "in many cases Irish politics are maverick to Western Europe."³ Leon D. Epstein in his study has taken the view that "Ireland can be disregarded because of its size and small industrial base or treated as a special case for historical reasons."⁴ The present paper suggests an approach to the analysis of the Irish political party system related to an operationally definable model and goes on to suggest why Labour has been accorded its minor-party role within that system.

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1. Cf. Brian Farrell, "Irish Political Culture and the New State", *Administration*, vol. 16, No. 3.
2. B. Chubb, "Ireland 1957" in D. E. Butler, ed., *Elections Abroad*, London, 1959, p. 185. Cf. B. Chubb, "The Republic of Ireland", in Stanley Henig and John Pinder, (eds.), *European Political Parties*, P.E.P., London, 1969, p. 450.
3. "Conclusion," Henig and Pender, *op. cit.* p. 503.
4. Leon D. Epstein, *Political Parties in Western Democracies*, London, 1967, p. 138. Cf. D. W. Rawson, "The Life-Span of Labour Parties", *Political Studies*, vol. xvii, No. 3, September 1969, p. 329.

To date, the debate about the effects of the single-transferable-vote system of P.R. has tended to distract attention from any broader effort to analyse the development of the Irish political party system.⁵ Partisans and observers have pointed to the dominance of a single-party over a forty year time span, to the lack of alternation of parties in government, to the difficulty of securing an over-all majority of seats, to the absence of any substantive ideological conflict between the parties and many other factors as evidence that the Irish party system is defective and deviant. They have usually related these failures, in one way or another, to the form of electoral machinery operated in Ireland.

Ireland, it is argued, has exhibited the most common characteristic of the "two-party system", i.e. single-party government, in all but six of the last 48 years. It has, however, signally failed to achieve the alternation (or, even, expectation of alternation) of single parties in government. The sole exception was the transfer of authority from *Cumann na nGael* (later Fine Gael) to Fianna Fáil in 1932. On this basis, it is suggested, Ireland is a defective "two-party system"; the defect is attributed to P.R. and the argument advanced for the adoption of the "straight vote" as a means of ensuring a reasonable expectation of party alternation in government.

Proponents of P.R., on the other hand, have tended to argue that the proportionality of the electoral machinery has been attenuated by dominant parties as a means of retaining a near-monopoly of governmental power. Implicitly, it is assumed, the retention of larger multi-seat constituencies would have denied any party with less than 50 per cent plus of the national vote an over-all majority of seats. This accumulation of electoral strength is virtually ruled out; it has been attained only once—in the General Election of 1938. Logically, though for persuasive reasons this implication has not been explicitly developed, the situation would be expected to give Ireland a series of (presumably alternating) coalition governments. Ireland, in these terms, might be regarded as defective "multi-party" rather than bi-polar. Neither side has attempted to place the defects and deviances of the Irish party system in any larger comparative context. Little effort has been made to move beyond descriptive labels and seek some more relevant operational model.

Political scientists increasingly have recognised that to concentrate on an analysis of political party systems simply by number is insufficient. It is not merely the number of parties, but the number relevant to the formation and maintenance of government on some stable basis which is important. Professor Giovanni Sartori has shown that the distance between the parties is at least as important as the number of parties in determining the character of the system.⁶

5. For a general summary of the arguments and literature see *Report of the Committee on the Constitution, December 1967*, Dublin, 1967, (Pr. 9817), pp. 21–26, and bibliography, p. 140.

6. G. Sartori, "European Political Parties: the case of polarised pluralism" in J. La Palombara and M. Weiner, (eds), *Political Parties and Political Development*, Princeton U.P., 1966. Also G. Sartori, "Typologies of Party Systems—a Critique", paper delivered to the *International Political Science Association 7th World Congress*, Brussels, 1967.

In recent years, Professor Jean Blondel has been developing an operational definable typology of party systems in terms of the number of parties, the strength of the parties and the ideological spread of parties within the political system.⁷

Taking the nineteen Western democracies, he applies two simple objective measures with the following results:

TABLE I: *Average Vote of the two major parties (1945-66)*

	<i>Percentage</i>
United States	99
New Zealand	95
Australia	93
United Kingdom	92
Austria	89
West Germany	80
Luxembourg	80
Canada	79
Belgium	78
<i>Ireland</i>	75
Denmark	66
Sweden	66
Norway	64
Italy	64
Iceland	62
Netherlands	62
Switzerland	50
Finland	50
France	49

These data suggest that countries in the first group can be defined as "two-party systems"; countries in the second group as "three-party systems"; countries in the last two groups as genuine "multi-party systems", differentiated between six in which there has been a dominant party and three without a dominant party.

7. J. Blondel, "Party Systems and Patterns of Government in Western Democracies," I.P.S.A. 7th World Congress, 1967; also his *Introduction to Comparative Government*. London, 1969, chap. 10, pp. 153-176. For a critical comment on the "two-and-a-half party system", see Henig and Pinder, *op. cit.* p. 502, note 1.

TABLE 2: *Average strength of the two major parties, and difference between the parties, by percentage of votes cast (1945-66)*

			Difference	
United States	49	50	1	} Average disparity 1.6%
New Zealand	48	47	1	
Australia	47	46	1	
United Kingdom	45	47	2	
Austria	46	43	3	
Germany	46	35	10	} Average disparity 10.5%
Canada	36	43	7	
Belgium	43	35	8	
Ireland	46	29	17	

These data indicate that two-party systems tend towards a relative equilibrium between the two major parties; that the distribution of votes in the second group tends to be uneven, "the mode is not 40-40-20 but 45-35-20."⁸ This leads Blondel to suggest that a three-party system, while theoretically possible is essentially transitional and unstable. Hence he adopts the term "two-and-a-half party system" as the genuine model for this category. The Irish deviation from the average disparity recorded is discussed below.

Blondel then examines the ideological spectrum of parties in Western democracies. His analysis of the "two-and-a-half party system" shows:

	Socialist	Liberal/Radical	Christian	Conservative
Germany	L	s	L	
Luxembourg	L	s	L	
Belgium	L	s	L	
Canada	s	L		L
Ireland	s	L		L

(L = large party; s = small party.)

These comparative data show that none of these systems have large Communist or Agrarian parties and that they can be distinguished between "those which have a strong Right, a strong Left and a weak Centre, and those which have a strong Right, a strong Centre and a weak Left."⁹ Ireland, although there may be doubts about the use of the terms in detail, is clearly located in the latter group.

Taking a longer time-span, the whole course of Irish electoral experience since the foundation of the State, how well does this model fit the data?

8. Blondel, *ibid.*, p. 157.

9. Blondel, *ibid.*, p. 164.

TABLE 3: *Actual national percentage first-preference vote of two major parties (1923-69)*¹⁰

<i>Election</i>	<i>Two-party %</i>	<i>F.F.</i>	<i>F.G.</i>	<i>Difference</i>
June 1927	53.5	26.1	27.4	1.3
February 1948	61.7	41.9	19.8	22.1
June 1943	65.0	41.9	23.1	18.8
August 1923	66.8	27.6	39.2	11.6
May 1944	69.5	48.9	20.6	28.3
May 1951	72.0	46.3	25.7	20.6
September 1927	73.3	34.9	38.4	3.5
March 1957	74.9	48.3	26.6	21.7
May 1954	75.8	43.4	32.0	11.4
October 1961	75.8	43.8	32.0	11.8
June 1969	79.8	45.7	34.1	11.6
February 1932	79.9	44.6	35.3	9.3
July 1937	80.1	45.3	34.8	10.5
January 1933	80.2	49.7	30.5	19.2
April 1965	81.8	47.7	34.1	13.6
June 1938	85.3	52.0	33.3	18.7

Applying Blondel's analysis it is obvious that Ireland normally fits well within the limits of the "two-and-a-half party system." Ireland has only once approached the range of the two-party system (90 per cent share of the vote to the two major parties). This was in the General Election of 1938 which took place within ten months of the previous election and, uniquely in Irish electoral experience, gave a single-party more than half the popular vote.

