Michael Gallagher

The Irish Labour Party in transition 1957–82

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SLP	Socialist Labour Party
SP	Sunday Press
STV	Single transferable vote
TCD	Trinity College Dublin
TD	Teachta Dála (Dáil deputy)
UCD	University College Dublin
WUI	Workers' Union of Ireland

Glossary of Irish terms

Ard-Fheis	Term used for annual conferences of several political parties
Ceann Comhairle	Speaker or chairman of Dáil
Dáil	Lower house of parliament
Oireachtas	Parliament
Seanad	Senate, upper house of parliament
Tánaiste	Deputy Prime Minister
Taoiseach	Prime Minister

1
Background and context

The Irish Labour Party has been described as 'perhaps the most difficult of the Irish parties to understand'.[1] The general weakness of the Irish left, and the picture, accurate until the 1960s, of a conservative Labour Party with sometimes not a single parliamentary seat in the industrial centre of the country, and with the support of only a small minority of trade union members, have all seemed puzzling to some. This book examines the party over the period 1957 to 1982, one of transition for it during which some, but not all, of the anomalies were resolved.

The electoral potential of any party is determined to some extent by the nature of the party system within which it operates, by its own background, and by the political culture and social structure of the society in which it exists. In the case of the Irish Labour Party, it can be argued, each of these factors is inimical to its prospects. The cleavage which generated the largest two parties in the State is none of those employed by Lipset and Rokkan to explain the development of European party systems: centre versus periphery, landed interests versus industrialists, Church versus State and employers versus workers.[2] Ireland's by-passing of the first two of these conflicts was due mainly to its status as a part of the United Kingdom until 1922, and the breaking away of the Irish Free State in that year, which has led to suggestions that its political system is 'best viewed' as an example of decolonialising political systems.[3]

Instead, modern politics in the Republic of Ireland can be said to date from December 1921, when the Anglo-Irish Treaty, establishing the Irish Free State, was signed.[4] A sizeable minority in both the Dáil (the lower house of the Oireachtas, the parliament) and the country opposed it, and the then-dominant Sinn Féin party split irrevocably

traditional sources of agrarian discontent.[139] It has been suggested that Labour could have gained support from small farmers by taking up the land annuities issue during the 1920s,[140] but this is doubtful. Any attempt by Labour, still a part of the union movement, to exploit small farmers' grievances would have seemed as incongruous as, say, a statement from the Farmers' Party calling for higher wages for Dublin dock workers. There was hardly any overlap between the interests of the farmers and of Labour's supporters. Labour had very little to offer Irish farmers, and they in turn have never been noted as a class for their concern for the conditions of the urban and rural working class. If Labour had by some miracle attracted farmers into membership on a large scale, its whole nature would have changed, and it would no longer have been the political instrument of the people for whom it had been created.

Finally, the ever-open option of emigration deprives any country of those who are likely to be its most disaffected citizens. Labour has suffered particularly from this in Ireland, since it has made it much harder for it to win over Fianna Fáil's working-class supporters. In the past, when the economy was prospering they saw no need to vote against the *status quo*, while when it was in recession those with least commitment to the country were as likely to emigrate as to change their voting behaviour. The weight of emigration during the first half of the twentieth century resulted in an ageing population – between 1926 and 1961 the proportion of the population in the fifteen to twenty-nine age group fell from 25·0 per cent to 19·1 per cent, while the proportion of those over forty-five rose from 28·0 per cent to 32·5 per cent[141] – and, as a delegate to Labour's 1972 annual conference was to observe, 'people tottering on the brink of the grave are not the most receptive to radical socialist policies'.

All in all, then, it was not really surprising that there was no strong left-wing party in Ireland in 1957. The nature of the main political cleavage, the country's social structure and political culture, and its own nidicolous history, combined to ensure that the Irish Labour Party remained weak for the first thirty-five years of the State. The 1960s and 1970s were in many ways decades of change, however, and at times during this period there were grounds for believing that the party's prospects were improving.

2
The aftermath of the second coalition, 1957–61

2.1 The 1957 general election

At the beginning of 1957 the second coalition, or Inter-Party, government was in power. It was dominated by Fine Gael, which had nine of the fourteen Ministries, Labour having four and Clann na Talmhan the other. The government was in a precarious position in the Dáil, where it relied on the three seats of Clann na Poblachta, which was giving it external support, for an overall majority.[1] It was even weaker in the country as a whole. The six by-elections held in 1956 all produced large gains for Fianna Fáil. The economy was in a deep recession, and to cope with a serious balance of payments deficit packages of austerity measures had been introduced in February and July 1956, including large increases in import levies and a cut-back in public expenditure.[2] Gross national output was actually shrinking, and total industrial output fell by eleven per cent between 1955 and 1958.[3]

Most disturbingly for Labour, there were nearly 95,000 people on the live unemployment register in January 1957, the highest January figure since 1942.[4] The tone of the government's economic policies was set primarily by the Minister for Finance, the Fine Gael TD Gerard Sweetman, who was on the right wing of his party. After the austerity measures were introduced, criticism of the general drift of the government's economic policies began to emanate with increasing loudness from both the trade union movement and the Labour Party itself. At meetings of the Dublin Trades Council, Labour's participation in the 'anti-working class' government was criticised, and there were calls for it to withdraw.[5] The ITGWU official newspaper accused Labour of having 'drifted into the rut of conservatism'.[6]

newspaper concluded that the electorate's indifference to Sinn Féin, 'coupled with the quickening interest in Labour, may prove in perspective to have marked a decisive turning point in the progress of the Republic'.[99]

It rose from twelve to sixteen seats. Eleven of its TDs had been outgoing TDs, and the election of three of the others – a son of a former TD in Carlow-Kilkenny, Coughlan in East Limerick, and a former TD in Meath – could be explained largely in personal terms. A gain in South Tipperary gave the party two seats in the county for the first time since 1927, and in Dublin North West a leading member of the ITGWU, Michael Mullen, gained a seat, although this was offset by the defeat in Dublin North East of Denis Larkin of the WUI. In terms of votes, Labour rose to 11·6 per cent, about the same level as in 1951 and 1954 (see Appendix 2). Most of its extra 24,000 votes were picked up in Munster, and it performed very disappointingly in Dublin, where its percentage scarcely increased, whereas Fine Gael's share rose by over 5 per cent. Labour still had only one seat in the whole of Dublin, and was weaker there than Independent candidates, who polled 4,000 more votes and won three seats.

3

The move to socialism, 1961–67

3.1 Labour and Irish politics in the early 1960s

On the whole, Labour was reasonably satisfied with the results of the 1961 election, and when the Dáil reassembled there were signs of broader support for the party. Four TDs outside the PLP indicated their support for the nomination of Corish as Taoiseach: the two NPD TDs, Sean Dunne, a former Labour TD now sitting as an Independent because he had not been selected as a Labour candidate, and the entertainingly eccentric Independent Joseph Leneghan.[1] The most significant feature of the debate was perhaps an allegation by James Dillon that Labour was being used by Marxists, presumably an allusion to Noel Browne's promise of support, and his challenge to any secret Marxists to reveal themselves.[2] To Corish's denial that he knew to whom Dillon's remarks referred, Dillon replied that 'they will take damn good care you will not find out'. Labour's policy, said Corish, was based not on 'rip-roaring Marxism' but on 'Christian socialism'.[3] This rather bizarre exchange terminated in the following manner:[4]

Mr Corish: We in the Labour Party propose – and this is a definite proposal – that where it is shown, and it has been shown recently, that private enterprise, either foreign or in this country, fails to establish industry to absorb our unemployed, then we believe it is the responsibility of the State to extend the activities of the State bodies and semi-State industries in an effort to absorb the unemployed. I do not know whether anybody calls that Marxism or not.
Mr Dillon: It is enshrined in the policy of Fine Gael.
Mr Corish: It is enshrined in the recent Encyclical of Pope John XXIII.

This incident, minor in itself, showed that in 1961 Labour's immediate reaction to any suggestion that it was deviating much from the traditional pattern of Irish political thought was a very defensive and

was allowed to address the October conference to appeal against his expulsion. He rested his case on the manner of his expulsion, without repeating his earlier charges of trade union domination, but the expulsion was upheld by 365 votes to 209.[103]

The affair had no long-term significance, mainly because the tide feared by those instrumental in engineering the expulsion swept in anyway. Indeed, Mac Aonghusa's association with the distinctly illiberal tactics of the opponents of the Language Freedom Movement had made him to some extent a liability to the party. However, the manner of his expulsion – he was not informed in advance that his expulsion was being considered, and was given no opportunity to defend himself against any of the charges made at the meeting – savoured of the Star Chamber, and confirmed the suspicions of those who believed that the party establishment was opposed to the steady move to the left. One journalist stated that Labour had 'disgraced itself', and that it was clearly content to remain an inoffensive minor party,[104] while a national newspaper concluded that the expulsion revealed Labour as a party unable to tolerate 'stormy characters . . . a party without much confidence in itself, a party of safe men', in contrast to the dynamic socialist image it was attempting to project.[105]

4

Into the valley of death, 1967–69

4.1 The New Republic conference

The move to the left proceeded at an accelerating rate throughout 1967, and there was a sign that Labour was acquiring a new professionalism to back up its new image when a political director was appointed in May.[1] The appointee, Brendan Halligan, was a university graduate with a background as an economist and an executive in a semi-State company. He became general secretary of the party the following January, and played an important part in formulating the leadership's strategy over the next ten years. Whereas the outgoing secretary, Senator Mary Davidson, who had been on the Head Office staff since the 1920s, had seemed to see her role as mainly administrative, Halligan sought a more active political role for the office. The previous year he had delivered a lecture in which he accused Labour of having 'lost the people', and argued that 'its role has been minimal in areas beyond its sectional interests and its responses to change in the main have been defensive'.[2]

Upon his appointment he commented that 'it is almost respectable now to be a socialist', and declared that Labour intended to force the two major parties into some kind of merger.[3] Five months later he elaborated his views in a periodical article in which he outlined a number of reasons for believing that Labour's future was bright.[4] These included the failure of the two major parties to move with the times; their lack of distinctive identities or *raisons d'être*; the disappearance of the 'old guard' from the political scene and the electorate; the emergence of new voters without formed voting habits; the growth of Labour branches in the universities; the growing political consciousness of the unions, as evidenced by the increase in affiliations; the votes, money and psychological boost brought by these

will be brought under control at prices to be determined by the previous use of the land in question'.[71] A Physical Planning Authority would be established, and it would formulate a National Development Plan, under which 100,000 houses would be built in five years.

