

## Labour and the Irish Party System Revisited: Party Competition in the 1920s

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### I

In the 1969 General Election the Labour Party received more votes than at any other time in its electoral history. Nevertheless, despite this success, Labour continues to be one of the smallest social democratic parties in contemporary Europe. While many different reasons have been advanced to explain Labour's persistent weakness, there is general acceptance that the party's low level of electoral strength can be related both to the traditionally small industrial sector in Ireland – and so to the absence of significant working-class population – and to the apparently impregnable dominance of a nationalist political cleavage which has resolutely discouraged the emergence of an influential capital-labour opposition. In this sense, Labour's weakness can be seen in terms of its inability to compete with the larger parties which have organised their support in terms of variations on a nationalist/republican theme, and which have effectively rendered irrelevant the Labour demand that the electorate mobilise around strictly social and economic issues.

Perhaps the most cogent and persuasive explanation for Labour's weakness *vis-à-vis* the dominant nationalist political division is that suggested by Farrell (1970 and 1971), who emphasises the importance of Labour's decision to withdraw from the 1918 General Election. This election was to prove crucial to the future development of Irish politics and, in hindsight, can be arguably seen as marking 'the true beginnings of Dáil Éireann and the

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modern Irish state' (Farrell, 1970, p.488). It was in 1918 that Sinn Féin had its first opportunity to present itself as a viable alternative to the traditionally dominant Irish Parliamentary Party, and it was an election in which, as a result primarily of the recent extension of the franchise, an estimated two in every three voters were eligible to vote for the first time (Farrell, 1970, p.487).

Given the large number of new voters, and given the subsequent constitutional developments and the creation of the Irish Free State, the partisan loyalties which were engendered by the 1918 election were clearly of immense importance. Emphasising this point, the Farrell thesis argues that had Labour not withdrawn from the election, the party would have had an unparalleled opportunity to implant its political perspective into an electorate which was not yet frozen into traditional voting allegiances. By not contesting the election, Labour enabled Sinn Féin, the Unionists and the Irish Parliamentary Party to monopolise what were essentially virgin voters, and so create the foundation for the subsequent and virtually undisputed hegemony of the nationalist cleavage in Irish politics.

While Labour's abstention in 1918 was to have very significant repercussions on the long-term electoral strength of that party, and while the broad thrust of the Farrell thesis is incontrovertible, his argument does demand certain modifications. In particular, it must be noted that Labour did make up a lot of lost ground during the early 1920s, and that it was only in the latter part of that decade that the party began to suffer from an inability to compete with the dominant politics of nationalism. It is the intention of this paper to examine the process whereby Labour managed to carve out a relatively significant electoral niche for itself in the first three elections after the Treaty, and why the party's fortunes suddenly declined after that period. This paper will also attempt to identify to which party, or parties, Labour's former voters transferred in the late 1920s and early 1930s, and why these voters changed their partisan allegiance.

## II

That Labour was able to go some way to overcoming its initial electoral disadvantage is evident in Table 1, where it can be seen that the party obtained 22 seats in the first election of 1927. While its national vote remained quite small, at 13 per cent, the party had a strength more comparable to either of the two Treaty parties than is normally taken to have been the case.

Table 1: *Levels of support for the major parties, 1922-33\**

<i>Year of election</i>	<i>Treaty Parties**</i>			<i>Labour Party</i>		
	<i>per cent</i>	<i>N seats</i>	<i>per cent seats</i>	<i>per cent</i>	<i>N seats</i>	<i>per cent seats</i>
	<i>1st preferences</i>			<i>1st preferences</i>		
1922	60	94	73	21	17	13
1923	66	107	70	11	14	9
1927 (1), June	54	91	60	13	22	14
1927 (2), Sept.	74	119	78	9	13	9
1932	80	129	84	8	7	5
1933	80	125	82	6	8	5

\*These, and subsequent figures within the text are, unless otherwise stated, derived from figures collated by Brian M. Walker.

