

Party Politics in a New Democracy: The Irish Free State 1922-37

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Author: Mel Farrell

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Reviewer: Brian Girvin

The election of Donald Trump, the vote on Brexit and the political success of anti-establishment populist parties have led some commentators to draw comparisons with the challenges to democracy during the inter-war period. It is not necessary to be alarmist to recognise that inter-war politics in Europe and the United States can provide insights into contemporary instabilities. Mel Farrell occasionally notes these comparisons but his book focusses clearly on an important aspect of this earlier period: why did some states remain democratic while others succumbed to authoritarian or totalitarian takeover. He uses the Irish experience of state building and democratisation between 1923 and 1937 to illustrate the opportunities and costs involved in this process.

One of the attractions of Mel Farrell's book is that the Irish experience is placed within the wider European context. Each chapter briefly discusses major political events elsewhere and then assesses the Irish context. On this reading Ireland is neither exceptional nor *sui generis*. If at times the author suggests that there are 'unique' features to the Irish case, he is generally alert to the similarities. Yet as in all good history writing, what remains interesting is what is distinctive about independent Ireland during the inter-war period. The most distinctive feature is that the Irish Free State (later Éire) remained a democracy by 1939, when most states established after 1917 did not, nor did some other well established states, such as Germany, Greece or Portugal. In most cases parliamentary democracy was undermined from within rather than as a consequence of external intervention, though this was the case in Czechoslovakia. What is intriguing is why Ireland alongside Finland maintained democratic institutions while many others did not. It is unlikely that Ireland or Finland were exceptionally advantaged in this respect when they became independent. Indeed, democracy in both states was seriously threatened on occasions during the 1920s and 1930s.

Farrell rightly insists that Ireland's democratic achievement should not be taken for granted. He further notes that this occurred at a time when an 'anti-democratic virus' affected most of Europe. As a consequence, 'Ireland's new democracy was born at a time when democratic government was in peril'. The author attributes Ireland's successful democratisation to the 'moderate nature of Irish politics' when compared to continental Europe (pp. 7–8). Notwithstanding this valid point, moderation was hard won and for some time, as the author clearly demonstrates, success was not assured.

Ireland did have some advantages, including active involvement in the democratisation of the United

Kingdom during the 19th century. Furthermore, it was a property owning democracy with a strong rural and urban bourgeoisie, while literacy rates were high. In comparative terms, Ireland was not a poor country. Its per capita income placed Ireland within the range considered necessary to maintain democracy. However, the disadvantages might well have outweighed these positive structural elements. Ireland was Catholic, rural and irredentist. It had fought a war of independence, a civil war and had lost approximately 16 per cent of its national territory (at least as nationalists saw it). The economy had suffered seriously after the end of the civil war, during the depression and as a consequence of Fianna Fáil's economic war with Britain during the 1930s. Some sections of the elite in the 1920s and 1930s were attracted by non-democratic alternatives and militarism remained attractive to many. Political violence was never far away. [1]

While Farrell does not engage directly with this literature, his book is an important contribution to the study of inter-war Ireland. It builds on a number of recent publications that have re-evaluated the first decade of newly independent state.[2] The book's focus is on party politics and how a dangerously confrontational political system achieved stability and consensus. One aim is to challenge what the author describes as the cliché that the Irish party system was frozen by the civil war divisions. Farrell successfully demonstrates 'that developments subsequent to the state's foundation were to prove decisive in establishing the two party system of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael' (p. 14).

Nor is the impact of the Treaty and the Civil War on Irish politics neglected. The author provides an incisive assessment of the choices available to the various strands of political opinion. It is during these debates that the strength of moderate opinion appears to be crucial. There was a moderate majority in the country for a settlement along the lines of the Treaty. Even Eamon de Valera, who rejected the Treaty, acknowledged that it would be acceptable to the country but would split Sinn Féin. However, it is difficult to agree with the author that de Valera was 'a moderate' on these issues (p. 42). Tom Garvin's view that, 'De Valera's decision to oppose the Treaty was, however, crucial and must have severely aggravated the violence of the subsequent year and a half', is closer to reality in this context. This is also one of the reasons why those who supported the Treaty remained so hostile to de Valera in later years.[3] The question posed during this time was whether the 'will of the people' would be expressed through democratic elections or whether the 'will of the nation' would be expressed by self-selecting and militaristic elites. In the 1920s a majority of Irish voters supported the former while the latter was given expression by the Irish Republican Army and various iterations of militant republican parties.