At the other end of the scale, Ireland has only once appeared as a "multi-party without a dominant party system." This was the June 1927 General Election when the distance between *Cumann na nGael* and *Fianna Fáil* closed to a 1.3 per cent margin, more normally associated with a two-party system proper; however, nearly half the voters, on this occasion, shared their first preference votes across six other parties and a large field of Independents. The outcome was sufficiently

10. Electoral data in this and later tables derived from *Report of the Committee on the Constitution*, Annex II, pp. 100-101; "Results of Irish General Elections 1923-1965" in *Trade Union Information*, I.C.T.U., February, 1968, pp. 5-10, and "Analysis of Results of General Election 1969", *Trade Union Information*, August 1969; and from calculations based on the officially-published *Elections Results and Transfer of Votes* for each post-war election.

indecisive for W. T. Cosgrave to offer "any reasonable adjournment" to the other party leaders if they wished to attempt the formation of a coalition government.¹¹ In the September General Election of that year, after the assassination of Kevin O'Higgins, although the margin between the two major parties remained close (3.5 per cent), only four other parties contested the election and the Independents' share of the first-preference vote dropped from 12.2 per cent to 8.8 per cent. This, then, gave a result tending towards a coalition resolution of the problem of government formation—and, in fact, Cosgrave formed his new government with the support of the Farmers and Independents.¹²

Both these elections, and the 1923 contest, might be regarded as transitional for the Irish system. It was not yet clear whether Cosgrave or de Valera would come to command a "natural" majority. It is noticeable that the only other Irish elections that fall outside the range of the "two-and-a-half party system", as operationally defined, all occurred in another period of instability. From the war-time General Election of 1943 through to the end of the 'fifties, Ireland witnessed sharp fluctuations in the electoral support of both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, the sudden rise of a new national party effort in *Clann na Poblachta*, and two periods of inter-party government.

The fragmentation of political opinion and interest can be traced chronologically. In 1943, after an unprecedented span of five years and five days, a new General Election for the eleventh Dáil cut the share of the vote going to the two major parties by more than 10 per cent each. Labour increased its share by 50 per cent (from 10 per cent in 1938 to 15.7 per cent in 1943). The remaining 19.3 per cent of the poll was shared between the new farmers' grouping, *Clann na Talmhan* (10.9 per cent), and a flock of 28 Independents, "Farmers" and minor groups (*Ailtirí na hAiséirí*, Monetary Reform, Unemployed Interests, *Córas na Poblachta*). Eleven months later Fianna Fáil was able to recover much of its ground in the 1944 General Election. Fine Gael, fielding only 54 candidates for the 138 seats, continued to decline in an election with an exceptionally low turn-out (67.7 per cent). The fragmentation of the electorate was further shown by a split in Labour, with a consequent drop in its joint share of the poll (Labour 8.9 per cent; National Labour 2.2 per cent) and by a spread of minor groupings that included *Ailtirí na hAiséirí*, Monetary Reform, Old I.R.A. and 15 Independent candidates.

In the 1948 general election Fine Gael offered 82 candidates but its share of the first-preference vote dropped, for the first time, below 20 per cent; Labour continued weak and divided; Fianna Fáil dropped 7 per cent. The new factor in the situation was *Clann na Poblachta*, with its 93 candidates offering a national challenge to the largest parties. In the event, it captured 13.2 per cent of the vote and 10 of the 147 seats. The outcome of this fragmented election was the first inter-party government, which despite its unusually diverse party base (Fine Gael, Labour, National Labour, *Clann na Poblachta*, *Clann na Talmhan* and

11. *Dail Debates*: vol. xx, col. 13, 23 June, 1927.

12. See W. Moss, *Political Parties in the Irish Free State*. Columbia U.P., 1933, p. 172.

Independents) served for 3 years and 3 months—well up to the average life-expectancy of cabinets in stable Western parliamentary systems.¹³

These three elections in 1943, 1944, 1948 marked a break in the general trend of Irish results over a twenty-year period towards giving the three established parties an increasing share of the national vote; a trend resumed again in the 'fifties and 'sixties. The movement is illustrated in Fig. 1.

The results are, of course, significantly affected by the number of candidates on offer. This is a variable that must be considered in any discussion of the relationship between voting behaviour and electoral machinery, although it does not appear in the "index of proportionality" calculated by Dr. O'Leary in his booklet on the Irish system. For convenience the statistics are given in the following table.¹⁴

TABLE 4: *Number of candidates by major party affiliation (1923-69).*¹⁵

	'23	'27	'27	'32	'33	'37	'38	'43	'44	'48	'51	'54	'57	'61	'65	'69
Fianna Fáil	87	87	88	104	102	100	92	105	97	118	118	112	112	107	111	121
Fine Gael	106	96	88	100	85	95	74	87	54	82	77	89	82	95	102	125
Labour	53	51	31	37	22	25	33	75	41	58	37	42	30	35	44	99
Minor party	81	103	30	12	26	8	1	58	41	121	36	44	48	25	15	14
Independents	46	39	24	22	7	26	7	28	15	27	28	15	16	38	8	13
TOTALS:	373	376	261	275	242	254	207	353	248	406	296	302	288	300	280	372
Percentage Poll:	61.3	68.1	69.0	76.5	81.3	76.2	73.5	74.2	67.7	74.2	75.3	76.4	71.3	70.6	75.1	76.9