\*\*Cumann na nGaedheal and Sinn Féin (from 1927 (1) onwards, Fianna Fáil).

Though Labour's voting strength in June, 1927, showed a marked decline from the 1922 figure of 21 per cent, the smaller figure is arguably more important: the pact between the pro- and anti-Treaty factions in the 1922 election, allied to the large number of uncontested seats (almost 30 per cent of TDs were elected unopposed), resulted in both a very low turnout, and an artificially muted competitiveness between the larger parties. Thus, ignoring that election as anomalous, we can see Labour in 1927(1) as having secured a small, though not insignificant core of support. Table 1 also demonstrates that those parties which were organised around nationalist/republican issues did not, in fact, gain a really strong electoral monopoly until September, 1927, and that there was a relatively large section of the electorate in the early years of the state which was willing to consider alternative issues to those which divided the pro-and anti-Treaty parties.

The relatively low level of penetration into the electorate by the Treaty parties in the early 1920s would seem to demonstrate that the damage caused to Labour by its withdrawal from the 1918 election was not wholly irreparable. While the nationalist opposition had had a clear electoral monopoly in that election, there nevertheless remained a very large section of the electorate which had not been socialised during that crucial context and which, presumably, remained accessible to the Labour message in the post-independence era. Though two-thirds of the electorate were eligible to vote for the first time in 1918, and thus were open to the inculcation of fresh partisan loyalties at a time when the only available politics was the politics of nationalism, it must also be noted that a majority of the voters actually stayed away from the polls at the election. In the case of 25 of the 72 constituencies in what later became the Irish Free State, there was no

contest, as only one candidate had stood, and this resulted in some 35 per cent of the eligible electorate being unable to vote. These non-voters, together with those who had an opportunity to vote, but who abstained for one reason or another, amounted to some 55 per cent of the electorate in the 26-County area.<sup>1</sup> Significantly, it was in those areas which had not been contested in 1918, that Labour candidates in 1927(1) achieved the best results: by grouping together sets of the single-member constituencies of 1918, the multi-member constituencies of the later election can be approximated, and a comparison shows that those Labour candidates who stood in areas which had not been contested in 1918 gained, on average, some 19 per cent more votes than their party colleagues standing in the contested areas of 1918.<sup>2</sup> While this evident bias lends credence to the Farrell thesis, and goes some way towards explaining how Labour managed to make up lost ground in the period up to and including the election of June, 1927, it is still necessary to understand why Labour suddenly collapsed in the latter part of the first decade of independence.

### III

The decline in the Labour Party's electoral fortunes from September 1927 onwards can be directly attributed to the logistics of the sharply polarised party system which developed in this period, which though potentially operational throughout the first decade of independence, did not actually emerge until the entry of Fianna Fáil into Dáil Éireann in August, 1927 and which was accentuated by the 'anti-system' character of Fianna Fáil's opposition. An anti-system party is one which 'undermines the legitimacy of the regime it opposes . . . (and) abides by a belief-system that does not share the values of the political order within which it operates' (Sartori 1976, p.133), and clearly Fianna Fáil's role in this period approximates to this definition. The party's active commitment to total separation from

1. These figures are taken from *The Constitutional Yearbook for 1921* (London: National Unionist Association, 1921), and *The Glasgow Herald*, 30 Dec., 1918.

2. The actual figures show that Labour candidates in the uncontested areas won an average of 3330 votes each, whereas those in the contested areas won an average of 2789. These figures must, however, be treated with some caution. In the first place, it is impossible to make a relevant comparison between 10 of the 28 (non-university) constituencies of 1927, and contested/uncontested areas in the 1918 election, as each of those ten includes some contested, and some uncontested areas. Secondly, of the 18 constituencies in 1927 which can be approximated to almost wholly contested, or almost wholly uncontested areas in 1918, only 5 approximate to the uncontested type, as only a minority of the candidates in 1918 were elected unopposed. Finally, those 5 constituencies represent a rather confined geographic area: namely, Clare, Cork and Kerry.