On taxation, Labour would introduce a capital gains tax, an annual wealth tax, a flat-rate tax on company profits, and income tax on farmers whose land had a rateable value of more than £100.[72] As things stood, farmers paid no income tax, and the document acknowledged that this was mainly because of 'the effect it will have on the fortunes of any party who sought to introduce such a form of taxation', a point emphasised at the 1977 general election. The document stressed that most of the income raised by taxation of wealthy farmers would be used to help poorer farmers, but the latter may nonetheless have feared that the measure could be the thin end of a wedge.

One of the most important proposals was for the creation of a department of Economic Development, which would devise and implement a comprehensive National Plan. The department would start by initiating a survey of the nation's resources, and would draw up an inventory of them. It would analyse 'the trends of technological development over the next two to three decades . . . in order to identify possible growth areas for the economy'. This done, the plan ('the optimum strategy for maximizing the use of our resources') would be formulated. It would 'set down the type of industries to be established and the areas in which they will be located'. The plan would cover a period of fifteen or twenty years, and would be 'total, comprehensive, aggressive, imaginative and flexible'.[73]

To find fault with the programme would not be difficult. It appeared to rest on the assumptions that Labour was on the verge of a fifteen-year spell in government, and that it would find unlimited funds at its disposal upon entering office. There was no attempt to cost the various proposals. The suggestion that it would be possible to devise and implement a comprehensive national plan in a country so reliant on imported raw materials and vulnerable to changes in the world economic climate betrayed a rather starry-eyed naivety, as did the idea that capital invested in Britain could be attracted back by minor fiscal manipulation, when in fact a flight of capital from Ireland would have been more likely to follow an election victory for Labour.

Whatever the programme's defects, it is to Labour's credit that it produced it at all. No other party had offered a comparable critique of

Irish society, or had set out its aims and policies at such length and in such detail; it contrasts markedly with Fianna Fáil's failure to issue even an election manifesto between the 1950s and 1977. Its naivety sprang from its creators' genuine concern to improve the quality of life of the Irish people. It represented a rare infusion of idealism into a political system in which voting behaviour was generally assumed to be determined by a combination of inherited allegiances and self-interest. Labour itself felt that criticism would be more justly directed at those parties which did not produce policies than at the admittedly imperfect policies which it had worked hard to produce. Speaking at the 1969 annual conference, Seán Dunne TD pointed out that for a long time Labour had been accused of lacking policies. 'And yet,' he went on plaintively, 'as soon as we produce the proposals every damn thing in the world is wrong with them in certain quarters, and particularly amongst political commentators.'

4.5 **The approach to the 1969 general election**

Inevitably, the trickle of allegations that Labour was communist now became a flood, many of them based on distortions of the facts. The president of the Federation of Irish Industries, an employers' organisation, discerned something contradictory in what he described as Labour's claim that policies which in Czechoslovakia had caused people to burn themselves alive in the name of freedom would lead to paradise in Ireland.[74] A remark, scarcely more than an *obiter dictum*, made at the conference by Conor Cruise O'Brien, to the effect that Ireland should close its diplomatic mission in Portugal and open one in Cuba instead, proved a rich source of inspiration for the fertile imaginations of Labour's opponents. James Dillon declared that 'Labour has now announced as their ideal for Ireland that we should become the Cuba of the Atlantic, with a Castro to lead us'.[75] In February 1969 Patrick Norton joined Fianna Fáil, alleging that Labour had abandoned practical and progressive policies in favour of 'Cuban socialism'.[76] Erskine Childers stated that some leading Labour personalities 'openly advocate Ireland joining the socialist world of Russia, China and satellites'.[77] Neil Blaney alleged that Labour not only regarded Cuba as a model but would like to invite the Red Army to set up nuclear warheads around the coast.[78]

At the 1969 conference Labour had also approved the idea of making the contraceptive pill more widely available. This drew from

the Fine Gael TD Oliver J. Flanagan, well known for his conservative views on matters of sexual morality, the allegation that it was 'a brazen defiance of Catholic teaching', a rebuff to the Hierarchy and a 'slap in the teeth' for the Pope.[79] Labour did not respond, but some of its members feared that it could be seriously harmed by allegations that its new approach was in conflict with Catholic teaching. In the world-wide Catholic Church the papacy of John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, and the Second Vatican Council, which deliberated between 1962 and 1965 and encouraged greater discussion within the Church, all had a liberalising influence. These trends were resisted by the Irish Hierarchy. John Charles McQuaid, Archbishop of Dublin between 1940 and 1972, and a long-standing *bête noire* of Irish liberals, returned from the Vatican Council to inform Irish Catholics that the reforms it envisaged would not affect them: 'You may have been worried by much talk of changes to come. Allow me to reassure you. No change will worry the tranquillity of your Christian lives.'[80]

Although the 1960s were in general a period of 'quiescence' in Church–State relations,[81] it seemed that this was not so much because the Church was becoming less conservative as because it was more restrained in its expression of its conservative attitudes. Even before the 1969 campaign got under way, some Labour spokesmen were seeking to head off the charge that socialism and Catholicism were incompatible. Brendan Halligan gave the papal encyclicals, especially those of John XXIII, as authorities for Labour's move to the left; Labour, he said, was in fact the only party making an attempt to implement his teachings, *Mater et Magistra* having been ignored by right-wing Catholics in Ireland and elsewhere.[82] John O'Connell declared that in some respects Labour's policies fell short of the standards of Pope John, and claimed that other Popes had advocated policies like Labour's document on workers' democracy; if Labour was condemned as communist because of the policy document, he said, 'we are content to stand condemned in the company of the great Popes'.[83]

In the main, though, Labour felt supremely confident about its prospects in the forthcoming general election. The other parties seemed to have problems. Fianna Fáil's morale had been dented by the heavy defeat of its proposal to change the electoral system, and its association with Taca seemed likely to cost it support among the working class and small farmers, although Taca's membership fee had been cut from £100 to £5 to placate party critics.[84] Moreover the party seemed to have a leadership problem. Lynch appeared amiable but

weak and vacillatory; he was still regarded as a caretaker Taoiseach and as little more than *primus inter pares* in the Cabinet, and Fianna Fáil's lack of a dominant leader in the de Valera or Lemass mould was thought likely to be an electoral handicap.

Fine Gael was still internally divided. Declan Costello announced in 1967 that he was leaving politics because of ill health, and confirmed this two years later, but there is little doubt that the apparently unshakable grip of the conservative wing, headed by Liam Cosgrave and Gerard Sweetman, contributed to his decision.[85] The liberal wing, which at the highest level now consisted only of Tom O'Higgins TD and Senators James Dooge and Garret FitzGerald, tried to assert itself at the 1968 Ard-Fheis, which discussed a proposal that the party change its name to 'Fine Gael – Social Democratic Party'. Dooge described Fine Gael as 'a radical party' and said, 'We are not doctrinaire socialists, but we are not afraid of being selective socialists.' Although most delegates clearly favoured the change, forceful chairmanship by Sweetman, who was called a 'fascist' by some delegates, succeeded in having the matter referred to a postal ballot of all branches, which resulted in a vote of 653 to 81 in favour of the *status quo*.[86] The *Just Society* idea had made some impact on the party, though, even if only on its rhetoric, and it made much use of phrases like 'social reform' and described its policies as 'progressive' and 'forward-looking'. It still studiously refrained from offering or accepting a position on a left–right spectrum, and although in the past labels like 'right' and 'left' had played little part in Irish politics there was a feeling that a British-type two-party system might be emerging. If this happened, it was thought, Fine Gael's fuzzy image might leave the party crushed between Fianna Fáil on the right and Labour on the left.

There were no other active parties in existence. A special Ard-Fheis of Clann na Poblachta held in July 1965 decided to dissolve the party, and a statement was issued explaining that party members had felt there was no point in continuing as a party, since the Clann had very little support and no apparent prospect of regaining any.[87] Sinn Féin still preserved a nominal existence, though it was then in a state of electoral dormancy.

5

The 1969 general election

5.1 **Labour's approach to the campaign**

The result of the general election held on 18 June 1969 was a shattering blow to the Labour Party, and caused it to revise fundamentally its assessment of its own future and the likely development of Irish politics, leading to a reversal of the 'no coalition' strategy. To understand why a performance which on paper was similar to the party's previous results should have had such an impact, it is necessary to understand the expectations with which Labour entered the campaign.

The party believed that it was on the verge of a major breakthrough, and several leading figures made rash predictions to this effect. The normally shrewd James Tully once suggested that Labour would have a Dáil majority after the election,[1] and in his constituency advertisements sought voters' support 'to return a Labour government'.[2] Many speakers made it clear that they expected Labour to be at least the second largest party in the new Dáil, and the party leader once 'promised' that a record number of Labour TDs would be elected.[3] Even after the polls closed, at a time when he could not have been trying to create a bandwagon effect, Corish stated that he was certain Labour had won more seats than Fine Gael.[4] A political correspondent predicted that Labour would win twenty-eight to thirty seats, and some provincial newspapers seemed to expect a leap in Labour's strength.[5]

This optimism was backed up by a campaign costing £25,000,[6] a large figure by the party's own standards, and by the nomination of ninety-nine candidates, compared with an average of thirty-seven at the three previous elections and a peak of seventy in 1943. In only seven constituencies did Labour nominate just one candidate, and two

of these were cases where outgoing TDs had successfully resisted pressure to take running mates.[7] In nineteen constituencies there were two Labour candidates, ten had three, and in six, all in the Greater Dublin area, there were four; in the Dublin area Labour put up more candidates than Fianna Fáil. There was a difference also in the nature of the Labour candidates (see Table 5.1). Of the 1969 candidates, over a half, as opposed to about a quarter at recent elections, were not members of any elected body, and over two-thirds, as opposed to about a third in the past, were new to Dáil elections. At the start of the campaign it seemed that the freshness of these candidates, unencumbered by association with the party's previous uninspiring record, might be an electoral asset. Moreover, although at previous elections about a third of the Labour candidates had been trade union officials (see Appendix 4), on this occasion just over a fifth were. For the first time ever, there were more candidates in the 'professional' category than in any other, reflecting Labour's success over the past nine years in attracting such people and the appeal it hoped to make to the middle class and the intelligentsia at the election. In 1961 only one of its thirty-five candidates had been a professional. In another respect there was little change, though; only three of the ninety-nine candidates were women.

Some of the 1969 professionals were prominent, highly educated personalities usually referred to, either admiringly or pejoratively, as 'the intellectuals'. Following the acquisition of Conor Cruise O'Brien, who stood in Dublin North East, Justin Keating, a Trinity College lecturer who was well known to farmers because of his work on agricultural programmes on television, was selected as a Labour candidate in North County Dublin; he had joined the party about eighteen months earlier. In May Dr David Thornley announced that he was to stand in Dublin North West, stating that he was satisfied that 'the Norton era' in the party's history was over for good.[8] Thornley too was a lecturer at TCD, and had become nationally known by presenting the popular and often controversial television current affairs programme 'Seven Days'. Three other 'doctors' stood for Labour in Dublin constituencies: Noel Browne and John O'Connell, who were both medical doctors, and John O'Donovan, an economics lecturer at University College, Dublin. Labour had become intellectually respectable.