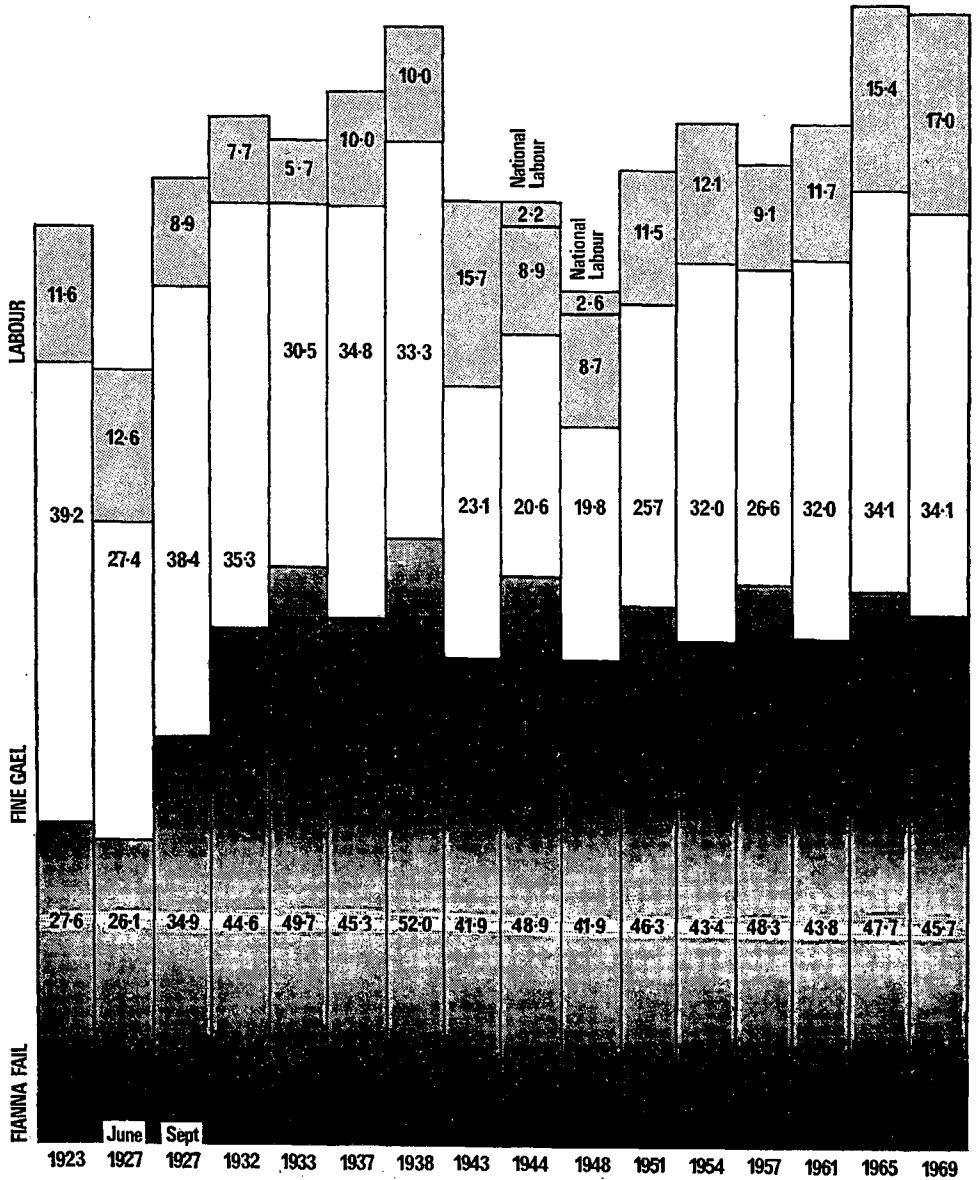
The inter-party government experience affected both the electoral strategy and performance of the parties in succeeding elections until the end of the 'fifties. The circumstances account for the deviations from the "two-and-a-half party system" evident in the General Elections of 1951 and 1957. In 1951, partisan opinion was still sufficiently fragmented to give 7 per cent of the national vote to the two smallest parties, *Clann na Poblachta* (4.1 per cent) and *Clann na Talmhan* (2.9 per cent), and 9.6 per cent to the 28 Independent candidates. In 1954, this "minor groupings" vote dropped, but so did the Fianna Fáil vote, apparently due in considerable measure to voters switching to Fine Gael, which for the first time since 1938 gained more than 350,000—jumping, in fact, to its best post-war total (427,300) until the 1969 General Election (449,673). This restored the equilibrium between the three relevant parties within the two-and-a-half party model. The movement between the two major parties was reversed in the 1957 general

13. J. Blondel, *Introduction to Comparative Politics*, Table 18-1, p. 343, shows the average duration of governments in the Atlantic parliamentary systems (1946-66); United Kingdom, West Germany; and Norway all average 3.3 years.

14. C. O'Leary, *The Irish Republic and its experiment with Proportional Representation*, Notre Dame Press, 1961, pp. 49ff.

15. Information re candidates derived from J. F. S. Ross, *The Irish Election System*. London, 1959; from official returns, and by the courtesy of the Department of Local Government. Polling percentages from *Trade Union Information*.

Fig. 1: National first preference percentage by major parties (1923-69)



election, Fianna Fáil gaining nearly half and Fine Gael dropping to only a quarter of the national first-preference vote. This movement of opinion between the major parties in the 1950's continued into the 1961 General Election, as indicated in Table 5 (compare graphic presentation *supra*).

TABLE 5: *First preference votes by major party (1951-57)*

<i>Party</i>	<i>1951</i>	<i>1954</i>	<i>1957</i>	<i>1961</i>
Fianna Fáil	616,600	579,500	592,700	511,800
Fine Gael	342,300	427,300	326,400	373,900
Labour	153,100	161,600	111,700	136,700
Other	221,000	166,900	196,300	146,100
Percentage Poll:	75.3	76.4	71.3	70.6

All other Irish elections, measured in these terms of the performance of the two major parties, fit within the general limits of the "two-and-a-half party" model, although it might be noted that the distance between the parties did widen very considerably in 1933. In that General Election voter turn-out reached an abnormally high rate of 81.3 per cent; Fianna Fáil gained its highest-ever popular vote (687,000) and the intervention of the new National Centre Party took support from *Cumann na nGael*. The most recent Irish elections of 1965 and 1969 show not only the two major parties cleaving close to the "45-35 per cent" mode but suggest that Labour is at last moving towards the 20 per cent share which is the norm for the small party in this model. However, over the whole span of Irish electoral experience, Labour has customarily fallen well below that level, as indicated in Table 6.

TABLE 6: *Labour percentage of first-preference votes (1923-69)*

1923	11.6
1927 (i)	12.6
1927 (ii)	8.9
1932	7.7
1933	5.7
1937	0.0
1938	10.0
1943	15.7
1944	11.1
1948	11.3
1951	11.5
1954	12.1
1957	9.1
1961	11.7
1965	15.4
1969	17.0

A number of factors have been noted as explanations for Labour's electoral weakness. One has been the failure to offer sufficient candidates nationally. As shown in Table 4, Labour has normally contested about a quarter of the seats. However, this may be taken as a symptom rather than a cause of a deeper malaise. Similarly an undue emphasis on the small Irish industrial base and subsequent lack of an industrial proletariat tends to ignore the well-defined pockets of constant Labour support in rural areas, especially rural Leinster and the South.¹⁶ Moreover the emphasis on industrialization and urbanization ignores the experience of many post-World War II states, from Cuba to China, and throughout Africa, where underdeveloped agrarian societies have shown the capacity to develop and sustain strong socialist parties prior to, and apart from, any substantial industrial base. Another explanation stresses the disparity between Labour's interest, image, and history as a self-consciously class-based party and the relatively egalitarian homogeneity of Irish society. This theme of Ireland as a classless society is a well-established social and political doctrine;¹⁷ more recently, both social scientists and pollsters have indicated the selective quality of the observation, have pointed towards a hardening of the class-structure in Ireland, and have suggested the existence of some relationship between class and party preference.¹⁸ Nevertheless, in the absence of any more detailed work on socio-economic class and partisan preference, it seems reasonable to accept with Basil Chubb the inevitably peripheral character of a class-based party in a system dominated by two large national parties divided along a constitutional axis that cuts across social, economic and regional divisions.¹⁹ It then becomes necessary to seek a more comprehensive understanding of Labour's weakness; and of its persistence, in the genesis of the Irish political party system.

This can be traced back to the 1918 General Election and to Labour's failure to take part in that contest. The topic has received little critical attention to date. Indeed, in a newspaper series published earlier this year, a former financial secretary of the Labour Party declared that it was not a factor "of any significance."²⁰ Placed in the context of the enduring influence of that election on Irish political development, it might be argued to the contrary that the significance of the Labour decision cannot be over-stated.

16. Epstein, *op. cit.*; John A. Murphy, "The Irish Party System", in K. B. Nowlan and T. D. Williams (eds.), *Ireland in the War Years and after, 1939-51*, Dublin, 1969; Basil Chubb, "The Republic of Ireland", in Henig and Pinder, *op. cit.*

17. See Bertram Hutchinson, *Social Status and Inter-Generational Social Mobility in Dublin*, Dublin: Economic and Social Research Institute Paper No. 48, October 1969, p. 1. Cf., e.g., Mr. de Valera in the debate on the Constitution, *Dail Debates*, vol. lxxvii, col. 997, 25 May, 1937.