Britain, and to the creation of a 32-County Republic; its advocacy of the immediate removal of the oath of allegiance to the British crown, and de Valera's assertion that Cumann na nGaedheal had no proper right to be regarded as the legitimate Government of the Free State (Dail Debates 28:1398) together created a belief-system which was in fundamental conflict with the political order within which the party operated.<sup>3</sup> While this opposition was present throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, it remained somewhat illusory as long as Fianna Fáil pursued its abstentionist policy, and refused to participate in the Dáil. Following the assassination of Kevin O'Higgins in July, 1927, and the subsequent Public Safety Act and Electoral Amendment Bill, the party did enter Dáil Éireann, and it was only then that the nature of its conflict with Cumann na nGaedheal became really relevant. At this point, the Irish party system polarised, opposition became highly centrifugal and as the centre proved unable to hold, those parties which occupied that centre found their politics to be increasingly peripheral to the concerns of the vast majority of the electorate.

With the entry of Fianna Fáil into the Dail, and the subsequent increased relevance of its political demands, two major issue areas came to dominate the politics of the period. In both of these areas the Labour Party occupied a centrist and/or inconsequential position. The first of these two issues concerned the Treaty, and the nature of the Free State's relationship to Britain. While both Fianna Fáil and Cumann na nGaedheal had well-articulated, firm, and strongly opposing views on this highly salient question, the Labour position was at best ambiguous, and at worst confused. There was a certain degree of hostility to the 1921 settlement among Labour supporters, not least because partition had separated off the industrial North-East of the country and so robbed the party of a potential electoral stronghold. Nevertheless, Labour's elected members took the oath of allegiance and their seats in Dáil Éireann at a time when the vast majority of anti-Treatyites were abstaining. While in the Dáil, the party strenuously criticised the Government for not making sufficient efforts to end partition, and adopted what was in effect a militant republican position, eventually siding with Fianna Fáil against Cumann na nGaedheal when the former entered the Dáil in August, 1927 (Mitchell 1974, pp.207ff, pp.255ff). Though taking no official stand on the Treaty question, and though in

3. In hindsight, it is easy to neglect the importance of the anti-system nature of the Fianna Fáil opposition in this period, and to point to the constitutional ease with which that party eventually gained control of government in 1932. This, however, is to neglect the very real doubts which then prevailed concerning the party's commitment to the existing system of government, and the fear that there might be a return to civil war (Munger, 1975).

practice supporting 'nothing less than the Treaty', Labour simultaneously 'did not accept the Treaty as the final settlement of Ireland's needs' (Mitchell, 1974, p.272). Finally, the party's ambivalent position on the whole Treaty issue can be seen in its commitment to the removal of the oath of allegiance, while at the same time it refused to make that commitment a major part of its programme, on the grounds that social and economic issues took precedence over constitutional disputes (Mitchell, 1974, p.203).

But even on social and economic issues, the Labour policy was far from salient to the issues of the day. The second major issue to become relevant following Fianna Fáil's 'legitimation' in August, 1927, was that concerning the overall orientation of the Irish economy, with Fianna Fáil urging economic autarchy and self-sufficiency, in contrast to the Government's open economy policy, and its stress on Ireland playing a full role in an international free trade market. The Government's programme found its strongest support among the large farmers (or 'ranchers') and commercial interests, who were mainly concentrated in the East and South-East, whereas Fianna Fáil policy was designed to attract the support of the small farmers and petit-bourgeoisie who were mainly concentrated in the West and South-West (Garvin, 1977, and Rumpf, 1959). Within this sharp and very salient opposition, Labour pursued a largely irrelevant social and economic programme geared towards the needs of a relatively small section of the electorate. Its policies were essentially welfarist, with a minimal attraction to the major economic sectors of the community, and were oriented towards the urban and rural proletariat, a group which, in relative terms, was electorally peripheral. In 1926, for instance, only 8 per cent of the gainfully employed population were engaged in industry, and only a further 9 per cent were classifiable as farm labourers (Meenan, 1970, Tables 2.1, 4.2 and 5.1).