Farrell provides a comprehensive discussion of how a new political party, Cumann Na nGaedheal, emerged to defend the Treaty settlement and establish the foundation of the new state. Interestingly, he argues that the 'new party reconciled a break with the revolutionary movement while maintaining a link with the separatist past' (p. 74). By this time the republican insurgency had been defeated through a successful military campaign, fought by a national army under civilian control. The government also had the support of public opinion, the churches and most of the media. Moreover, the pro-Treaty forces acted ruthlessly against the republicans, for example executing 77 of them, without losing support or legitimacy. Farrell makes good use of the diaries of Liam de Roiste, a pro-government supporter in Cork to demonstrate unease at the government's ruthlessness but also the underlying hostility to the IRA and its insurgency. In response, de Valera, the IRA and Sinn Féin considered the establishment of the Free State a coup d'état orchestrated by the British to maintain control over Ireland. Such divisions were not easily bridged.

The August 1923 general election cemented the pro-Treaty majority: over 70 per cent of the electorate supported parties that accepted the Treaty (including the Labour Party, Farmers and Independents). Cumann Na nGaedheal won 39 per cent of the vote, forming a government under the leadership of W. T. Cosgrave which remained in office until 1932. Sinn Féin won 27 per cent of the vote; a considerable achievement for a party many of whose members were in prison or on the run from the authorities. In effect over a quarter of the electorate in the first Free State election supported a party that considered the new state to be illegitimate.

Farrell's discussion of Cumann Na nGaedheal is of particular interest. He skilfully outlines the policy options available to the party and government; some taken some not. There are good insights into key figures in the party, particularly W. T. Cosgrave, the first President of the Executive Council (Prime

Minister), and someone often underrated by historians.^[4] The author asks how Cumann Na nGaedheal or the government could contain the ‘unsatisfied nationalism’ of the IRA, Sinn Féin or later Fianna Fáil (p. 102). In a sense they could not, given the balance of forces in the new state and the constraints imposed by a conservative international system in which they had to operate. However, Cumann Na nGaedheal was remarkably successful at achieving a balance between moderate nationalist objectives and maintaining aspects of the Treaty settlement considered essential to the stability of the state.

Cumann Na nGaedheal successfully negotiated the main challenges the new state faced. It comprehensively defeated the republican insurgency in a manner that no British government could have done. It re-established political stability and restored the country’s economic viability, despite the losses incurred in the civil war. An unarmed police force was established, which in time was generally accepted as legitimate. This provided the basis for re-establishing the rule of law over all parts of the state, often in the face of criminal and republican hostility. In the early years of the state the most important success was maintaining civilian control over the military in response to a 1924 crisis involving senior members of the army and the party (pp. 119–29). After the trauma of civil war, in the face of considerable scepticism, the new government established its reputation as a stable and moderate government within the international system and for financial markets. Joining the League of Nations represented an expression of sovereignty and independence for the new state. The government consciously distanced itself from Britain insisting on the autonomy of the Dominions as independent actors. Though cautious, Irish policy during the 1920s had a significant impact on the evolution of the Dominions. It was also a remarkable achievement for a new state, especially one whose continuing existence was in question.

Farrell’s discussion reinforces what is now becoming a new consensus; that the policies pursued by Cumann Na nGaedheal were crucial to the stability of the new state and to successful nation building between 1923 and 1932. Without it, the democratisation of the state would have been more uncertain and its financial and economic stability weakened. Farrell also shows that Cumann Na nGaedheal was never the imperialist puppet caricatured by republican and radical critics. Its policies were nationalist, emphasising the need to strengthen Irish identity while reflecting Ireland’s distinctive national culture. By 1927 the party can be accurately described as a moderate conservative party with strong nationalist roots, committed to moderate reform within strict financial and institutional constraints.

Farrell emphasises the dynamic nature of the Irish political system in the 1920s and 1930s. This allows him to challenge the view that the party system was frozen as a consequence of the civil war. In a persuasive argument he shows that it is events that followed the end of the civil war that established the so called ‘two and a half party system’ of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Labour Party, that characterised Irish politics from the 1930s to the early 21st century. Most importantly two of the three parties here did not exist in 1923: Fianna Fáil was established in 1926 and Fine Gael in 1933. A realignment in Irish politics occurs between 1926 and 1935 as a consequence. Farrell argues persuasively that it was political developments in the 1920s that shaped the form that the modern party system would take (pp. 118-19). He rightly focusses on the two general elections in 1927 to sustain this case. The outcome of the June election was inconclusive and the party system became extremely fragmented. The September election effectively created the two party system, with Fianna Fáil and Cumann Na nGaedheal consolidating their position reflecting two distinctive constituencies. The two parties attracted over 70 per cent of the vote in 1927. This combined vote for the two major parties remained a feature of Irish politics for over 75 years.