18. Cf. Hutchinson *supra*, and results of 1969 poll published in the news magazine *Nusight*, October, 1969; December, 1969; April, 1970; and Irish Marketing Survey, *This Week*, June 1970.

19. B. Chubb, *A Source Book of Irish Government*, I.P.A.: Dublin, 1964, p. 213. For a discussion of the regional character of this cleavage see E. Rumpf, *Nationalismus und Sozialismus in Irland*, Meisenheim-am-Glan, 1959, and P. Pyne, "The Third Sinn Féin Party, 1923-1926: II: Factors contributing to collapse", *The Economic and Social Review*, Dublin, Vol. 1, No. 2, p. 235ff.

20. J. Charleton, *Irish Press*, 30 January, 1970.

Apart altogether from local Irish developments, the 1918 General Election marked a major turning-point in the history of representation in these islands. It was the climax of a series of parliamentary reforms stretching back to the Reform Bill 1832. The Representation of the People Act of 1918 added an entirely new electorate to the political system.²¹

In Ireland in the eight years since the previous election of December 1910 the electorate almost trebled, as can be seen in Table 7.

TABLE 7: *The Irish Electorate (1910-1918)*

	<i>Boroughs</i>	<i>Counties</i>	<i>Universities</i>	<i>Total</i>
1910	122,326	575,011	4,138	701,475
1918	386,667	1,539,607	10,399	1,936,673

In effect, allowing for the usual replacements due to mortality, two out of every three voters on the register were exercising the franchise for the first time. Many members of this new "political generation" were women; others were less affluent citizens previously ineligible because of property qualifications; others were young men voting for the first time. Such a group, as Butler and Stokes suggest, "will be unusually open to the influence of issues and events which dominate national politics at the time of their entry into the electorate."²² In Ireland in 1918 the dominant issues and events revolved around the efforts of the Sinn Féin party to gain independence.

Sinn Féin grew in less than two years into a nation-wide political organisation. This "second Sinn Féin" owed little beyond its name to the little group of advanced nationalists brought together by Arthur Griffith with his ideal of a "King, Lords and Commons of Ireland."²³ With masterly ambiguity it avoided any narrowly "Republican" definition. In the bitter words of one of its early leaders:

"it was a dual body from the start. It was built upon compromise from the start . . . The split was there from the start. The so-called treaty was only the wedge that burst the two sections asunder."²⁴

21. D. E. Butler, *The Electoral System in Britain since 1918*, Oxford U.P. 1963, p. 1.

22. D. E. Butler and D. Stokes, *Political Change in Britain*, London, 1969, p. 53.

23. For a thorough treatment of this subject see Michael A. Laffan "The Development of Sinn Féin 1916-1917", unpublished M.A. thesis presented at University College, Dublin, Autumn 1968.

24. Rev. Michael O'Flanagan, presidential address to Sinn Féin, 14 October, 1938, in P.R.O. Dublin, *Sinn Féin Funds Case*, 2B.82.119. This view of Sinn Féin was a common-place among contemporary observers and participants.

It was indeed not a combination of two groups but of many diverse political groups into a typically broad-based independence movement. It included the original Sinn Féin of Griffith, militant Volunteers, newly-organised I.R.B. (as well as ex- and anti- I.R.B. militants), the anti-partitionist constitutionalist Irish Nation League, the newly-founded Liberty League of Count Plunkett (in open competition with Sinn Féin in early 1917), *Cumann na mBan*, as well as many former supporters and activists of the Irish Parliamentary Party. Indeed it would be fair to say that apart from the staunch parliamentarians and the Unionists only one significant political interest in Ireland was not represented in Sinn Féin. That interest was Labour.

Nor did Labour contest the election against Sinn Féin. The circumstances of its curious electoral passivity are described in the historical reconstruction which forms the second part of this article. For purposes of the present analysis the fact of Labour's absence from the General Election is sufficient.

For that election is not merely "critical", in V. O. Key's sense of marking the appearance of a new pattern of support that persisted in subsequent elections. It is the real foundation of contemporary Irish politics.²⁵ With it we can date the true beginnings of Dáil Eireann and the modern Irish state. After it the notion of Irish representation at Westminster was to be no more than an historical anachronism. The displacement of the Irish Parliamentary Party by a new Irish political élite is obvious. The emergence of a vast new generation in the electorate has been less marked. Outside a handful of Belfast wards,²⁶ this great mass of new voters was given no opportunity to register a preference for Labour at this critical election. They were denied, at the outset, an occasion to form the basis of a Labour-voting habit. When that observation is related to the convincing evidence indicating both the hardening of partisan preference over time and the greater constancy of political behaviour rather than political attitude,²⁷ the subsequent electoral weakness of the Labour Party becomes more explicable.

The majority of Labour leaders, despite Connolly and Larkin, failed to recognise the need to synthesise socialism and nationalism. They over-emphasized the electoral confidence of Sinn Féin and under-estimated the powerful persistence of the separatist impulse it represented. They saw in the Sinn Féin national front a potential opponent; they knew something at first hand of the frailty of its apparent unity. They did not recognize in it a political weapon that might be captured by a vigorous Labour leadership and shaped into a socialist sword. In

25. See Brian Farrell, "A Note on the Dail Constitution of 1919" in *The Irish Jurist*, vol. iv, n.s., part 1, Summer 1969.

26. Cromac, Pottinger, Shankhill and Victoria. These candidates were sponsored unsuccessfully by the Belfast Labour Representation Committee. Carson's Labour Unionist Association ran three successful candidates in St. Anne's, Shankhill and Victoria. See Noel O'Keefe, "The 1918 Election in Ulster", *Clio*. Michaelmas term, 1969, published by the Irish Universities History Students' Association, p. 22.

27. See, e.g., A. Campbell *et al.*, *The American Voter*, New York, 1960, pp. 161-4; Seymour M. Lipset, *Political Man*, London, 1960, pp. 270ff.; Peter G. J. Pulzer, *Political Representation and Elections in Britain*, London, 1967, p. 127ff.

the interests of preserving the precarious unity of their own movement and of maintaining a degree of ideological purity, the Labour leaders stood aside. They played no central role as Sinn Féin went on to construct a polity within a polity. Labour was excluded from the first Dáil, from direct representation in the Treaty negotiations, and from participation in the first, seminal Irish governments. It forfeited a substantial bloc of working-class support, while leaving itself open to the charge of only representing a single interest. It permitted the shaping of a basic cleavage in Irish political life that ran along a constitutional axis and cut across other potential sources of political disagreement. It created, by its abstention in 1918, the conditions for its own subsidiary role in the "two-and-a-half party system" that subsequently developed in Ireland.

II

To date, Labour's abstention and consequent late arrival within the new Irish party system has been explained in curiously a-political terms. It might have been attributed specifically to the lack of a clear-cut Labour programme, to poor leadership or to Sinn Féin pressure. Instead, most comment has accepted Labour's own official explanation at its face value: "the party agreed to stay out of the 1918 election to leave the way clear for the nationalist priorities of Sinn Féin."²⁸ Yet such an interpretation ignores the well-documented and long-standing antipathy between Labour and Sinn Féin and conveniently overlooks the fact that Labour's withdrawal was a major change of policy at the National Executive level.