Given the polarised party system which emerged following the 'legitimation' of Fianna Fáil in August 1927, and given Labour's irrelevance to the two major issues which created that polarity, it is not surprising to see the smaller party's vote dropping drastically in the September, 1927, election, and the concomitant increase in popularity of the Treaty parties. The issues which had always divided the two major parties had, as a result of Fianna Fáil's changed strategy, become so important as to deny the majority of the electorate the option of not voting for one or the other of these two extremes. The campaign propaganda leading up to the September election continually emphasised that Ireland could not take the risk of having a Government composed of, or dominated by parties other than the two main protagonists. One advertisement, for instance, cited three choices

which faced the voter: a de Valera single-party Government, a Cosgrave (i.e., C na nG) single-party Government, or a Coalition, and pointed out that the last option would result in weakness, insecurity, instability and irresponsibility: the nature of the polarised opposition demanded a definite decision (O'Leary, 1961, p.23, Mitchell 1974, p.271).

Other factors may, of course, be adduced to explain Labour's decline in the September, 1927, election and, in particular, it must be noted that the party's campaign resources had been much reduced by its efforts during the June election of that year. In September, the party found itself able to nominate only 28 candidates, as compared to the 44 who had stood in June, and five of the constituencies which it had contested in the earlier election were not fought in September. In order to assess, therefore, the extent of Labour's loss as a result of voters transferring to other parties where they *had* an opportunity to maintain an allegiance to Labour, it is necessary to examine those constituencies where Labour candidates were consistently nominated throughout this crucial period.

Between 1927 and 1933, when, as Table 1 shows, the party experienced its major decline, Labour candidates were consistently nominated in only 16 of the country's 30 constituencies,<sup>4</sup> yet even here the party experienced significant losses.

Table 2: *Turnout and Labour support in the 16 constituencies consistently fought by Labour between 1927 and 1933\**

<i>Year of election</i>	<i>Total valid Poll</i>	<i>N Labour 1st Preferences</i>	<i>per cent Labour 1st preferences</i>
1927 (1)	707,409	111,706	16
1927 (2)	721,855	89,398	12
1932	788,288	81,035	10
1933	857,555	78,387	9

Change in TVP, 1927 (1)-1933: +150,406 (+21 per cent).

Change in Labour vote, 1927 (1)-1933: - 33,319 (- 30 per cent).

\* For a list of these constituencies, see n. 4.

4. The 16 relevant constituencies are: Carlow-Kilkenny, Clare, Cork Borough, Cork North, Cork West, Dublin North, Dublin County, Galway, Leitrim-Sligo, Leix-Offaly, Limerick, Longford-Westmeath, Tipperary, Wexford, and Wicklow. Though Fianna Fáil did not officially nominate a candidate in Cork North in June, 1927, Daniel Corkery, who had headed the poll as an Independent Republican in that election, stood for Fianna Fáil in subsequent contests. Treating Corkery as a Fianna Fáil candidate throughout, there was at least one candidate standing for each of the three parties - Fianna Fáil, Cumann na nGaedheal and Labour - in each of the 16 constituencies in all four elections.

Despite a regularly increasing turnout in these constituencies, the Labour vote fell continuously between 1927 and 1933, and, particularly, between the two elections of 1927 when the party system experienced its sudden polarisation. Over the four elections, the Labour vote fell by a total of 30 per cent, whereas turnout increased by 21 per cent; between 1927(1) and 1927(2), a period of just four months, Labour lost some 20 per cent of its total vote in these constituencies. Clearly this loss was occasioned by factors other than simply those relating to the problem of campaign resources.<sup>5</sup> Rather, it would appear that the party's political irrelevance occasioned a drift of its voters to one or other, or both, of the two major parties.