Moreover the party was fighting on an explicitly socialist platform, described by one newspaper as 'one of the most socialist programmes in

Table 5.1 *Background and fates of Labour candidates, 1969*

	Elected	*Eliminated*	*Lost deposit*	*Total*	%
Region					
Dublin City	8	7	10	25	25·3
Dublin County	2	4	4	10	10·1
Rest of Leinster	4	6	9	19	19·2
Munster	4	9	12	25	25·3
Connacht	0	3	10	13	13·1
Ulster	0	0	7	7	7·1
Occupation					
Manual employee	1	7	7	15	15·2
Trade union official	7	7	7	21	21·2
Non-manual employee	2	4	13	19	19·2
Commercial	2	4	11	17	17·2
Farmer	0	1	4	5	5·1
Professional	6	6	10	22	22·2
(Politician)	7	2	0	9	9·1
Membership of public bodies					
Dáil	11	3	0	14	14·1
Seanad	0	1	1	2	2·0
County council	9	20	15	44	44·4
None	7	9	37	53	53·5
Electoral experience					
Previous Dáil campaigns	14	10	8	32	32·3
No previous Dáil campaigns	4	19	44	67	67·7
Total	18	29	52	99	100·0

Notes. For occupation, the 'Commercial' category includes small businessmen, shopkeepers, publicans, garage proprietors, bookmakers and other self-employed persons. The 'Professional' category includes schoolteachers, solicitors, doctors, university lecturers, journalists and architects. In the case of candidates with more than one occupation, the major occupation has been taken. In the case of candidates who were full-time, or almost full-time, politicians, their other or previous occupation has been used, although the number of full-time politicians is also given.

A member of a 'county council' is a member of one of the twenty-seven county councils or one of the four main city corporations. It must be borne in mind that some Oireachtas members also belonged to county councils.

'Eliminated' candidates are those who neither were elected nor lost their deposits.

Europe'.[9] The manifesto was a condensed version of the 1969 policy documents, with some of the rhetoric moderated, and its introduction captured the optimistic and assertive spirit in which Labour entered the campaign:[10]

> The politics of the old Republic are over. The choice is no longer between two identical parties, divided only by the tragedy of history. The choice is now between the old Republic of bitterness, stagnation and failure, represented by the two Civil War Parties, and the New Republic of opportunity, change and hope, represented by the Labour party. Ireland is at a crisis of decision. There is only one way forward – with Labour. But there are many ways backwards. Labour will not retard the growth of the new politics by cynically abandoning its ideals for short term party advantage. The hopes of the future will not be betrayed. This is a time of great national change. The outworn habits of the past are being abandoned. In politics traditions die hard, but change is evident. The Referendum was overwhelmingly defeated by a quarter of a million votes mainly by the young people of Ireland. The two Civil War parties have lost their attraction for the new generation. The politics of the seventies will not be modelled on the forties or the fifties. This is a time for renewal, for new thinking, for fresh ideas. Labour is the party of the future. It has brought in the new politics. The advance of Labour cannot be stopped. Never before has the challenge of Labour been so strong. This time it is time for Labour.

The party also issued a catechismic booklet to canvassers, designed to enable them to deal with voters' questions, which is of help in reconstructing its fears and expectations.[11] Canvassers were to confirm that Labour was a socialist party, but the suggestion that its policies were 'communist inspired' was to be described as 'a stupid statement', since they had been 'written by Irish men and women, based on the inspiration of Connolly's teaching, the Christian outlook, and the demands of the future'. Voters who asked how Labour would finance its policies were to be told that the government would reverse the flow of investment from Ireland to Britain and would use the extra money generated by the expansion of the economy. Canvassers were to inform sceptical voters who asked how Labour could possibly form a government that if the swing away from Fianna Fáil manifested in the PR referendum were repeated, Fianna Fáil would be 'destroyed as a major political party', while Fine Gael was characterised as a party of part-time politicians. The not unreasonable question, 'With only 18 seats in Dáil Eireann, how can the party expect to be taken seriously as

Sources. Provincial and national newspapers, trade union publications, campaign literature.

an alternative government?', was to be dismissed cavalierly as 'quite misleading', on the ground that it implied that no small party could ever grow to become a major party. The booklet, then, is useful to the researcher, demonstrating that Labour anticipated the 'red smear' campaign and was aware of a credibility gap between its size and its ambitions; but it was not so useful politically, because although 10,000 copies were printed, only 5,000 were taken up by the constituency organisations.[12]

5.2 The election campaign

Labour's campaign received an early boost when Michael Joe Costello, a widely respected agricultural expert, declared his support for the party's farming policies,[13] and it also emerged that Rickard Deasy, a former president of the National Farmers' Association, was to stand for Labour in North Tipperary. This caused surprise, not least within the constituency, where local resentment was given expression in a statement issued by the two candidates already selected, in which they announced unenthusiastically that, 'putting their own local interests aside', they would 'welcome' his addition.[14] At national level, however, where the intricacies of constituency politics are not always fully understood, it was believed that the capture of Keating, Costello and Deasy could lead to a massive increase in Labour's support among farmers.[15]

Labour candidates took up points from the manifesto, promising that the party in power would provide a free national health service for all, expand the social security system, embark upon a crash house-building programme, and introduce a system of economic planning. The manifesto was even vaguer on the question of whether Labour would nationalise the banks than the policy programme had been, stating that 'Labour will make financial institutions serve the people' and mentioning 'Labour's policy of public control over Irish capital'. Conor Cruise O'Brien took up the sale by the Finance Minister, Charles Haughey, of some land for £204,000, arguing that it was unethical and revealed that self-interest lay behind Fianna Fáil's attachment to the capitalist system.[16] The ICTU president, James Dunne, 'pledged' the 'support' of ICTU for Labour's efforts, and said he looked forward to working with a Labour government.[17] The ITGWU held a press conference for Labour, placed advertisements in the papers urging its members to support the Labour candidates, and

spent around £17,000 in support of Labour's campaign, a figure which dwarfed its affiliation fee of £1,642.[18] Other unions placed advertisements in the provincial press in support of individual candidates who were members of the union concerned.

At the national level, Labour ran an energetic advertising campaign, built around the slogans 'Let's Build the New Republic' and 'The Seventies will be Socialist'. At the local level, candidates both expounded party policies and stressed their personal records; an inverse relationship seemed to obtain between a candidate's experience and his appeal for support on the basis of his party affiliation. Whereas new candidates made bold promises and generally lost their deposits, experienced campaigners tended not to emphasise their connection with Labour. The outgoing TD in Cork South West, Michael Pat Murphy, made no secret of his intention not to use any of the centrally prepared literature and to campaign, as always, on his personal record. His local newspaper advertisements detailed this – his efficient and speedy work on behalf of his constituents, his promotion of tourism and industry in the constituency, and so on – at length, and mentioned only twice, unobtrusively, that he was the Labour candidate and had carried out his services to his constituents 'as a Labour TD'.[19] In North Kerry, Dan Spring TD did not mention the Labour Party at all in his advertisements, which merely stated that he had worked for the constituency for twenty-six years and urged, 'He helps you. Now you help him!' The local paper's political correspondent commented that although this was 'a far cry' from 'The New Republic', it was nevertheless 'the very stuff of politics in County Kerry' and was likely to see Spring re-elected,[20] as indeed it did. At a Labour Party public meeting in North Tipperary the two weaker candidates, each of whom lost his deposit, spoke mainly about party policies, including Labour's promise to introduce a free national health service, while the strongest candidate, a county councillor since 1960 and a future TD, unashamedly stressed his personal record, stating that he had 'served the people since 1956 . . . knew the needs of the people . . . and knew they needed more medical cards'.[21]

Fianna Fáil did not issue a manifesto, Charles Haughey, the election director, explaining that 'Manifestoes have a Marxist ring about them'.[22] It fought as usual on its record in office, and advised voters not to jeopardise the progress made. Early in the campaign, seeking to capitalise on the disunity of the opposition, it employed the slogan 'There is no alternative', but when it appeared that voters regarded

this as arrogant it revived a phrase which had first appeared at its January 1969 Ard-Fheis: 'Fianna Fáil – the Party of Reality'. Its candidates argued that Labour could make extravagant promises because it knew it would never have to find the money to pay for them. The social conscience of 'The Party of Reality' – or 'the party of stark reality' as one of its candidates described it[23] – was as great as the opposition's, but it would not make irresponsible promises to win support.

Fianna Fáil defended the capitalist system against Labour's criticisms. At the outset of the campaign the Taoiseach stated that the party believed in 'the right of private property, in private initiative and in private enterprise supplemented where necessary by the efforts of the state'.[24] A candidate in Meath declared that 'Fianna Fáil will stand at all times for private enterprise'.[25] The Minister for Education, Brian Lenihan, addressed an appeal to 'common sense people with a stake in the country' and promised them 'security and stability'.[26] Although most Fianna Fáil advertisements bore a picture of the Taoiseach with the suggestion 'Let's Back Jack', Lynch did not play a prominent part in the campaign at national level. Instead of making major speeches at a few large venues, he went on a nation-wide 'meet the people' tour, addressing many small groups of people; convents were said to feature particularly strongly on his itinerary.[27] After the election it was often suggested that Lynch's tour and his personal popularity had been important factors in maintaining Fianna Fáil in office.[28]

Fine Gael again fought the election on a *Just Society* platform; its policies were a diluted version of those subsumed under the same heading in 1965, and in consequence they had the support of the whole party this time. For the first time ever it nominated more candidates than Fianna Fáil, 125 as against 122. Fine Gael claimed that its policies offered a constructive and 'progressive' alternative to the government while avoiding Labour's naive utopianism. Its policies were spelled out in detail, were costed,[29] and involved a shift in government expenditure towards the social and health services. For the first time since 1938 no minor parties nominated candidates.

On the whole, Labour's campaign was fairly covered by the mass media. With 26·5 per cent of the candidates, its campaign speeches were given 25·1 per cent of the column inches devoted by the three national newspapers to speeches.[30] Two of the papers gave more space to Labour than to Fine Gael. Only the *Irish Press* committed itself editorially – to Fianna Fáil, of course – but under a new editor it took a less Manichean view of the contest than it had tended to in the past. Television and radio journalists were in many cases sympathetic to Labour, if only because its campaign seemed to be bringing something fresh to a rather dull political system, and party members were prepared to acknowledge afterwards that RTE's coverage of the election had been, if anything, generous to Labour.

5.3 The 'red smear' campaign

For the most part, Labour was forced on to the defensive by the tactics employed by Fianna Fáil, which can be divided into two categories: allegations that its policies were communist and alien to Ireland, and allegations that they were inconsistent with the principles of Roman Catholicism.