Even allowing for the virtual re-structuring of Sinn Féin during 1917, Arthur Griffith was still a potent name in advanced nationalist circles. Since the turn of the century he had been a severe critic of the Labour movement in both its industrial and political actions.²⁹ "AE" wrote of Griffith in July 1917 as a "sheer reactionary, a pure capitalist's man."³⁰ Labour spokesmen on platforms and in pamphlets dissected and condemned the inadequacies of Sinn Féin. Most Labour leaders and publicists recognized openly with O'Casey that "Labour will have to fight Sinn Féin,"³¹ and identified with Louie Bennett the lack of any revolu-

28. Michael Viney and Owen D. Edwards, "Parties and Power" in Edwards, (ed.), *Conor Cruise O'Brien Introduces Ireland*, London, 1969, p. 89. Cf. David Thornley, "The Development of the Irish Labour Movement", *Christus Rex*, XVIII, 1, p. 19; P. Lynch, "The Social Revolution that never was" in T. D. Williams, (ed.), *The Irish Struggle 1916-1926*, Dublin, 1966, pp. 48-9; Donal Nevin, "Labour and the Political Revolution" in Francis MacManus, (ed.), *The Years of the Great Test 1926-1939*, Cork, 1967, p. 55.

29. See J. D. Clarkson, *Labour and Nationalism in Ireland*, Columbia U.P., 1925, pp. 257ff; Emmet Larkin, *James Larkin*, Mentor Books, 1968, p. 57; N. Mansergh, *The Irish Question*, London, 1965, pp. 237ff.

30. "AE" to Thomas Johnson, 2 July, 1917, Thomas Johnson Papers, National Library of Ireland.

31. P. O Cathasaigh, *The Story of the Irish Citizen Army*, Dublin, 1919, p. 67.

tionary principle in the Sinn Féin programme.³² Sinn Féin, said one Labour pamphleteer,³³ was:

complex, subtle and contradictory. It is but the new name for developed capitalism in Ireland, using Nationality and the Irish language as a cloak to reach its goal. . . . Sinn Féin is the revolt of the Irish commercial class against landlords and the Government that supports landlords to the detriment of the industrial capitalists . . . the Irish Republic the Sinn Féiners are after is but the counterpart of France and America where year after year the capitalist sweats dividends out of his helpless workers.

Undoubtedly this was an attack that seems closer to the pre-1916 invective of Connolly than to the customary post-1916 image of a staid and rather timid trade-union movement. But it is impossible to read what Labour men were saying and not recognize that that image is distorted and that the antagonism towards and suspicion of Sinn Féin remained a dominant theme. There was applause in the Derry Guildhall in August 1917 when the President of the Irish TUC asserted:³⁴

in time of industrial strife the capitalist class drop all political and religious divisions, Sinn Féiners, Redmondites, Carsonites, Catholics and Protestants all join together with the one common object and that is to grind down the organized workers—all of which points to the necessity of a strong, virile Labour organization keeping itself independent and always ready to grapple with any tyranny no matter what flag it sails under.

But it was becoming increasingly difficult for any political group to maintain independence in the circumstances of Irish life. The hegemony of the Irish Parliamentary Party had been challenged in a series of bye-elections. By autumn 1917 Sinn Féin had grown from a declining minority faction into a national front organization embracing all shades of separatist opinion.³⁵ The polarization was almost complete and Labour could scarcely hope to remain neutral or disengaged for long. A pamphlet on *Sinn Féin and the Labour Movement*³⁶ argued that:

Sinn Féin may claim to be the national movement of Ireland . . . the movement for National Independence cannot possibly hurt the Labour Movement, and the Labour Movement ought not to hurt the National Movement.

32. Louie Bennett, *Ireland and a People's Peace*, Dublin, 1918, p. 11. "Sinn Féin sets Ireland as an isolated plaintiff at the bar of the nations instead of making her an active partner in the great democratic alliance. . . . Sinn Féin has suffered, as other political parties suffer, from the vice of compromise. They had not the vision nor the courage to throw expediency to the winds and stand firm upon bedrock principles."

33. "Charles Russell," *Should the Workers of Ireland Support Sinn Féin?* Dublin, 1918, pp. 6, 11, 15.

34. *Report Irish Trade Union and Labour Party Congress*. 6-7-8 August, 1917, p. 6.

35. See Brian Farrell, "Irish Political Culture and the New State", *Administration*. vol. 16, No. 3.

36. "Spalpin", *Sinn Féin and the Labour Movement*, n.d., p. 15.

The pressures, and suspicions, were evident before the end of 1917. In the Labour weekly *Irish Opinion* Thomas Johnson was forced to explain³⁷ that the paper was neither being used to capture Labour for Sinn Féin, nor as a tool in some plot to undermine Sinn Féin. Through its representation on the Mansion House Conference, Labour was drawn into the anti-Conscription campaign and the food crisis agitation. It was in danger of losing its identity in the larger nationalist movement that had already swallowed up militant Volunteers, ex-parliamentarians, the Liberty League of Count Plunkett and the anti-partitionist Irish Nation League. Individuals—Madame Markievicz is the most dramatic example—had already crossed over into Sinn Féin ranks. But trade union leaders recognized the need to preserve Labour unity and independence.

William O'Brien detailed Labour's position when he resigned from the original committee that created the second Sinn Féin coalition after the Count Plunkett Conference of April 1917. If he was free to support one political group, he explained,³⁸ other Labour men could reasonably claim the right to work for other parties,

and that would put an end to our hope to unite all Irish workers in the Labour Party. Bearing in mind the fact that most of the members of the rank and file of the Irish Labour Party up to recently gave their adhesion to the Redmondite Home Rule party and that there is still a considerable minority in the Labour movement who favour supporting that party.

So, through 1918, Labour leaders persisted with their plans to develop an independent political party. At the TUC Conference held in Waterford in August the title of the organisation was changed to "Irish Labour Party and Trade Union Congress", emphasizing this renewed political accent. In his presidential address William O'Brien insisted:³⁹

we are a political party, independent, erect, free . . . in the coming year, maybe in the closing months of this year, we must bend at all events some of our energies to the building up from within of our political machinery, and the elaboration of a political policy and electoral programme and the completion of the structure of the Irish Labour Party. We must secure Labour representation, independent, able, strong, efficient and constructive on all our public elective bodies both national and local.

He pointed to the extension of the franchise and underlined the need for changes in the constitution of the Congress and Party in order to extend its membership, up to then limited to members of affiliated unions, in order to recruit "women voters" and other "democratic organisations."

37. "Bolo Unmasked" in *Irish Opinion*, 15 December, 1917, p. 29. See Johnson Papers, NLI, for background.

38. William O'Brien to Dr. T. Dillon, 28 May, 1917, O'Brien Papers, NLI, Ms. 15, 653.

39. *Congress Report 1918*, p. 17.

At the Conference a resolution was passed⁴⁰ calling for "the setting up of the essential Labour machinery in every municipal and Parliamentary constituency where this is found practicable". It called on all Trades Councils and similar local Labour organizations:

- (a) To equip themselves with copies of the new register;
- (b) Ensure the appointment of Ward and District Labour Election Committees without delay;
- (c) Ascertain, as far as possible, the voting power of Labour in each municipal and Parliamentary constituency, and immediately communicate the result to the secretary of the Congress;
- (d) Endeavour to educate public opinion—particularly Labour public opinion—by frequently holding public meetings, lectures and debates, and by the distribution of suitable literature.

Six weeks later this political militancy was endorsed in an electoral manifesto from the National Executive. This announced that the Irish Labour Party was "a combatant in the coming electoral struggle"; set out the party programme and parliamentary strategy—"undertaking, for the moment, a policy of abstention from Westminster" but leaving the door open for a special national Congress to sanction a change if warranted—it committed the party (by "unanimous vote" of the National Executive) to a policy of abstention from Westminster while allowing that

it is conceivable that altered circumstances and the interests of the workers and democracy may however warrant a change of policy which shall be determined by a special National Congress.