The figures in Table 3 confirm this hypothesis, and the correlation coefficients show Labour losing votes to both major parties – to Cumann na nGaedheal between 1927(1) and 1927(2), and to Fianna Fáil between 1927(2) and 1932. The catalyst for this change was, undoubtedly, the entry of Fianna Fáil into Dáil Éireann, and the subsequent emergence of a polarised party system in which the centre – occupied by Labour and other minor parties – was unable to hold in the face of the sharply centrifugal competition.

Table 3: *Coefficients of correlation between changes in Labour support and changes in the support of the two major parties, 1927-33, in the 16 constituencies, controlling for changes in turnout.*

	<i>Period of change</i>	<i>Fianna Fáil</i>	<i>Cumann na nGaedheal</i>
Labour	1927 (1)-1927 (2)	.56*	-.79**
	1927 (2)-1932	-.63**	-.18
	1932-1933	-.17	-.32

\*Significant at 95 per cent probability level.

\*\*Significant at 99 per cent probability level.

#### IV

Finally, we must explain why the majority of Labour's lost voters transferred to Cumann na nGaedheal, and why a smaller number transferred to Fianna Fáil. At first sight, the large transfer to Cumann na nGaedheal in 1927 is surprising, given the radical social policies of Fianna Fáil, and the

5. Nor is there any evidence to suggest that Labour's losses were due to a high abstention rate among its supporters since, statistically, there is no significant relationship between the change in the Labour vote, and the change in the number of voters who actually turned out on polling day.



essentially conservative and bourgeois programme of the Government party. There are, however, two possible explanations. In the first place, a great deal of Labour support came from farm labourers (Gallagher, 1976, Chapter 4), most of whom were employed on the larger farms (see Table 4). It was farms such as these which were in the forefront of the major agricultural

Table 4: *Number of farm labourers and size of farm, 1936\**

Size in acres	1-15	15-30	30-50	50-100	100-200
No. of farm labourers	3,600	7,100	13,800	28,600	25,100

\*Source: Adapted from Table 8, p.192, in Freeman, (1969).

export trade with Britain, which was then being fostered by the Cumann na nGaedheal Government, and opposed by Fianna Fáil. Clearly, the advent of Fianna Fáil to office, and the creation of a strong tariff wall around Ireland, would have resulted in a major loss of income to those farmers who employed the vast majority of farm labourers. In such circumstances, and given the need to arrive at a definite decision between the two larger parties, one would expect the transfer of a significant number of farm labourers to the Government party.

Secondly, by entering the Dáil at a time when the anti-Treaty forces were abstaining, Labour would have gained some support from those voters who, while critical of Cumann na nGaedheal policy in other areas, nevertheless accepted the 1921 settlement. If their support for the Treaty outweighed their opposition to the other elements of Government policy, these voters would naturally have gravitated to Cumann na nGaedheal during the crucial election of September, 1927, given that it had become quite possible for Fianna Fáil to be in a position to control Government following that party's 'legitimation', and given the renewed saliency of the Treaty dispute. Recognising this, Cumann na nGaedheal made a determined effort to win Labour voters in September, 1927, by accusing the smaller party of betraying both its own supporters and the Treaty, and by pointing to Labour's alignment with Fianna Fáil when the latter entered the Dáil in August of that year (Mitchell, 1974, p.271). The substantial number of Labour transfers to Cumann na nGaedheal would seem to indicate that a sizeable body of

Labour support was willing to maintain their allegiance to the party if, and only if, Labour continued in its *de facto* acceptance of the Treaty.<sup>6</sup>

The Labour voters in this period were not, of course, all in agreement with the 1921 settlement, and clearly some of those who radically opposed the Treaty would have transferred their loyalties to Fianna Fáil once the latter had abandoned its abstentionist policies, and so become an effective agent for political transformation. While Labour voters apparently did not transfer to Fianna Fáil until 1932, this may possibly have been due to the unwillingness of either party to compete directly for one another's vote in September, 1927, whereas there was quite intense competition between them in 1932 (Mitchell 1974, p.274 and Moss, 1968, pp.184-95).