However, I would treat some of the author’s conclusions here with caution. Farrell argues that ‘[t]he year 1927 was good for democracy and the legitimacy of the Irish Free State’ and that it was also the ‘year in which the Dáil finally became fully representative of the Free State electorate’ (pp. 182; 151). These claims do have some validity but it is a view based on hindsight. Fianna Fáil was forced to enter the Dáil or lose its seats after the murder of the Minister for Justice and External Affairs Kevin O’Higgins. Fianna Fáil remained an anti-system party in the Dáil, refusing to cooperate with the government and consistently criticising security policy as unnecessary. Furthermore the party remained an anti-constitutional party throughout this period. A case can be made that Fianna Fáil maintained this anti-constitutional stance until the electorate ratified de Valera’s constitution in 1937. Seán Lemass’s claim that his party was ‘slightly

constitutional' should be taken more seriously in this context, as should the overlap between Fianna Fáil membership, the IRA and other radical anti-system parties.

The most positive reading of Fianna Fáil in this period is that the party reached a reluctant and reserved accommodation with the Free State and the parliamentary system. It was certainly grappling with the consequences of participating in a parliamentary and constitutional system that most party members considered illegitimate. Nevertheless this established the basis for normalisation but, as the author recognises, this did not occur until later in the 1930s. The representative nature of the Dáil after 1927 in itself was not the most significant factor. It is arguable that the collapse of the Weimar republic and the Fourth Republic in France was a consequence of their representative nature: extremists on the left and the right in both cases undermined the moderate centre and democracy itself. The Irish situation between 1927 and 1932 was not as difficult as these cases, but there were regular opportunities for alternative and non-democratic outcomes into the 1930s.

The author is less assured when dealing with de Valera and Fianna Fáil. He discusses the realignment of the right in the face of Fianna Fáil's successes. He explains how a new party, Fine Gael, emerged in 1933 from disparate political groupings opposed to the new government. Fine Gael was a more complex party than its predecessor and for a period, under the leadership of Eoin O'Duffy, it had authoritarian and paramilitary aspects to it. There was considerable uncertainty, instability and political violence between 1932 and 1935 and democracy could not be considered secure until later in the decade.

Farrell notes that the change of government in 1932, 'proved to be an important milestone on the road towards a more stable Irish democracy', while acknowledging that this was not apparent at the time or for some years thereafter (pp. 249–50). I would argue that the years between 1932 and 1937 are the most important ones for the stabilisation and consolidation of Irish democracy. Furthermore, it is primarily the behaviour of Fianna Fáil during these years that established the conditions for consolidation. It is possible that the author underestimates this achievement, in part because he rightly seeks to show how important Cumann Na nGaedheal was. However, this misses the most crucial part of the story. While there had been a change of government in 1932, democracy itself was not consolidated. Consolidation implies more than institutionalisation; it also means that democracy is 'the only game in town' and that radical and authoritarian alternatives are excluded.^[5] This was not the case in 1932 or 1933 and in particular it was not at all clear to observers at the time that Fianna Fáil would accept the outcome of elections or setbacks to their policies.

What then was Fianna Fáil's contribution? To maintain Irish democracy during the 1930s some further conditions had to be met. The first was that majority outcomes in elections should be considered legitimate. There was some doubt about this among the new opposition. It is important to remember that the first leader of Fine Gael was General Eoin O'Duffy who, as Police Commissioner, planned a coup against Fianna Fáil. He was dismissed by the new government but he and others within Fine Gael continued to hold authoritarian views. Moreover, O'Duffy led the paramilitary Blueshirt movement and government supporters feared that democratic institutions would be overthrown as they had been in Italy, Germany and elsewhere. While Fine Gael moved to the right during the 1930s, the Cosgrave leadership accepted electoral outcomes as legitimate. In effect, Fine Gael remained a loyal opposition, especially after O'Duffy resigned.^[6]

A second condition was that Fianna Fáil would rule in a responsible fashion, but be able to implement its policies. This entailed that the government would not try to bypass the Dáil when it could not muster a majority or when the Seanad (the upper house) delayed implementation of legislation, as was its right. De Valera called snap elections in 1933 and 1938 to enhance the government's position and overcome perceived obstruction to policy and eventually abolished the Seanad itself. Moreover, the government did not engage in a policy of retribution against Free State officials in the police, military or civil service, though Cumann Na nGaedheal feared that this might occur and republicans advocated it.

A third important condition was that Fianna Fáil could undo the Treaty settlement, replacing it with a new constitutional order. It is relevant to recall that even while in office Fianna Fáil remained an anti-system

party though not an anti-democratic one. As Farrell argues, the party did come to terms with parliamentary democracy in 1927, but never with the Treaty or the 1922 Constitution. They were also able to do this, because Britain did not attempt to re-enter Irish politics and actively support the pro-Treaty opposition. What successive Fianna Fáil governments were able to do was gradually and democratically weaken the Treaty institutions and in so doing created the context for transforming Irish political culture. A new consensus was then established which consolidated Fianna Fáil's political dominance and institutionalised a new republican political culture.