A few days after the campaign began a large Fianna Fáil advertisement described Labour's policies as 'alien doctrines which are foreign to our people's traditions and beliefs',[31] and this set the tone for the rest of the campaign. A Meath candidate said that Labour's ideology was 'foreign and contrary to Irish tradition and heritage', while in Laois a senior member of the party organisation attacked Labour for propounding 'doctrines alien to the Irish people'.[32] Kevin Boland, the Minister for Local Government, alleged that Labour wanted to take away people's land, property and savings, and that its policies had been 'imposed on the reluctant but ultimately compliant old guard' by 'the intellectuals, the doctors, the university dons and the professional agitators'.[33] Michael Moran, the Minister for Justice, described Corish as a mere puppet of 'the modern Marxist élite' and of 'the new left-wing political queers who have taken over the Labour Party from the steps of Trinity College and Telefis Éireann'.[34] Neil Blaney, the Minister for Agriculture, described Labour's membership as ranging from 'capitalists' to 'pseudo-intellectual Marxists, Maoists, Trotskyites and the like who have emerged from the sidelines like carrion birds to pick off the flesh of the Irish people'.[35] Patrick Norton, now standing for Fianna Fáil in Kildare, accused Corish of having been either unable or unwilling to continue his (Norton's) father's refusal to allow 'extremists' to 'infiltrate' the party.[36] Seán MacEntee stated that Labour stood for Lenin, Stalin and 'the red flames of burning homesteads in Meath'.[37] Almost every Fianna Fáil attack included the allegation that Labour wanted to impose 'Cuban

socialism' on Ireland, or contained some other allusion to Cuba or to Fidel Castro, who, following O'Brien's comments at the 1969 conference, was said to be the idol of Labour's 'intellectuals'.

Many Fianna Fáil candidates alleged that Labour had plans for widespread nationalisation. In Galway an outgoing TD stated that 'no one in rural Ireland wants the socialistic policies of Labour or the taking over by them of the people's savings over the years'.[38] Bax offers a first-hand account of a Fianna Fáil campaign in County Cork, during which a group of canvassers encountered three elderly people who had inferred from a Labour broadcast that the party would appropriate their life savings, lodged in a bank, if it came to power, a notion of which the canvassers certainly did not disabuse them.[39] Senator Eoin Ryan alleged that Labour intended that every firm, every factory, every job and every farm would be owned and controlled by the government, and a Dublin TD claimed that it would 'confiscate' Guinness's brewery.[40] Jack Lynch asked whether land nationalisation was 'still' among Labour's policies, which he described as essentially the same as those which had been tried and had failed in Eastern Europe.[41] Neil Blaney, too, often alleged that Labour intended to nationalise land.[42]

Some provincial papers expressed similar views. One accused Labour of being 'much closer to a Communist Party' than to a normal Labour party and of 'preaching sedition left, right and centre', and referred scathingly to the party's 'acquisition of some doctrinaire intellectuals'.[43] Another referred to 'Conor Cruise O'Brien and all the other Dublin-based Castros', adding that 'Free Ireland has certainly shown the difference between Christian socialism and the Godless brand which certain elements in our midst would try to have foisted on us'.[44] A third claimed that 'Labour has alienated a number of its followers by its extreme leftist policy which goes as far as nationalizing almost everything except the land, and who knows but that would follow if the opportunity arose'.[45] Two or three other provincial newspapers criticised Labour, and none came out in its support.

Occasionally Fine Gael speakers made similar charges. Professor John Kelly, embarking on a career as the most colourful rhetoretician among Irish politicians, said that he would be wary about joining Labour's 'ship' even if he were invited: 'I want to know where the ship is heading and they won't let me see their navigation instructions. There are a lot of funny noises coming from below and I suspect they have some queer fellows in the engine room.'[46] Liam Cosgrave said of

Labour's policies that 'They are none of them for 1969. The Labour programme is for 1984,' and later described them as 'far too doctrinaire and unrealistic'.[47]

The accusation of communism contained the implicit accusation of atheism and anti-Catholicism, which was also made explicitly, usually in the door-to-door canvass or the after-mass meeting at the chapel gates but occasionally in a prepared speech or a supplied script sent to the newspapers. The Minister for Defence, Michael Hilliard, said that some of those who had 'forced their way into' Labour were not 'believers in the fundamental Christian principles which have activated our people down the centuries'.[48] A successful Fianna Fáil candidate in Mayo, Joseph Leneghan, said that if Labour came to power there would be laws permitting abortion and divorce, and it would be 'great for the fellow who wanted a second wife every night'.[49] Michael Pat Murphy alleged that in his constituency Fianna Fáil had claimed that Labour's policy would be to throw priests into prison and torture them,[50] and a Sligo Labour member spoke of a Fianna Fáil candidate alleging that it was Labour policy to tear down every crucifix in the country.[51] Labour believed that Jack Lynch, in the course of his convent tour, was portraying Labour as a dangerously extremist party, and several Labour TDs have alleged[52] that nuns teaching in convent schools told their pupils to inform their parents that they should not vote Labour. Some priests were said to have warned their parishioners from the pulpit that socialism was the same as communism, or that they should be careful not to vote for a party unless they could be certain that it was not communist. O'Brien gives an account of a priest in County Kerry who informed his parishioners that socialism was even worse than communism, since it was a Protestant version of communism.[53]

Labour reacted to such allegations sometimes by counter-attacking, but more often defensively. At the start of the campaign Brendan Corish said boldly that although some people said Labour's programme was too radical, he had 'seen this happen before', and 'in four or five years' time this policy will be regarded as somewhat conservative'.[54] O'Brien pointed out that the 'red smear' had been tried against some of the Irish patriots of the past, and indeed against Fianna Fáil itself during the 1920s.[55] A Tipperary candidate 'defied' any Irishman to say that 'Tacaism' was more Irish and christian than socialism.[56] A Roscommon-Leitrim candidate refuted allegations that Labour's policies were alien by claiming that historical figures of the

stature of Fintan Lalor, Michael Davitt, Patrick Pearse and James Connolly had 'often called for' policies such as those now advocated by Labour, adding that 'the only alien policy we can be accused of adopting is that dictated by the late Pope John'.[57] Noel Browne returned the allegation most vigorously, arguing that the free enterprise conservative political philosophy of the two major parties was derived from British imperialism and was therefore itself alien to Ireland.[58]

On other occasions candidates preferred to deny the charges and to try to distance themselves from the taint of communism. A Kildare candidate said that Labour's policies 'are based on solid Christian concepts of equality and justice and thank God we are not Communists, nor fellow-travellers', and he pointed out that Patrick Norton's allegations had been made against his own father at the time of the National Labour split.[59] John O'Connell TD felt it necessary to assure voters that 'when the Labour movement speaks of socialism, it speaks of a society where personal property exists'.[60] Some candidates went to such lengths to try and dispel any suspicion that their Catholicism might be less than wholehearted as to recall Conor Cruise O'Brien's 1966 characterisation of the party as one whose leaders never mentioned James Connolly's name without 'some allusion establishing the speaker's religious orthodoxy, and if possible Connolly's also'.[61] At the start of the campaign Corish attributed socialism's acceptability to 'a new climate in the world' created by the late Pope John: 'I have taken particular care to read his Encyclicals and reading them one finds that we are much behind the ideas which Pope John propounded'.[62] O'Brien himself, having raised the spectre of Cuba in the first place, sought to banish it by producing a press cutting which showed that eight American Catholic bishops had advocated the lifting of the American trade boycott of Cuba.[63] Even Noel Browne was reported as saying that it was to 'Christian Socialism' that Labour had committed itself.[64]

David Thornley, when his candidacy was announced, took care to emphasise that it was as 'a sincere committed Christian' that he was joining Labour,[65] and the party secretary, Brendan Halligan, advised anyone who thought its policies might be communist to read them, after which it would be obvious that they were in fact based on papal teachings.[66] In Carlow-Kilkenny a candidate said that many of Labour's policies 'followed closely along the lines of the teachings of Pope John XXIII',[67] while a Kildare candidate went one better by

stating that Labour wanted to create the kind of society 'envisaged by the late Pope John XXIII and St. Francis Xavier'.[68] In Dublin the party's vice-chairman, Dermot O'Rourke, also sought to establish that the absence of the papal imprimatur on Labour's manifesto was a mere technicality, since it was 'in accordance with the teachings of' Popes John XXIII and Paul VI.[69] In Donegal-Leitrim a candidate declared that 'Socialism is as old as time and Christ its greatest exponent', and pointed out that the Vatican had diplomatic relations with Cuba.[70] A Sligo candidate described Labour's ideals as being 'in line with those of Vatican II and the World Council of Churches', adding with some exaggeration that 'that was why bishops and clergy in Ireland had spoken out in favour of them'.[71]

5.4 The election results

Contrary to almost all expectations, Fianna Fáil emerged from the election with a clear Dáil majority, seventy-five seats out of 144. Fine Gael moved up from forty-seven to fifty seats, while Labour, which had gained twenty-two seats in 1965, now won only eighteen, the number it had had at the dissolution. Only one Independent was elected (see Appendix 1). Fianna Fáil's victory was achieved despite a drop in its share of the votes, mainly by a judicious revision of constituency boundaries, under which its votes produced a high yield in seats.[72] Thus in Dublin City its share of the votes fell from 47 per cent in 1965 to 39 per cent in 1969, but its share of the seats dropped only from 52 to 48 per cent. In the province of Connacht, although its votes rose only from 48 to 51 per cent, its share of the seats went up from 52 to 62 per cent.

Labour, in contrast, made a significant gain in votes but fell back in terms of seats. It won more votes than ever before, and achieved its highest percentage vote since 1922. In Dublin City it overtook Fine Gael for the first time in a general election, and won over nine times as many votes as it had in 1957 (see Appendix 2). In seats, too, its performance here was impressive. Whereas in 1957 and 1961 there had been only one Labour TD in the city, there were now eight, with ten in the whole Greater Dublin area. The upsurge in professional people, which in 1965 had had an impact only at the candidate level, now made itself felt at the PLP level; a third of the Dáil party had a professional background. Eight of the eighteen Labour TDs had university degrees, as opposed to two of those elected in 1965. Its

6

The retreat from Havana, 1969–73

6.1 The reaction to the 1969 election

The result of the election was a traumatic blow to the party.[1] It changed dramatically Labour's assessment of its short-term prospects, which led to a change of attitude on coalition and to a tacit setting aside of the 1969 policies. For a while, however, Labour continued to castigate 'the two conservative parties', and the January 1970 annual conference was unrepentant.