Another source of Labour losses to Fianna Fáil following the latter's entry to the Dáil was the radical nature of the larger party's social and economic programme which, in terms of social welfare policy, was 'more advanced than any proposed by any non-socialist party before the United States 'New Deal' (O'Leary, 1961, p.22). As early as June, 1927, Tom Johnson, the Labour leader, had complained that the Fianna Fáil programme contained fifteen items 'of which twelve were identical with the Labour programme in the last elections' (Mitchell, 1974, p.244). Thus, not only did Fianna Fáil, through its policy on land annuities and tariffs, attract the support of the small farmers and petit-bourgeoisie, but it also was a serious competitor for the Labour party in terms of its appeal to the urban and rural proletariat. With its 'legitimation' in August, 1927, and with its greatly increased representation at the September, 1927, election, Fianna Fáil offered Labour voters a much more credible outlet for their demands.

## V

In conclusion, we can discern a pattern in the development of Labour support in the first decade after independence. Immediately after the Civil

6. Evidence of a pro-Cumann na nGaedheal sentiment within the Labour ranks can be noted via the career of Daniel Morrissey, who was a Labour TD from Tipperary, and who, with Richard Anthony (Cork Borough), was expelled from the party for voting with the Government on the crucial Constitution Amendment (17) Act of 1931, which sought to increase the powers of the security forces. He subsequently stood as an Independent Labour candidate in 1932, and gained some backing from W. T. Cosgrave (Moss, 1968, p.185). In 1933, he was an official Cumann na nGaedheal candidate. Moss also notes that Cumann na nGaedheal gains in September, 1927, were made at the expense of Labour (1968, p.172). While the distribution of Labour's second preference would provide a good indication of the strength of pro-Government feeling among Labour voters, it is impossible to provide an effective analysis at this level since in twelve of the sixteen relevant constituencies in September, 1927, there was no distribution carried out.

War, Labour managed to secure a relatively strong electoral following as a relevant party of opposition to Cumann na nGaedheal. This support was heavily dependent upon the continued abstention of Fianna Fáil from the Dáil, in so far as that abstention effectively emasculated the political impact of the Treaty issue, so enabling alternative orientations to emerge as significant predictors of partisan loyalty. Within this artificial context, the non-nationalist and strictly welfarist policies of the Labour party achieved an unusually large degree of relevance. The circumstances of the period until 1927 allowed Labour to go some way towards overcoming the initial setback of its non-participation in the 1918 election, a process which was facilitated by the large number of voters who had not, in fact, participated in that crucial contest.

With the entry of Fianna Fáil into Dáil Éireann in August, 1927, a new style of party competition emerged, which invigorated the nationalist cleavage and effectively prevented the Labour Party from playing a significant role in the new politics of the late 1920s. The 'legitimation' of the Fianna Fáil opposition led to the immediate creation of a polarised party system revolving around the reinforcing conflicts of pro-versus anti-Treatyites, and petit-bourgeoisie and small farmers versus the large farmers and commercial interests. The policy of the Labour Party of this time, marked by an ambivalence on the constitutional question, and strictly welfarist economics, was largely irrelevant to the dominant electoral concerns. As a 'centre' party in a polarised party system, it rapidly found itself losing votes to the extremes and, in particular, to Cumann na nGaedheal. Essentially, the party suffered from an inability to compete, an inability which began to emerge only after the entry of Fianna Fáil into the Dáil in August, 1927, and which was to make a major contribution to the subsequent and persistent weakness of the Labour Party in the Irish party system.

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