The Manifesto urged:⁴¹

wherever Labour Candidates are nominated, having the approval and sanction of the Irish Labour Party, we ask for your votes, your help, your enthusiasm and your influence; where Labour Candidates are not nominated, see to it that Labour's national ideals, Labour's social and industrial programme are not submerged.

Labour's intentions were spelled out in a circular from the Election Subcommittee of the National Executive on 20 September, 1918:

40. *Ibid.*, pp. 64-65.

41. *Ibid.*, pp. 165-169.

IRISH TRADES UNION CONGRESS AND LABOUR PARTY

NATIONAL EXECUTIVE.

DUBLIN, 20th Sept., 1918.

GENERAL ELECTION.

Dear Sir,

The National Executive after carefully reviewing the political situation in all its bearings, the position of the Labour Movement in Ireland arising out of the War, and the effect on the growth of Labour's political consciousness of an election contest, has decided unanimously in favour of entering the field at the coming General Election with a number of Labour candidates as an independent political party. Our chief purpose in entering upon the contest is to provide an opportunity for the workers to declare their adhesion to the principles and policy of the Labour Party, on both National and Economic issues, to strengthen the position of Irish Labour in its relation with the inter-national Labour Movement, and to prepare the way for a full representation of Labour in a future Irish Parliament.

The present Constitution of the Irish Trade Union Congress and Labour Party provides that:—

- (1) A candidate for Parliament must be nominated by the National Executive or by one or more of the Affiliated Bodies;
- (2) Before any action towards the selection of a candidate is taken, the National Executive shall in the first instance be consulted *A candidate must be selected at a Conference convened by the Local Trades' Council.* Where no Trades Council exists the National Executive shall arrange to have a Conference convened, *and no candidature can be promoted until endorsed by the National Executive.*
- (3) . . . In the case of parliamentary elections the expenses of a candidate shall be borne by the body or bodies nominating a candidate, with such financial assistance as the Central Funds can afford.
- (4) Candidates . . . must be and remain members in good standing of a Labour Organization, eligible for affiliation to this Congress, and must, if elected, continue to be members thereof so long as they retain their seats. They shall also pledge themselves to accept this Constitution, agree to abide by the decisions of the Annual Meetings and National Executive in carrying out the aims of this Constitution; *appear before their constituencies under the title of "Labour Candidates" only, and abstain strictly from identifying themselves with, or promoting the interests of, any candidature not endorsed by the National Executive.*

In the opinion of the National Executive it is desirable that your Council should call a Conference of Trade Unions in the Constituency at as early a date as possible—

not later than October 5th—with a view to deciding whether a Labour Party candidate should be nominated or not.

The basis of representation at the Conference should be as follows:—

- One delegate for Societies having 100 members or less;
- One delegate for each additional 100 members up to 500;
- One delegate for each additional 250 members up to 1,000; and
- One delegate for each additional 1,000 members afterwards.

A delegate from the National Executive will attend your meeting to consult if you will let me have all the information you can as to the local situation, the prospects of a Labour candidature, what the other parties are doing, what amount of local funds, if any, are available for election purposes, and if any local Union has a candidate in view?

Hoping to hear from you at an early date.

I am, Yours fraternally,
 THOMAS JOHNSON,
 Secretary, Elections Sub-Committee.

Labour in Dublin had already taken action. On September 14, O'Brien, as secretary of the Dublin United Trades Council and Labour League, wrote "urgently" to the secretaries of affiliated unions reporting the unanimous decision of the National Executive and inviting them to appoint delegates to attend a special conference in the Trades Hall, Capel St., ten days later.⁴² At this meeting a decision was taken to contest four Dublin seats—Harbour, College Green, St. Patrick's, St. Michan's. Five names were offered in nomination: James Larkin, Thomas MacPartlin, Thomas Farren, Louie Bennett, William O'Brien.⁴³

Elsewhere in Labour circles electoral enthusiasm was less marked. A conference of the Meath Labour Union on September 20 decided not to run a candidate. A nomination meeting of the Bray, Kingstown and District United Trades and Labour Council was thrown into confusion by the suggestion that "a Labour candidate had been selected by the Sinn Féin party in East Wicklow." In early October nominating conferences in Cork and Waterford were adjourned until after the special national Conference planned for November. The Irish Clerical Workers Union refused to support Labour unless it was abstentionist and the

42. Thomas Johnson Papers, NLI.

43. William O'Brien Papers, NLI, Mss. 15, 705-10, diaries. In many cases, entries appear to have been made, or changed, after the event and these documents need to be used with care. As far as possible I have checked all evidence from this source against other contemporary papers and records. I have used the *Dublin Saturday Post* as an authoritative source of Labour news; William O'Brien wrote to Johnson, 8 November, 1916, "the *Saturday Post* gives us practically all the space we ask for" (T. Johnson Papers, NLI) and the Minutes of the National Executive of Labour for the period are comprised of clippings from that paper.

Kilkenny Trades Council and Labour League unanimously disapproved of Labour's intention to run candidates as a separate political party, "being convinced that by doing so they would be doing the movement an immense disservice to itself and the country."⁴⁴

In Dublin, too, there were disagreements. The "unanimous decision of the National Executive cloaked sharp differences of opinion. As early as 27 August O'Brien had noted in his diary:

J. J. H[ughes], C. O'S[hannon], Farren, Foran and self re G[eneral] E[lection] Foran for W[estminster], Farren and C. O'S agst. Mac P[artlin] told me he was agst. fighting at G. El. T. J[ohnson] and self agreed after disc[ussion] we must fight.

On September 7 he again records indecision:

No dec. MacP. for no fight. Foran for att. W. J. J. H. almost do. Rest for fight and ab[stain] W. for present as good tactics not matter of principle.

The National Executive decision to fight was taken at a resumed meeting on September 10. Both MacPartlin and Joseph Mitchell of the Belfast Trades Council were absent. Although O'Brien records rather laconically in his diary "Talk with MacP. re G.E." (20 September) and MacPartlin allowed his name to go forward, he appears to have remained unconvinced on the wisdom of attempting an immediate Labour electoral assault. However, these disagreements in the senior ranks might have remained hidden but for the activities of P. T. Daly.

Daly had been a member of the IRB. He had been expelled many years previously, became a close collaborator of Larkin and was squeezed out of a strong trade union position during 1918. This provided him with an ample motive for wishing to discredit and embarrass the O'Brien-Johnson-Foran group in the ITGWU.⁴⁵

At a meeting in early October, Daly attacked the decision to contest the Dublin seats and refused a proffered nomination for the St. James's constituency. He published instead his own plan for Labour to withdraw from the forthcoming election, but to organize to fight all the metropolitan seats in the next election, which it was assumed would take place as soon as the war was over. At the end of the month he published a letter charging, in some detail, that Labour leaders had held secret conferences with representatives of other political bodies.⁴⁶ The charges were vigorously denied by MacPartlin in his speech⁴⁷ to the special national Conference on November 1:

44. References to the Meath, Cork and Waterford conferences in O'Brien's diary. East Wicklow and Kilkenny meetings in *Saturday Post*, 28 September, and 5 October, 1918.

45. For Daly, see Florence O'Donoghue (ed.), *The IRB and the 1916 Rising*, Cork, 1957, p. 84, note 1; *Forth the Banners Go: reminiscences of William O'Brien as told to E. MacLysaght*, Dublin, 1969, chap. IX, and Daly's libel action against the ITGWU.

46. *Dublin Saturday Post*, October 12, 19, 26, 1918.

47. *Report 1918*, p. 105.

During the previous week reports had appeared in the papers from a political party, and suggestions had been taken from them that there was collusion between the Labour Party and a political party in the country. He wanted to say that as far as he was aware in Ireland there had been no negotiations or collusion, good, bad, or indifferent by the Labour Party with any political party, nor was there likely to be in the future.