In his leader's address Brendan Corish declared his continued faith in each one of the 1969 policy documents, and said that it had been essential for Labour to fight the last election in the manner it did, as part of 'the unceasing political war to make this a socialist state'.[2] Labour had lost a battle but not the war; Irish politics were still in a transitional phase, and Labour must not relax its pressure to create a new political system. There could be no going back to the 'comfortable' days when 'we were pretty vague about our ideals, we were limited in our objectives . . . [and] timid about our policies'.

Attempts to have the 1969 approach abandoned were unsuccessful. The two Tipperary constituency organisations proposed a motion calling on the party to enunciate policies which would be more acceptable to the electorate. The 1969 policies, its supporters said, had not gone down well in rural areas, and Labour's cause here had not been helped by mentions of Cuba at last year's conference or by 'snide remarks' about 'things that are very dear to our Irish people'. What had been built up by men like 'the great Bill Norton' should not now be destroyed by irresponsibility. James Tully moved a similar motion, asking that party policy be referred to the incoming AC for review. He accused some party members of being 'commies', and commented that he was 'sick and tired' of 'smart alecs . . . with sweat dripping on to

their school books who talk about the workers of this country', a sentiment which attracted a mixture of disapproval and applause. The policies were defended by Justin Keating, who denied that Labour had suffered a defeat at all in the election and attributed the apparent success of Fianna Fáil's smear campaign to many Labour members' inability to explain the policies clearly, resulting from a failure to familiarise themselves with them. Conor Cruise O'Brien, too, argued that Labour had to clarify and explain its policies, not drop them. If Labour was concerned only to enunciate 'acceptable' policies, it could enunciate Fianna Fáil policies; to pass the Tipperary motion would be to say to the electorate, 'These are our principles, and if you don't like them, we'll change them.' Both motions were heavily defeated.

Despite these fighting words, Labour was losing strength. Individual members in rural areas had begun to vote with their feet almost as soon as the election was over. A defeated candidate in South Tipperary resigned from the party, as did a prominent Limerick member, who expressed his disagreement with 'the socialist republic idea'.[3] The former TD Paddy Tierney also left, stating that for the past two years Labour had been 'going the wrong road, led by people whom I feel will create a greater division between city and rural people'.[4] The steady growth in party membership was reversed in rural areas (see Appendix 3), where those who had been swept into the party on the wave of enthusiasm of the late 1960s began to drift away as the tide ebbed. The lesson that Labour was still only a third party was hammered home at three by-elections early in 1970. In Dublin South West, Labour had won two seats in 1969, but after the death of one of its TDs, Seán Dunne, it had great difficulty in selecting a candidate because of factionalism within the local organisation. The Labour vote fell by over a half, from 44·3 per cent to 21·5 per cent, and this defeat, in probably the most working-class constituency in the country, left no room for doubt that the 1969 election had been the crest of the wave. In Longford-Westmeath the Labour candidate lost his deposit, and a gain in Kildare brought the party only up to its traditional level; here the Labour candidate was, perhaps, helped by Justin Keating's pointing out that he seemed invulnerable to any 'red smear', since he was a GAA member and a Pioneer and had had a Christian Brothers education.[5]

The transition of the previous decade had created a party riddled with internal contradictions, but these had remained largely latent while Labour's fortunes had seemed set for spectacular improvement.

7

Labour and Irish nationalism, 1957–73

7.1 **Irish nationalism since the Treaty**

Pre-1922 Irish nationalism fits fairly comfortably Minogue's definition of nationalism as 'a political movement depending on a feeling of collective grievance against foreigners'.[1] Viewed through the green haze of the Easter Rising and its aftermath, even the most insignificant and discrete incidents can be linked and said to constitute a 'tradition'. The mountain of literature on the subject contrasts with the limited analysis of the less romantic cause of Loyalism,[2] and of the unglamorous record of post-1922 Irish nationalism. Indeed, the very concept of Irish nationalism since the Treaty is a controversial one, of which at least three different interpretations – one sympathetic, one unsympathetic and one cynical – are possible.

The essence of the first, which might be called the traditional nationalist view, is that post-1922 Irish nationalism is the same phenomenon as pre-1922 Irish nationalism. It has the same goal, an independent thirty-two-county Irish Republic, and faces the same problem, British interference in Irish affairs. It made significant progress towards its aim in 1916–21, but the national task is not completed. The partition of Ireland, in this view, is the root cause of 'the problem'. Britain imposed partition on an outraged nation, and Britain could, and should, end it. What an Act of a British parliament had done, another Act could undo. Partition has greatly hindered the 'national advance'; in the words of a Fianna Fáil TD in 1937,[3]

> the main cause of all that emigration, of all the poverty, and of anything else that is wrong politically, nationally and economically with the country is due to the partition of Ireland.

The existence of the northern Protestants does not justify partition, for

the differences between them and the rest of the Irish people are no greater than the differences to be found within any nation. Their reluctance to join a united Ireland is caused mainly by British manipulation and British-fostered myths; if they threw in their lot with the rest of the Irish people, they would in fact receive more than fair treatment. In this view, which has been increasingly on the defensive since 1970, the problems of Northern Ireland spring from a conflict between British colonialism and Irish nationalism.

The second, which could be called the two communities interpretation, maintains that Irish nationalism emerged from the 1916–22 period looking surprisingly like colonialism. Before then it had rested on a belief that a community of people (the Irish) had the right to its independence from a larger nation (Britain) which claimed jurisdiction over it, but after 1922 it held that the northern Unionists had no such right *vis à vis* the Irish Republic. Indeed, it could be claimed that inherent in Irish nationalism had always been the contradiction of denying to others what it claimed for itself, but that this had remained latent while the Irish nation had itself been under the colonial yoke. The root of the problem in the north, in this view, lies not in a conflict between Britain and Ireland, but in the existence in Ireland of two communities with very different traditions and aspirations. Any political creed advocating that one community be compelled to be governed by a State dominated by the members of the other community, it is argued, is not nationalism at all but colonialism. Protagonists of this view see partition as a symptom of the problem rather than its cause, regard violence in Northern Ireland as springing from conflict between the two communities *within* the north rather than conflict between Britain and Ireland *about* the north, and advocate that the south should concentrate its efforts on improving relations between the two communities. As Whyte points out, internal conflict theories of the problem were surprisingly late in emerging, but are now widely accepted.[4]

The third interpretation regards post-1922 Irish nationalism as an ersatz version of what went before, espoused for purely functional reasons and not to be taken seriously. By 1922 the three major grievances which had fuelled Irish nationalism throughout the nineteenth century – alien rule, landlordism and religious discrimination against the bulk of the population – had been resolved to the general satisfaction of most Irish people. The continued use by politicians of nationalist rhetoric represented the vestigial traces of a

setter' for the northern government.[103] Thornley's speech drew criticism from outside the party ranks. The Fine Gael deputy leader, Tom O'Higgins, alluding to Thornley's attitude to the use of violence, commented sharply that 'we can afford no fifth column in this Parliament',[104] and the parliamentary correspondent of the *Irish Times* suggested that Thornley had come close to describing Barnhill as a legitimate target for the IRA, and called his speech the most 'chilling' of all the 'shabby notes' sounded in the Dáil in the previous two years.[105]

Thornley's claim that his views were those of the 'grass roots' of the party is impossible to verify, but contemporary opinion poll evidence, from a survey carried out by Irish Marketing Surveys in May 1970, suggests that Labour supporters were more republican than supporters of the other two main parties, while only a minority favoured the most militant options offered in the questionnaire. If the events of August 1969 happened again, 24·6 per cent of Labour supporters thought the Irish army should move into the north, as opposed to 18·1 per cent of Fianna Fáil supporters and 12·0 per cent of Fine Gael supporters, and 16·7 per cent approved of arms being supplied from the Republic to 'people in the North'.[106] Thirty per cent of Labour supporters wanted the British troops to leave the north at once, and 18·3 per cent said that they would prefer to see the border go than stay even if this could be achieved only by the use of force; lower proportions of the other parties' supporters agreed with these views.

The 1972 conference was to suggest that, whatever their views on the north, most Labour members did not want to see the party torn apart over the issue, and an IMS survey conducted during the 1973 election campaign found that only 5 per cent of Labour supporters regarded it as the most urgent problem, and only 23·5 per cent ranked it among the three most urgent problems facing the Republic, as against higher proportions of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael supporters.[107] Consequently, something of a backlash developed towards the end of 1971, with a growing feeling among party members that the PLP's bickering was getting out of hand. The mood was given expression by John O'Connell, who warned that Labour was heading for self-destruction if it continued in its present manner, called for firm leadership, and referred to 'prima donnas' within the party who seemed to consider themselves above criticism.[108] The last point struck a responsive chord among many party supporters, in whose eyes the behaviour of Dr O'Brien and Dr Thornley, both of whom had entered

the party only three years earlier, was better suited to a university debating society than to a political party. Some, indeed, were beginning to wonder whether the inflow of the 'intellectuals' had been such a good thing after all. Thornley seemed impetuous and unconcerned by the need for party discipline, while a journalist wrote of Labour TDs' irritation at O'Brien's frequent 'abrupt departures to foreign capitals' to attend showings of his play *Murderous Angels*.[109]

7.5 **Defusion and resolution 1972**

The focus for party unity was to be a policy statement on the north issued in January 1972. By September 1971, as the next annual report euphemistically observed, 'it was evident that disagreement existed as to the nature of party policy regarding the North',[110] so that the AC and the PLP set up a thirteen-member Northern Committee to prepare a policy statement to be submitted to the next party conference. The committee was on paper a high-powered one, containing three TDs associated with the two communities approach – Barry Desmond, Conor Cruise O'Brien and Michael O'Leary – and the two most prominent traditional nationalists, David Thornley and Seán Treacy, as well as the party leader and the party chairman.[111] Its statement was accepted by a joint meeting of the AC and PLP by twenty-seven votes to three – those opposing it appear to have been two hard-line nationalist TDs and an AC member – and was later accepted also by the 1972 annual conference.[112]

The document was very obviously shaped by more than one hand, and Corish was to admit at the 1972 conference that it had been 'a hurried effort in order to get a sense of unity in the party'. Labour's 'fundamental objective' was 'the establishment of an all-Ireland Socialist Republic', and its main principle was 'the voluntary reunion of all Irish people and territory'. It unequivocally repudiated the use of force to achieve a united Ireland. However, it stated, this was not to be interpreted as 'acquiescence in . . . the political division of the island'; on the contrary, Labour was 'unconditionally opposed to the built-in official violence practised by the Unionist Government'. The party demanded 'that the sectarian Unionist regime in the North must be brought to an end', aimed at 'the withdrawal of the British Troops as soon as a political solution permits', called for the ending of internment, and supported the idea of 'talks between the elected public representatives of all the parties concerned'. Finally, it 'recognised'

that the present troubles were caused partly by 'the deliberate worsening of relations between Catholics and Protestants by landowners and capitalists' and by 'the economic situation in the whole island'.