Another condition was the acceptance of a new constitution. De Valera's decision to introduce a new constitution was strongly opposed by the opposition and heatedly debated in parliament. Though the 1937 Constitution was subsequently criticised for its narrowly catholic-nationalist focus, it was remarkable in a number of ways. Peter Mair argued that the new constitution limited the power of the executive and circumscribed parliamentary sovereignty. Through the constitution Ireland moved away from the Westminster model for politics to what has been described as a consensual model.^[7] In contrast to the experience of the 1922 Free State Constitution, de Valera's Constitution could not be amended by a parliamentary majority. The Constitution was ratified in a referendum and it provided that any future amendments would have to be ratified by the electorate in a referendum. Furthermore, the new head of state, a president, was also elected. Surprisingly the constitution also provided for an upper house, though its remit was rather limited. The retention of propositional representation, when Fianna Fáil could have increased their majority in a first past the post system, is also significant. The decision to establish an independent supreme court, which could declare legislation unconstitutional, provided a means for citizens to challenge the government and to defend constitutional rights.

The final condition necessitated addressing what Farrell has described as 'unsatisfied nationalism' (p. 102) in respect of sovereignty and Northern Ireland. Articles 2, 3 and 9 expressed Ireland's irredentist claim over Northern Ireland, while other articles reflected other values in nationalist political culture. This aggressive statement of nationality disarmed all but the most extreme republicans and provided the basis for their acceptance of the state. The IRA lost any legitimacy that they might have gained under the Free State. Closely linked to this was the open acknowledgement of the special position of the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland and the Catholic nature of the society. Various articles reflected the influence of the Catholic Church, but nothing in the constitution turned Ireland into a theocracy. The Pope was critical of the Constitution and the most he would do was not condemn it. Throughout most of Europe at this time, the Catholic Church was anti-democratic. Most predominantly Catholic states did not survive as democracies and where they did the dominant Catholic political position was authoritarian. What Ireland achieved in the 1930s was significant in this comparative context. De Valera cemented an historic compromise between the Catholic Church and Irish democracy. Nationalism and religion have frequently destabilised democracy, but in the Irish case the constitution integrated these forces within a democratic and constitutional framework.

Is there a single factor that explains the positive outcome for Ireland? What Farrell's incisive book demonstrates is that political leadership mattered; this is crucial according to the comparative research noted earlier. Ireland may have been fortunate in retaining democracy during the inter-war period, but this was not an accident. In the first decade, Irish democracy survived against the odds because Cumann Na nGaedheal successfully met the challenges that the new state faced (sometimes extremely ruthlessly). After 1932, Irish democracy was maintained and consolidated at a time that democracy was weakening in most of the world. Fianna Fáil was able to draw on Cumann Na nGaedheal's achievements and consolidate democracy, but ironically did so by democratically undermining the Treaty settlement that Cumann Na nGaedheal had spent so much effort defending.

[1] This section benefited from the following sources, though the literature is extensive; Nancy Bermeo, *Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times: The Citizenry and the Breakdown of Democracy* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2003); Giovanni Capoccia, 'Defending democracy: reactions to political extremism in inter-war Europe', *European Journal of Political Research* 39: 4 (2001), 431-60; idem, *Defending Democracy: Reactions to Extremism in Interwar Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2005); Svend-Erik Skaaning, 'Democratic or Autocratic Victory in Interwar Europe? A comparative Examination of structural Explanations', *Zeitschrift für Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft* Special Issue 1 (2011) 247-65

[2] The key study is John Regan, *The Irish Counter-Revolution 1921-1936: Treatyite Politics and Settlement in Independent Ireland* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1999); Farrell's work is in part a rejoinder to Regan's thesis as is Jason Knirck, *Afterimage of the Revolution: Cumann Na nGaedheal and Irish Politics, 1922-1932* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014)

[3] Tom Garvin, *1922: The Birth of Irish Democracy* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1996), 59,

[4] Michael Laffan, *Judging W. T. Cosgrave: The Foundation of the Irish State* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2014); Jason Knirck, 'Apostates or imperialists? W. T. Cosgrave, Kevin O'Higgins and Republicanism' *New Hibernia Review* , 14: 4 (2010), 51-73 for detailed discussion of Cosgrave

[5] Bill Kissane, 'Majority rule and the stabilisation of democracy in the Irish Free state', *Irish Political Studies* 13:1 (1998), 1-24

[6] I have discussed the seriousness of this threat in Brian Girvin, 'Nationalism, Catholicism and democracy: Hogan's intellectual evolution' in Donnchadh Ó Corráin (ed.) *James Hogan: Revolutionary, Historian and Political Scientist* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001), 141-62

[7] Peter Mair, 'De Valera and Democracy' in T. Garvin, M. Manning and R. Sinnott (eds) *Dissecting Irish Politics: Essays in Honour of Brian Farrell* (University College Dublin Press, 2004), 31-47; Farrell does not cite this source in his book.

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