But MacPartlin had been seriously ill in the previous weeks and was, as already suggested, not fully in touch with all that had happened.⁴⁸ Daly—whatever about his motives in raising the issue, had put his finger on a sensitive spot.

The possibility of some electoral pact between Labour and Sinn Féin had been hinted at for months. Before Christmas of 1917 Larry Byrne (better known by his journalistic pen-name “Andrew Malone”) wrote to Thomas Johnson that “Sinn Féin is out for a deal on the Dublin seats.”⁴⁹ At the Sinn Féin Standing Committee as early as 23 July, 1918 “it was suggested with reference to the Wood Quay municipal vacancy that if the Labour Party put up a good man Sinn Féin would support them.”⁵⁰ As Sinn Féin’s own preparations for a general election advanced, the question of coming to some agreement with Labour over seats, at least in the Dublin area, became increasingly pressing.

On August 16 the Standing Committee directed Harry Boland to arrange a conference with “representative Labour men”, and a week later a delegation consisting of Fr. Michael O’Flanagan, Alderman Tom Kelly, Boland and Robert Brennan was appointed to follow up this contact. Boland reported back on September 12:

his efforts to bring about a conference with Labour were fruitless. He understood that Labour intended to contest some fifteen seats and to declare for abstention from the English Parliament but not as a principle but as an expedient. After considerable trouble it was decided to go ahead with our programme leaving it open to adjustments should occasion and opportunity arise.

Clearly, then, Boland’s contacts were sufficiently well-informed to pass on details of the Labour position, but were not yet open to persuasion. The following week the question of ratifying local Sinn Féin nominations for Dublin city seats again focussed the Standing Committee’s attention on relations with the Labour Party: “it was ultimately decided that a deputation consisting of Messrs. Boland, Brennan and Alderman T. Kelly should meet representatives of Labour with power to negotiate in respect of three seats”; and meanwhile consideration of the Dublin nominations was deferred.

48. Personal family information; also MacPartlin’s speech *supra*. and O’Brien’s diary “Saw MacP on his feet again” (30 Oct., 1918).

49. L. Byrne to T. Johnson, 18 December, 1917, Johnson Papers, NLI.

50. Minute Book of the Sinn Féin Standing Committee, 23 July, 1918, p. 88; the original is on microfilm in NLI and a typed copy is found in the documentation of the Sinn Féin Funds case in the Public Record Office, Dublin (2B.82.119). All subsequent references to the Standing Committee from the same source.

This joint meeting was held in 27 Dawson St. on September 22—clearly P. T. Daly's sources were also well-informed since he gave details of the location later. Sinn Féin were represented by Boland and Brennan; the Labour men were Cathal O'Shannon, Thomas Farren, and O'Brien.⁵¹ According to the Sinn Féin reports,⁵² Labour demanded the Harbour, College Green, St. Michan's and St. Patrick's divisions in Dublin but agreed to accept St. James's in lieu of the latter. "Labour has also decided to contest up to fifteen seats but the outside probable number would be seven or eight and six was very likely. There might be four Labour seats in Dublin, one each in Cork and Derry and a possibility as regards Limerick, Waterford and North Sligo." Once again, faced with this evidence of Labour's intention to fight, the Standing Committee of Sinn Féin decided to postpone consideration of its own Dublin nominations.

By now, it is clear, other informal local negotiations were in progress. On September 16, J. Crowley of Sinn Féin wrote to O'Brien: "I have been asked to see you about St. Michan's"⁵³ and a cryptic note in O'Brien's diary five days later ("Saw M.S. re G.E.") may well refer to Michael Staines prospective Sinn Féin nominee for the St. Michan's division. At all events, deputations from the St. Michan's and Harbour organizations of Sinn Féin called on the Standing Committee to demand ratification of their nominees.⁵⁴ On the last day of September at the Committee,

the question of the Dublin seats and Labour's intention to put up candidates was discussed at length and on the motion of Mr. Brennan seconded by Mr. MacMahon, it was decided that we should go ahead with the ratification of candidates. The following were accordingly approved:

Clontarf	H. Boland
College Green	Sean T. O Ceallaigh
Harbour	J. V. Lawless
St. Michan's	M. Staines

The selection by St. James's of Dr. Hayes was deferred. St. Patrick's and St. Stephen's submitted the name of Alderman Kelly but the Alderman refused to allow his name to go forward.

But the Committee was not yet finished with the Labour issue.

In early October Liam de Róiste wrote from Cork⁵⁵ regarding the position there and later that month Sean T. Ó Ceallaigh wrote to William O'Brien of Mallow (the parliamentarian) asking him to use his influence against any decision to run a Labour man in Cork—"as our desire is to have this election fought

51. O'Brien diary.

52. To a special meeting of the Standing Committee, 23 September, 1918.

53. O'Brien Papers, NLI, Ms. 15, 681.

54. Minutes, 23 September, 1918.

55. Minutes, 3 October, 1918.

between the Irish party and ourselves on the clear issue of self-determination we are most anxious that any other question that would cloud that one issue should be avoided if at all possible." O'Brien, although highly critical of the quality of the Sinn Féin nominees in Cork undertook to help and expressed the view that "the Trades Council wing of the Labour Party will not I think join in any attempt to cause a triangular fight in Cork", but was less sure of the Transport Workers section.⁵⁶

In Dublin, relations with Labour provoked disciplinary problems in Sinn Féin. J. V. Lawless complained that at a meeting of the Sean Connolly Sinn Féin Club when the Labour question was discussed Harry Boland "made statements in consequence of which Mr. Lawless resigned from the candidature of the Harbour Division."⁵⁷

A deputation from the Dublin *Comhairlí Ceanntair*, consisting of Messrs. Crowley and Fitzgibbon, attended at the Standing Committee to discuss the Labour question. Crowley argued that "in the event of Sinn Féin antagonizing Labour at the election it was his opinion that Labour would win no seat but that Sinn Féin might lose twenty seats." The deputation expressed alarm at rumours of secret negotiations with Labour and dissatisfaction with the idea that the Standing Committee might require any Sinn Féin nominees to stand down in favour of Labour candidates. In response, the senior Sinn Féin officer, Fr. Michael O'Flanagan, laid down a strictly disciplined party line: "if policy demanded that, any candidate throughout Ireland must be prepared to stand down and that applies in Dublin as much as it did in any other place."⁵⁸

However, after the deputation withdrew, a further discussion to clarify Standing Committee policy ensued and it was decided to submit the following pledge to all Labour candidates:

I hereby pledge myself to work for the establishment of an Independent Irish Republic and that I will accept nothing less than complete separation from England in settlement of Ireland's claim: that I will abstain from attending the English Parliament: and that if I am ordered by the Labour Congress to attend the English Parliament I will place my resignation in the hands of my constituents.

This pledge was well-designed to intensify disagreements among the Labour leaders. On the other hand, Sinn Féin leaders now agreed that if Labour candidates accepted the pledge then the selected Sinn Féin nominees should be asked to withdraw.⁵⁹ A further meeting between Boland, Brennan and Alderman Tom Kelly, for Sinn Féin, and Farren, O'Shannon and O'Brien was held four days

56. Sean T. Ó Ceallaigh to O'Brien, 14 October; O'Brien to Ó Ceallaigh, 16 October, 1918, in Michael McDonagh Papers, NLI Ms 11, 439.

57. There is no mention of the incident in J. V. Lawless's unpublished memoir; the reference comes from Standing Committee Sinn Féin Minutes.