Overall, the statement was such that no one person could agree with it in its entirety, but on certain crucial points it marked a defeat for the most militant members of the traditional nationalist wing. Violence was repudiated, the stipulation that those involved in talks should be elected public representatives ruled out the IRA, and it implied that the achievement or imminence of a political solution had to precede the withdrawal of the British troops. The desire for 'the voluntary union of all Irish people and territory' was highly ambiguous, for, like the phrase 'unity by consent', it did not make clear what was needed before union could be considered 'voluntary'. It did not state whether a majority vote in an all-Ireland plebiscite would suffice, or whether there must be a majority within the north, or whether unanimity throughout the island was necessary.

After the document was published Labour's rows subsided briefly, with a tacit agreement that the matter would be resolved by the party conference. The nationalist mood in the country was strengthened after 'Bloody Sunday', 30 January 1972, when thirteen unarmed demonstrators were shot and killed in Derry by British paratroopers, and when, in O'Brien's words, England 'seemed to be acting in the way we often accused her of acting but of which we had not, for decades, really believed modern England capable'.[113] In an understandably emotional Dáil debate held a few days later, those Labour TDs who spoke called for a withdrawal of the British troops, at once or at some future date to be specified, although some, for whom these views were uncharacteristic, soon reverted to their former positions. Conor Cruise O'Brien, Frank Cluskey and Michael O'Leary advocated withdrawal of the troops.[114] James Tully said that Britain should now give freedom to the north, as it had to other areas which it had previously held 'in thrall'. He added, 'This is the old battle of Ireland *v.* England ... This is an island, thirty-two counties of Irish soil, and we are entitled to every square inch of it.'[115] Stephen Coughlan came close to expressing outright support for the IRA, which, he said, 'speak for more than 80 per cent of the people of Ireland'. When the Minister for Finance appealed to the IRA to leave the task of ending partition to the politicians and 'get out of the way', Coughlan interjected, 'The Minister should get out of their way.'[116]

A fortnight later David Thornley returned to the fray, arguing that Labour should not condemn unreservedly the violence being employed in the north.[117] Instead, it should

> identify, as Connolly did, those aspects of the Republican struggle which are essentially reactionary and those which are essentially social, and . . . disown the former and make ourselves the spokesmen of the latter. This we are signally failing to do.

He did not suggest how the party might identify the two aspects. A number of members resigned from the West Galway constituency council out of dissatisfaction with Labour's 'drift to the right', citing O'Brien's attacks on the IRA as an example.[118] The council's secretary stated that he could understand their feelings, since 'we have repeatedly protested about the Quisling attitude to British imperialism'.

The annual conference, held at the end of February, spent a lot of time on the north, debating both the policy statement and a motion to remove O'Brien from the spokemanship.[119] In the end both issues were decided against the more extreme members of the traditional nationalist wing, but the divisions within the party were made very clear by the range of views expressed. The opening speech of the conference, the address of the party chairman, Roddy Connolly, the son of James Connolly, was strongly nationalist in tone. Using terms like 'the British army of occupation', 'the terrorists of the British army' and 'the six-county statelet in the north-east of our country', he too drew a parallel between Brian Faulkner and Vidkun Quisling. Tragedies such as Bloody Sunday sprang from 'the violent occupation of part of our country by troops of a foreign power' and from the continued denial by the 'non-nationalists' of the nationalists' 'right to merge into a new Ireland'. He contrasted the civil rights movement of 'the working people of Derry, of the Falls Road and Ardoyne areas in Belfast' (all Catholic areas) with 'the destructive violence of the lumpen proletariat of the Shankill ghettoes' (a Protestant area). He added, in what did not sound like an unequivocal repudiation of force, that 'non-violent means . . . are the much to be preferred methods in the present circumstances in trying to achieve a solution of the north-east problem'.

Brendan Corish, in his leader's address, took a more nationalist line than he usually did, although the general emphasis was on reconciliation. He put forward four proposals, including the

withdrawal of British troops from Catholic areas, the ending of internment, and the replacement of Stormont by a representative commission. The fourth was more controversial; the British government 'should announce a date by which it will withdraw its army and end its control of the area'. This, he maintained, would bring the Unionists to the realisation that they had to live in peace with the rest of the Irish people. In saying this, four weeks after Bloody Sunday, he was expressing a widely held view that Britain was not playing a constructive role in the north, and that it should withdraw before it exacerbated the harm it had already done. This view was by no means confined to Ireland. The fraternal delegate from the British Labour Party, Tony Benn, also said that he felt there was no justification for continued British involvement in Ireland; Britain's role in the north must now be only temporary, and hindered the working out by the Irish people of their own future.

The northern policy statement was generally approved, although without much enthusiasm, since, as several delegates pointed out, it contained many platitudes. Most of the criticism, however, concerned a point on which it was not platitudinous, namely its firm rejection of violence. David Thornley reminded the conference that James Connolly had employed 'physical force', and argued that both wings of the IRA were facts of life and should be brought into any talks held. A Dublin delegate accused the party spokesmen on the north of failing to stress that the northern Protestants 'are a minority of the Irish people, and that they have no right to tell the majority of the Irish people what they want'. A South Tipperary delegate advocated the policy statement's complete rejection and its replacement by a call for the ending of internment, the withdrawal of the British forces, and 'support for the freedom fighters in Northern Ireland in their struggle against British imperialism'. Violence, he said, had 'worked before', most notably between 1916 and 1921.

However, the mood of the conference was clearly against violence. The IRA was no more popular than the British army, for the wave of support it could have expected after Bloody Sunday had been largely dissipated during February 1972 by the burning of the British embassy in Dublin, the killing by the Official IRA of a number of women cleaners in Aldershot, and an assassination attempt on a Northern Ireland Cabinet member. Gerry Fitt, the leader of the SDLP and its fraternal delegate, stated that no Labour member should give any support to either wing of the IRA. The conference accepted the policy

statement, and rejected all those amendments which the leadership had declared unacceptable.

The composite motion calling for the removal of O'Brien from the northern spokesmanship was moved by Seán Treacy. He referred to O'Brien's 'conservative, right-wing expressions' and accused him of having denigrated James Connolly, betrayed Labour's constitution and, along with Noel Browne, given comfort and solace to the Stormont regime. He could no longer subscribe to 'a brand of spineless, supine, unprincipled shoneenism' which was 'anti-Irish and anti-Labour'. He had been amazed, he said, that 'the extreme socialists in this party were the first to renege when the war of liberation was on in this country'. Among those opposing the motion were two Dublin TDs, Barry Desmond and Frank Cluskey, the latter saying that he supported O'Brien's position because he believed it had 'a tremendous amount of socialist content'. O'Brien himself denied that he had denigrated the dead or that he was, as some of his critics alleged, 'peddling any so-called two nations theory'.[120] The censure motion had arisen mainly because of his repudiation of violence, he said, and if it were passed it would consequently cast doubt on the earlier acceptance of the policy statement.

Treacy's speech was greeted with as much booing as applause, and the motion would undoubtedly have been defeated, but in the event it was withdrawn, after Paddy Devlin of the SDLP had urged this in the cause of party unity. Treacy stated that he had been heartened by O'Brien's speech; many of the uncertainties had been cleared up, and Labour now had a policy document with which they could all agree. The debate ended with O'Brien and Treacy shaking hands, to general applause.

The conference debates unquestionably cleared the air, and led to a sharp reduction in the amount of public argument between Labour TDs on the north. The conference had come out in favour of the unequivocal repudiation of violence, and O'Brien had been in effect confirmed in his spokesmanship. However, it would be wrong to conclude that the conference had endorsed all of O'Brien's views and rejected the traditional nationalist interpretation which he opposed so strongly. For one thing, the policy statement which it approved was a rather incongruous mixture of views from the two wings of the party. For another, many centrist delegates, while uneasy about O'Brien's soft-line approach, were even less attracted by the apparent readiness of some of his opponents, including Treacy, to tolerate violence, and if

the anti-O'Brien motion had been passed Treacy would have had a strong claim to the spokesmanship.

Thirdly, many delegates seem to have regarded the real issue at stake as being not the party's attitude to the north but the wider one of whether it should revert to its pre-1967 non-socialist image. Tension between right and left was high, partly because of the contraceptives Bill vote only three weeks earlier. Many rural delegates of traditional nationalist views seem to have regarded O'Brien's northern policy as merely another aspect of an attempt by the new members of the late 1960s to swing the party away from its 'tried and true' approach to politics. In his speech Treacy stated, with allusions that were not lost on either left-wing or right-wing delegates, that he was 'asking this conference therefore, the rank and file, the poltroons and the backwoodsmen, to win back the soul of this party, to take over once again and control its destiny'. Similarly, some left-wing delegates whose views on the north differed from O'Brien's spoke against the motion to remove him from the spokesmanship. One, Brendan Scott, acknowledging that many 'sincere socialists' did not like O'Brien's policy, warned, referring to the contraception vote, that 'their sincere desire for a change of policy might be used by some of the unholy relics of Sadleir and Keogh's Brass Band, the pre-Vatican I crozier-shying rump who have proved their contempt for any form of civil rights only recently in the Dáil'.[121]

The conference itself, then, did not unequivocally mark the defeat of the traditional nationalist wing, but events in the north now began to undermine completely the position of its most militant members. Stormont was prorogued on 24 March 1972, and the British government appointed a Secretary of State for the north. He appeared to operate the policy of direct rule even-handedly, which inevitably brought him into conflict with Unionist politicians more often than with Catholics, further blurring the traditional southern perception of the British as the instigators of Unionist obduracy. A British Green Paper issued in October drew favourable responses from the southern parties.[122] Support for the IRA was also much harder to justify, since once Stormont had gone it had no credible defence to the accusation that it was attempting to 'bomb a million Protestants into the Republic'.

No more serious disputes arose within Labour until October 1972, although hints of division surfaced twice. In March Dr John O'Connell arranged talks between the Provisional IRA and the British

opposition leader Harold Wilson, and described proposals by the former, which included a demand that the British declare an intention to leave the north, as 'responsible and realistic', while stating that 'I will not ever condone violence or brutality, no matter for what justification'.[123] There were suggestions of an attempt to expel him from the PLP, some TDs feeling that to involve members of paramilitary bodies in talks confers legitimacy on them and encourages them to believe that they can 'bomb their way to the conference table',[124] but in the end a new 'code of party conduct' was adopted. No action was taken when O'Connell arranged further Wilson–IRA talks in July.[125] Some disagreement also arose at the ITGWU annual conference, when some delegates sought to have the union disaffiliate from Labour mainly because of the 'anti-national views' of some Labour TDs, but it was withdrawn at the request of the general secretary, although the conference went on to call for the immediate withdrawal of British troops from the north, and one delegate urged Labour to 'get rid of the people who advocate the policy of felon-setting' if it wanted to regain its 'image as an Irish socialist party'.[126]

The basic division within the PLP still existed, even though it was no longer being exposed to the public gaze, and it erupted for the last time in the autumn of 1972 after the SDLP published a policy document, *Towards a New Ireland*. The document advocated joint British–Irish sovereignty over the north, and called on the British government to state that it believed that it would be in the best interests of all if Ireland were eventually united. Fianna Fáil reacted enthusiastically to the proposals, but Labour's response was cooler.[127] There were no formal links between Labour and the SDLP, although in November 1971 Brendan Corish had mooted the curious idea of a complete merger, to form a thirty-two-county socialist party to work for a thirty-two-county socialist republic.[128] Attempts to revive the Council of Labour, with the SDLP and NILP as co-members, had failed, owing mainly to differences between the northern parties, and it did not meet again.[129]

Nevertheless, the SDLP had expected better from Labour, and its chief whip, Paddy Devlin, stated that relations between the two parties had been permanently damaged. Its deputy leader, John Hume, clashed with Conor Cruise O'Brien in a radio debate, since O'Brien's view was that the substance of the document was such as to weaken moderate Protestant opinion, and that to insist on progress towards

unity in present circumstances was 'unwittingly and unintentionally a formula for civil war'.[130] In mid-October John O'Connell tabled a motion at a PLP meeting declaring that the PLP supported the document, which was opposed by O'Brien. A victory for the motion, which would probably have ended O'Brien's shaky reign as spokesman, was forestalled only by an amendment by Corish which suggested that the party meet the SDLP for discussions. The amendment was passed, but only on Corish's own casting vote, and it seems that several TDs supported it only out of loyalty to the leader, and on the following day the AC accepted the motion O'Connell had put before the PLP.[131] More SDLP criticism followed, Austin Currie alleging that the PLP's refusal to support the SDLP document was a 'face-saving charade' for O'Brien's benefit.[132] However, the ILP–SDLP discussion meeting itself was not quite as explosive as had been feared, and although some of the SDLP participants were very critical of O'Brien the ILP members present explained that their criticisms of the document sprang not from hostility to the SDLP but from a feeling that they should be honest with their friends, and the two party leaders managed to prevent an open breach developing.[133]

This proved to be the last serious challenge to O'Brien's position. His own constituency council, with which he had had his differences, declared its support for the January policy statement, and the West Galway constituency council, which earlier in the year had been critical of him, now stated that it would oppose any attempt to replace him as northern spokesman.[134] Noel Browne denounced both the SDLP, which he described as a new version of the Nationalist Party, and its 'silly, pretentious, irresponsible and pompous' policy document.[135] Gerry Fitt indicated some agreement with O'Brien's views, and accused Fianna Fáil, which he described as the 'political Siamese twin' of Unionism, of having 'done nothing' for the north over the years.[136] A PLP meeting at which yet another attempt to displace O'Brien had been expected passed off peacefully, with an agreement to consign a discussion of the Northern Ireland question to the safe limbo of the non-existent Council of Labour.[137]

A visit paid by David Thornley to the Provisional IRA leader Seán MacStiofain in the Mater Hospital in Dublin served only to emphasise his isolation within the PLP. MacStiofain had been sentenced to six months' imprisonment for being an IRA member, and had been taken to the hospital because he was on hunger strike. After an unsuccessful armed attempt to free him, an estimated 7,000 demonstrators marched

to the hospital to demand his release.[138] They included Thornley, who said he could not stand by and see an Irishman die of a hunger strike and urged that MacStiofain be released while the Dáil 'debated the issue'. Several public bodies around the country, mirroring the behaviour of county councils in 1957, called for his release on 'humanitarian grounds'. Thornley was reprimanded in the Dáil by Noel Browne, who also criticised the visits paid to MacStiofain by John Charles McQuaid and his successor as Archbishop of Dublin,[139] and drew no public support from any Labour member. Indeed, Labour was able to put on a rare show of public unity in the Dáil vote on the controversial Offences against the State Bill in late 1972, since it was unanimously opposed to such measures while in opposition, some members being concerned that they were illiberal and others that they were anti-republican.

The question of the north played little part in the 1973 election campaign, even though it seemed to have dominated Irish politics since 1971. Apart from suggestions that 'subversives' would have an easy time under a divided, indecisive coalition government, the only serious Fianna Fáil attack on Labour's approach came from George Colley, who argued that O'Brien was in effect suggesting that the Republic wash its hands of the fate of the northern Catholics, who would have been 'at the mercy of the Unionists' for the previous three years had not the Irish government been looking after their interests.[140] At the election Conor Cruise O'Brien's vote rose numerically but fell slightly in percentage terms, David Thornley's fell sharply, while Seán Treacy's rose considerably. The low importance accorded by voters to the northern question, however, means that these fluctuations in individuals' votes can by no means be attributed entirely to their perceived attitudes to Northern Ireland.

7.6 **Conclusion**

Many of Labour's problems on this issue were caused by the fact that the views of its TDs alone covered virtually the whole spectrum of opinion within the Republic, and were exacerbated by the circumstance that its spokesman was near to one end of the spectrum rather than in the centre, and was setting out deliberately to challenge the interpretation which had hitherto been taken for granted in the south. It was the sort of subject on which feelings were inevitably strong and passionate, and there was often a genuine fear that the PLP

8
The coalition question, 1957–73

8.1 **The background, 1922–57**

During the first thirty-five years of the State, Labour had experience of all three options open to a minor party. It spent twenty-five years in opposition, six in government as part of a coalition with other parties, and four giving external support to a single-party government.

None of these experiences was very satisfactory. In theory, a party might benefit from being in opposition, by developing a coherent overall policy and a long-term strategy. It might, indeed, consciously choose to remain in opposition; it might feel, for example, that if it joined a coalition it would be breathing life into a dying party, or would be preventing the emergence of a new political alignment in which its prospects would be much more favourable. Labour, however, evolved no striking set of policies while out of office, and the twenty-five years it spent there were due not to a careful balancing of long-term considerations against short-term opportunities but to the simple fact that no alternatives were on offer.

Between 1932 and 1936 Labour gave external support to Fianna Fáil administrations. After the 1932 election the seven Labour TDs voted for de Valera when the Dáil met to elect a new President of the Executive Council, a crucial decision, since Fianna Fáil held only seventy-two of the 153 seats. For a while Labour was consulted on

projected legislation in return for supporting the government in the Dáil, but the relationship, whose exact nature is still unclear, broke down around 1936 for reasons which are also unknown.[1] Although in theory a minor party giving external support to a government might enjoy power without responsibility, and might be able to take credit for the government's popular policies while avoiding both the odium of its unpopular ones and the risk of losing its identity, in practice things did not work out like that for Labour. Voters who approved of the nature of Fianna Fáil's policies do not seem to have attributed them to any extent to Labour's efforts, while Fine Gael and its allies accused Labour of being partly responsible for them. The alliance nearly cost Labour not only its identity but its very existence; at the 1933 election it won only eight seats and 80,000 votes out of the 1·4 million cast. In 1932 it had hoped that enabling Fianna Fáil to enter office might be to its own electoral advantage, since it might now attract the working-class protest vote which had previously gone to Fianna Fáil.[2] It soon came to realise, however, that helping Fianna Fáil into power was a lot easier than getting it out again, and during the 1930s Fianna Fáil increased its working-class support, especially in Dublin.

During the 1930s relationships between the two parties cooled. The passage of transfers between them declined greatly,[3] and Labour abstained on the vote on de Valera's renomination after the 1938 election. Labour grew steadily more disenchanted with what it saw as Fianna Fáil's increasing conservatism, and was inclined to blame Fianna Fáil for engineering the 1944–45 split in the ITUC and the party itself. After the 1944 election, consequently, Labour joined Fine Gael for the first time in voting against Fianna Fáil. Seven of its eight TDs opposed de Valera's renomination, the eighth abstaining, whereas three of the four National Labour TDs supported it, the fourth being 'detained at a meeting of Kerry County Council'.[4]

After this vote, it was only a matter of time before the opposition parties realised the logic of their position and accepted that a coalition was necessary if Fianna Fáil was ever to be prised out of office. Up to this point Labour in particular was trapped in a vicious circle (see Fig. 8.1). If it did well at an election, the ensuing single-party government was not stable and consequently called another election as soon as possible. In this, Labour suffered, partly because its resources had been drained by the previous election, and partly because voters gravitated towards the larger parties in the hope that a stable

Secretaries, Frank Cluskey, was from Dublin, and the other, Michael Pat Murphy, represented rural South West Cork.

The four Ministers were asked, individually, by Corish whether they would be prepared to serve in the government. They were offered specific Ministries, but were given no assurance that if they declined what they were offered they would be invited to choose another one. Tully and Keating were both pleased with what they were given; O'Leary was known to be unhappy with the choice of Labour, but took it anyway. Within Fine Gael, Cosgrave sought the advice of some of his front-benchers and closest confidants, but made the final decision himself. Some of the Fine Gael TDs appointed were given little notice that Cosgrave intended to offer them a post in the administration, and some were told only at the last moment exactly what he had in mind for them. Each party leader chose his own appointees; his selections were not subject to the approval of the other. The Dáil met on 14 March 1973, and endorsed the composition of the government by seventy-two votes to sixty-nine.

9

Labour in government, 1973–77

The National Coalition government held office for four and a quarter years, before being defeated at a general election held in June 1977. It began very brightly, and had a 'honeymoon period', lasting for about a year, during which a large number of popular decisions were made. Some of the early press comment, indeed, was almost embarrassingly sycophantic. Before the Cabinet was picked, one political correspondent wrote of the likelihood that a 'Government of all the talents' would be forthcoming and of the Coalition's 'problem of too much Ministerial talent'. Even after the government's composition had been revealed, he insisted that it was 'showered with talent', and the Coalition's first budget was hailed as 'the greatest social welfare budget of all time' and the 'most progressive budget yet'.[1]

After such lavish initial praise the Coalition was almost bound to disappoint. The greatest problems arose in the area of economic policy. The fivefold increase in oil prices after the 1973 Yom Kippur war reduced economic growth and led to massive inflation and unemployment throughout the Western world, and had a particularly strong impact on the Irish Republic, which was almost entirely dependent on imported energy sources. Consequently the government's performance fell far short of its promises. The 1973 manifesto had included the sentence: 'The immediate economic aim of the new government will be to stabilize prices, halt redundancies and reduce unemployment under a programme of planned economic development'.