58. Minutes 7 October, 1918.

59. Minutes 10 October, 1918; the motion on this had been deferred at the previous meeting.

later and an effort was made to offer this pledge to some at least of the Labour candidates, although the Secretary of the College Green *Ceanntar* declined to carry out the Standing Committee's instruction and refused to offer the pledge to the local Labour candidate.⁶⁰

Labour leaders, too, were under increasing critical pressure. In the middle of October a Labour election rally in the Mansion House was described briefly by O'Brien in his diary:

Fine att[endance]. Lively audience. Plenty of h[eckling] but we got the best of it.

Newspaper accounts paint a less favourable picture of a stormy meeting, punctuated with questions and interruptions from the floor.⁶¹ With P. T. Daly stirring up trouble in Dublin, a reconsideration of the situation was required.

Daly's motion to rescind the decision on nomination was placed on the agenda for the Council meeting of the Dublin Trades Council on October 2.⁶² This gave rise to a heated debate reported at some length in the *Dublin Saturday Post* two days later. Daly argued that if Labour men did not take their seats they would lose their deposits and charged that the nominating conferences had not been representative. A number of speakers reported that many trade unionists had "absolutely made up their minds to vote politically." Only six of 43 NUR men present at a branch meeting in Kingsbridge would support Labour, reported one representative who "thought the workers would profit if the matter was left as a clear issue between the two political parties." It was suggested that a decision regarding the abstention from Westminster issue would clear the air, while a Bakers' representative said that scabbing at the polls was as grave an offence as scabbing at work. In the event the Daly motion was lost 27-9.⁶³

In the same issue of the paper, however, a columnist underlined the continuing indecision under the heading:

The Labour Difficulty

Things do not seem to be going a bit smoothly in the labour world in Dublin regarding the running of Labour candidates in the event of a general election. There is a rift in the lute. The predominant question appears to be as to whether the national cause should take precedence; and if the question is answered in the affirmative then labour must take a back seat and allow the party which emerges victorious from the contest to look after the interests of the working man.

60. Participants at meeting of 14 October 1918 from O'Brien's diary; MacPartlin in his speech to Congress says the pledge was offered to him, *Report 1918*, pp. 105-6; Sinn Féin Minutes 24 October, 1918, report the College Green refusal.

61. O'Brien diary 16 October, 1918; *Dublin Saturday Post*, 19 October 1918.

62. Council Minute Book, courtesy Mr. Tom Brady, Dublin Trades Council.

63. *Dublin Saturday Post*, 26 October, 1918.

Cause of the Trouble

It is true that just now there is little unanimity as to the advisability of putting forward candidates and at Monday evening's meeting of the Dublin Trades Council Mr. P. T. Daly raised the point. His motion was defeated but some very straight tips were given as to the likelihood of certain societies not supporting the nominees of labour.

"God Helps Those . . ."

Like every other movement in this unfortunate country, unanimity seems to be the quantity most lacking and labour is no exception to the rule. When will these adherents to the cause of labour come to realize the fact that they need expect very little assistance from outside sources? Sinn Feiners and Nationalists can be Labour enthusiasts but advocates of the rights of labour cannot afford to indulge in such a pastime as Republicanism or Nationalism. However Dublin's labour leaders have plenty of grit and with that characteristic they may affect some surprises.

So, as the special Conference approached, the tension and suspicions grew. It was scarcely the easiest setting for a momentous decision. Groups of Labour leaders did meet but the National Executive only managed a reasonably full meeting on the opening day of the Conference, November 1. The only record appears to be a note in O'Brien's diary:

sided?

Nat. Ex. MacP[artlin] pre[sent] Dec[ision] to rec[ommend] withdrawal of all Labour candidates. C. O'S[hannon] and Farren agst.

Explaining the change in policy at the Conference, Johnson distinguished between the "War election" originally envisaged and the "Peace election" which was now to take place; there was now to be a Grand Inquest of the nations and Labour should withdraw in order to allow a demonstration of unity on the issue of self-determination. It was not an argument that appealed to Davy Campbell of Belfast, who saw the new strategy as a negative withdrawal that would leave the political field in the South to the Nationalists and "give a walk-over to the Conservative crowd in the North." Cathal O'Shannon also revealed his opposition and argued the case for a continued Labour campaign in both international-socialist and in nationalist terms.

But the majority were clearly relieved by a recommendation that released them from a difficult choice. Many reported the determination of local Labour supporters to vote Sinn Féin and, although some dissent was evident in the speeches of ITGWU representatives from Cork and Waterford, the National Executive's view was accepted by a vote of 96 to 23.

Obviously, as this attempt to reconstruct the circumstances of that historical decision indicate, there was some substance to Labour's stated intention of

withdrawing to allow "a clear expression of the people's opinion upon the question of self-determination." That view was influenced by the knowledge that the nationalist agitation would weaken Labour support. And, of course, the danger of vote-splitting and the pressure from Sinn Féin were strong additional factors in the political calculation. Nevertheless the negotiations with Sinn Féin show that an agreement between the parties could have resolved these difficulties, although the price might be a division of the Labour movement both industrially and politically along a rapidly hardening border. Peadar O'Donnell, for example, has suggested.⁶⁴

Labour leaders could not make up their minds what road to take. They were a bothered lot of men who gave themselves one task above every other, to hold the branches of the trade unions together in a period of controversy.

Certainly the real basis for the decision to withdraw lay in the divided counsels among Labour leaders. The central issue in that disagreement was articulated in terms of Labour's attitude towards attendance at Westminster; a far more serious and persistent line of cleavage was involved. Fundamentally the General Election of 1918 was a plebiscite to determine the future nature of Irish relations with Britain. In the event, the answer given was a separatist answer. The burgeoning of that separatist spirit was evident enough to Labour leaders; so was the consciousness of older partisan alignments both North and South.

The Labour movement itself was passing through a period of very rapid growth. In the leadership, as in the rank and file, there was a generational and an ideological division. Working-class solidarity meant one thing for men who had lived their lives in a United Kingdom that seemed more likely to endure than the emerging embryo of the Irish state; it meant something else to men whose eyes were fixed on the need to secure Irish workers full representation in the world of international socialism. One side still thought that Labour's essential arena was industrial rather than political; argued that the workers were not yet sufficiently politicized to accept Labour's "absolutely revolutionary socialist programme"; and stressed the strain imposed on workers by an electoral choice.⁶⁵ The other side posed the question, "would a Labour man going forward not appear in the eyes of the proletariat as good a spokesman of his class as the representative of any other political party"; they argued that by backing out of the election "they were cutting away one third of their numerical representation and one half their moral strength" in the international socialist movement; and asserted that "any of the workers who were prepared to vote for any political party while their own man was in the field was not worth a finger snap as a Trade Unionist."⁶⁶ At the end of the debate, caution carried the day.

64. Peadar O'Donnell, *There Will Be Another Day*, Dublin, 1963, p. 16.

65. *Report 1918*, p. 105, 108, 110.

66. *ibid.*, p. 108, 112, 114.

As the great drama of modern Irish state-building began, Labour had the opportunity to play a difficult, possibly a decisive, role. In withdrawing from the play, Labour leaders "confused the prompter's stool with a place on the stage."⁶⁷ The Labour Party has paid a heavy electoral price for that decision ever since.

67. O'Donnell, *ibid.*, p. 17. The importance of trade union growth as a factor tending to reduce the political emphasis at this time is significant. It might, in one sense, be argued that Labour barely existed as an organised political party. It was merely a weak outgrowth of the union movement. On the other hand, the same might be asserted of Sinn Féin in this period; yet it was to give birth to the political twin parties which have dominated the Irish system. For an interesting indication of union strength, revealing both rural and urban spread, see the ITGWU Census of Membership returns, June 30th, 1918, in NLI Ms. 13,948.