In the event, prices rose by about 90 per cent during the first four years of the Coalition's term, and almost doubled over the whole period, an average rate almost twice that experienced during the previous four years of Fianna Fáil government. In 1974 inflation

10

Marking time, 1977–81

10.1 Labour in the interregnum

The four-year period after the 1977 election was not one of advance for Labour, as the aftermath of the 1957 election had been. Indeed, the result of the 1981 election was to suggest that things actually got worse after the humbling 1977 result. While there was some new thought on matters of party policy, and a fresh approach to party strategy, there was no organisational overhaul, and no radical departure from the methods of the past.

The party spent this period under a new leader, Frank Cluskey. Ten days after the 1977 election Brendan Corish announced that he would not seek re-election as leader when the Dáil reconvened, and would not have done so whatever the outcome of the election. In his resignation statement he said that during the period of his leadership Labour had 'emerged as a National Party with clearly defined Socialist policies and a national organization'.[1] The statement ended, perhaps characteristically:

> The people of County Wexford have honoured me as one of their Deputies in the Dáil for thirty-two years. I trust I have served them well in the past and hope that I will continue to do so throughout this incoming Dáil. Their continued support has been at all times a source of great consolation throughout the trials of public life and particularly over the last four difficult years.

When the PLP met to elect a new leader on 1 July the only nominees were Frank Cluskey and Michael O'Leary. Only sixteen TDs were eligible to vote,[2] and the first ballot produced an eight–eight tie. In the vote, it appears, the PLP split partly on union lines and partly on an urban–rural basis.[3] Cluskey belonged to the WUI, all three members of which supported him, while six of the eight ITGWU members

supported O'Leary, a long-time member of that union. It was also noticeable that, of the five longest-serving rural TDs, only one (Corish) supported Cluskey, while only two of the six Dublin TDs supported O'Leary. A second ballot was held at once on the proposal of one of Cluskey's supporters, and this time Cluskey won by nine votes to seven; it is believed that the Wicklow TD Liam Kavanagh was the only one to change his vote. Kavanagh then proposed that O'Leary be elected deputy leader, which was unanimously agreed.

Cluskey had been in the Dáil since 1965, and had been a Parliamentary Secretary in the coalition government. Aged forty-seven when he became leader, he was a Dubliner who had been a trade union official before entering full-time politics. Cluskey's style of leadership, and his electoral fate, resembled in many ways those of Tom Johnson, the party's first leader. He too was an excellent parliamentarian; one reviewer of the 1977–81 Dáil described his 'tactical skill, political judgement and performance within the Dáil' as 'quite outstanding'.[4] He was a particularly sharp critic of Charles Haughey after the latter became Taoiseach in 1979, and was much more effective than the Fine Gael leader in piercing his defences. Cluskey was widely respected for his sincerity, his tenacity and his capacity for hard work. Like Johnson, however, he lacked popular appeal, and appeared dogged, unimaginative and colourless to television audiences, in whose eyes he was overshadowed by the other two party leaders. He lacked charisma and did not appear to enjoy meeting people *en masse* during election campaigns. His own Dáil seat was never secure – his first preference vote slid steadily from its 1965 level – and it was no great surprise when he lost his seat in 1981. His defeat, like that of Johnson fifty-four years earlier, was due partly to the intervention in his constituency of an Independent Labour candidate (see below).

The party faced few electoral tests during these four years. It contested only one of the three by-elections to arise; this was in Cork City, where the vacancy was occasioned by the death of the Labour TD Pat Kerrigan. A strong Labour candidate, Toddy O'Sullivan, actually doubled Labour's percentage vote (from 10·2 to 22·6 per cent), but finished only third; the Fine Gael candidate took the seat as a result of receiving 58·5 per cent of O'Sullivan's transfers, with only 18·6 per cent passing to Fianna Fáil.

The five-yearly local government elections were held in June 1979, on the same day as the first direct elections to the European

tax on clothing and shoes and the restoration of food subsidies, and it was also apparent that a large majority of PLP members favoured a continuation of coalition. Nonetheless, the AC decided, by eighteen votes to sixteen, that Labour would not participate in government in the new Dáil; instead, its TDs could support a minority Fine Gael government.

In the event the decision had no bearing on the outcome. Fianna Fáil won the support of the three TDs of Sinn Féin the Workers' Party (which in April changed its name to simply 'The Workers' Party'), Neil Blaney and Tony Gregory, who secured a remarkable list of commitments in return for his Dáil vote, so on 9 March Charles Haughey was elected Taoiseach by 86 votes to 79. In fact, Haughey ran into more trouble from within his own parliamentary party than from the Dáil, having to quell an abortive coup led by Desmond O'Malley before being confirmed as the Fianna Fail nominee for Taoiseach. Even so, the AC's decision caused deep resentment among most TDs, much of it directed against party chairman Michael D. Higgins, who was accused by Barry Desmond of 'an incredible piece of dilettantism' and of having played 'a negative and destructive role' by his influential advocacy of an end to the coalition. Desmond accused 'the closed minds and the ideologues' on the AC of having made a decision which conflicted with the wishes of most Labour voters, and the incident certainly raised the question of whether TDs were answerable in the first instance to those who had voted for them or to party members, a question which had never previously arisen in Irish politics because of the generally deferential nature of party members. PLP members' anger at being overruled by the AC was not assuaged by a statement from the party's youth wing containing the blithe assurance that a majority Labour government would be in power 'within a few years' as a result of the anti-coalition decision. Whatever transitions had taken place in the party since 1957, there remained room for a lot more thinking on the question of how to make the transition from a party of protest to a party of power.

11
Conclusion

During the period 1957–82 the nature of the Irish Labour Party changed fundamentally, but its electoral strength remained fairly constant. In 1957 it had been almost incongruously conservative by European standards; it shunned the word 'socialist' and seemed to regard even 'liberalism' as a dangerous creed. Its goals were much the same as those of all parties – higher employment, better social services, and so on – but it proposed no particularly distinctive or controversial methods to achieve them. Throughout the 1960s, however, it moved steadily to the left. It began, cautiously at first, to assert that it was 'socialist', and in 1969 it adopted new policies, the fullest and most left-wing ever evolved by any Irish party. It could no longer be argued that it had generally reacted timidly and defensively to change; by 1982 its position on both social and economic questions placed it in advance of the two main parties and indeed of the electorate.

Organisationally, too, there was significant change. Up to the mid-1960s Labour was a loosely linked collection of individuals, and although some had built up efficient constituency parties, there was little central co-ordination of these local organisations. Annual conferences were attended by hardly more than 100 delegates, most of whom were supporters of individual TDs, and were not forums for the formulation of policies. During the 1960s Head Office, which had previously had a purely administrative role, became much more political, and tightened up the party machinery considerably. Annual conferences became much larger affairs, with up to 1,000 delegates attending, and became the arena for decisions on party policy and strategy. They became much less sycophantic towards the parliamentary party, which came to expect vituperative criticism from some delegates, but were still unable to exercise effective control over

Appendix 2 *Performance of Labour in general elections 1957–81, by region*

	1957	*1961*	*1965*	*1969*	*1973*	*1977*	*1981*
Dublin							
Votes	20,058	20,606	55,019	93,430	78,347	74,688	54,845
% vote	8·1	8·4	18·5	28·3	22·3	17·5	12·2
Candidates	7	12	15	35	26	26	29
Seats	1	1	6	10	7	6	3
Rest of Leinster							
Votes	39,439	42,868	52,391	48,608	41,281	47,940	45,701
% vote	14·3	16·5	19·2	17·4	14·4	13·6	11·7
Candidates	11	9	10	19	12	14	14
Seats	3	5	6	4	5	5	5
Munster							
Votes	49,911	67,813	72,912	64,784	57,589	56,485	62,387
% vote	12·6	17·7	18·5	16·0	14·0	11·7	12·0
Candidates	11*	11*	13*	25	13	13*	14
Seats	8*	10*	10*	4	7	6*	6
Connacht-Ulster							
Votes	2,339	4,824	12,418	17,676	7,900	7,297	7,057
% vote	0·8	1·7	4·3	5·8	2·6	2·1	2·0
Candidates	2	3	6	20	5	4	3
Seats	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Ireland							
Votes	111,747	136,111	192,740	224,498	185,117	186,410	169,990
% votes	9·1	11·6	15·4	17·0	13·7	11·6	9·9
Candidates	31*	35*	44*	99	56	57*	60
Seats	12*	16*	22*	18	19	17*	15

* Includes outgoing Ceann Comhairle, returned automatically.

Appendix 3 *Labour membership 1964–80*

		Number of branches				*Percentage of total branches*			
Year	*Total*	*Dublin*	*Rest of Leinster*	*Munster*	*Connacht and Ulster*	*Dublin*	*Rest of Leinster*	*Munster*	*Connacht and Ulster*
1964	248	29	113	103	3	11·7	45·6	41·5	1·2
1965	289	38	124	124	3	13·1	42·9	42·9	1·0
1966	357	52	158	143	4	14·6	44·3	40·1	1·1
1967	457	67	187	187	16	14·7	40·9	40·9	3·5
1968	477	75	174	207	21	15·7	36·5	43·4	4·4
1969	501	83	183	211	24	16·6	36·5	42·1	4·8
1970	479	105	156	193	25	21·9	32·6	40·3	5·2
1971	450	95	147	187	21	21·1	32·7	41·6	4·7
1972	436	99	140	182	15	22·7	32·1	41·7	3·4
1973	480	97	153	210	20	20·2	31·9	43·7	4·2
1974	499	115	158	203	23	23·0	31·7	40·7	4·6
1975	467	115	152	179	21	24·6	32·5	38·3	4·5
1976	538	136	155	225	22	25·2	28·8	41·8	4·1
1977	549	150	173	206	20	27·3	31·5	37·5	3·6

Note. Until 1974 the party did not have a register of individual members. Instead, members registered with a local branch, which paid an annual affiliation fee to Head Office; the size of the fee did not depend on the size of the branch. Inevitably, some branches, no matter how many members they claimed, were 'paper' branches, more or less inactive between elections. For all these reasons, there is no way of telling how many members the party had during this period, although each branch was supposed, under the constitution, to have a minimum of ten members.

An individual membership scheme was introduced in 1974, under which each member had to pay an annual membership fee of £1 (later raised to £3) to Head Office. Branch figures broken down by province are not readily available for the period since 1977, but the individual membership figures at December of each year since 1973 are: 1974, 4,700; 1975, 5,100; 1976, 5,088; 1977, 3,474; 1978, 5,264; 1979, 4,846; 1980, 6,254.

Minimum branch membership is currently ten in Dublin and five elsewhere; in practice branch membership varies between five and not much more than twenty, with an average of ten. The annual branch affiliation fee is £10, so that the cost of setting up a paper branch of completely inactive members, in order to gain support at a candidate selection conference, is £40 in Dublin and £25 elsewhere, with the consequence that while some such branches still exist, they are less numerous than in the past.

Source: Figures provided by Labour Party Head Office.

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