

DAYS OF BLUE LOYALTY OVER?

We pointed out in the preface that the title of this book came from a comment made by a party member in response to one of the questions in the survey. This member was pessimistic about the future of the organisation, and wrote “Days of blue loyalty over”. Is this prediction in line with the evidence of this book, or is Fine Gael alive and well and set to prosper in the twenty-first century?

As we might expect, there are arguments to consider on both sides. On the negative side, some writers argue that the sun is setting on the world of political parties generally and that the political party as we know it today is a centralised, formally structured pyramidal body that evolved in and for the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century and is now as redundant as steam trains, gas lamps and the electric telegraph.¹ If this line of thought is valid, Fine Gael is indeed on the way out, but so are Fianna Fáil and Labour; days of blue loyalty, green loyalty and red loyalty are all over. However, those who pronounce the imminent death of the political party don’t offer any very plausible speculation as to what is likely to replace it, and we confidently expect political parties to continue to play a dominant role in structuring political life in Ireland and indeed in other European countries for the foreseeable future.

There are also more temperate argument on the pessimistic side that suggest that while parties as such will continue to thrive, these parties may not be quite the same as the parties of yesterday or even today. In particular, they may not have many members. There are two sides of this case: one stresses the *demand* side of the argument and says that parties have no real need for members any more, while the other stresses the *supply* side and says that even if parties do want members they will have great difficulty in finding and keeping them. We have already discussed many of these arguments, especially in chapters 1, 5 and 6, and here we will just review some of the main points briefly.

Taking the demand-related arguments first, the suggestion is that parties no longer need members in the same way or to the same extent as they used to. With the mass media as a campaigning vehicle and with public money provided by the state, the election work and the subscriptions formerly supplied by members are of diminishing value. Moreover, if members demand some policy “payment” for their services – in other words, if they use their power within the party to commit the party to a certain policy line or to select candidates of a certain policy outlook – then they could become a liability to the party leadership, as the danger is that the policy demands they make will render the party less electable. So writers such as Richard Katz and Peter Mair portray parties gradually withdrawing from civil society, fighting battles (often little more than mock or ritualistic ones) with each other in their own “party world” but no longer engaging with ordinary people.² Parties, in this view, are on the road to becoming “head without a body” organisations: they will have a strong well-funded head office and a powerful parliamentary group, but will neither have nor see the need for a vibrant grassroots membership.

Turning now to the supply-related arguments, it is often suggested that peo-

ple are becoming ever less likely to join parties. Indeed, as we have pointed out, membership trends are downwards in virtually all European countries. Those who are thinking about joining a party for “solidary” reasons can nowadays find plenty of other and probably more appealing leisure and social opportunities; those who are motivated by policy should have little difficulty in finding a pressure group that is committed to the cause that concerns them. Moreover, if political parties generally are often regarded as going through a difficult time these days, then established, major parties seem to be in most trouble of all. With policy convergence between the main parties having taken place in many countries, none of these parties finds it easy to identify itself with a distinctive cause that will inspire and enthuse those outside its traditional recruitment pool. A citizen who feels strongly about a particular issue may not see much point in joining a large party on whose agenda this issue is just one of many issues and quite probably not the top priority. It might seem to make more sense to join a smaller party that gives central place to the subject the citizen is concerned about and in which one will not have to spend a lot of time fighting against general indifference to persuade the party to take the issue up. Or, perhaps, such a citizen may decide that the established political and institutional structures are not sufficiently flexible or responsive to their wishes and instead join a single-issue pressure group whose organisation is looser and less hierarchical than that of a party, or work at community level to try to change things on the ground.

Major political parties suffer a number of difficulties when trying to recruit new members and enthuse existing ones. Since they aim to be a dominant force in government, there are constraints on how they can behave; if they issue wild promises, or make spending commitments without soberly pointing out the revenue implications, they may be penalised by an electorate that demands a responsible government. Moreover, they are constrained by their past record; while of course some degree of policy evolution is inevitable, if they are to be taken seriously they cannot blithely advocate policies at one election that bear no relation to what they advocated previously.³ However, while being consistent, level-headed, honest and responsible is all very well, it is not always easy to transform this into excitement. It becomes a little more easy if a party’s main rival is none of these things, especially if that rival is in government. Then, ordinary virtues becomes appreciated as rare values that are under threat, and in such circumstances new members may flock to the party.⁴ Fine Gael, as a party that has played the leading role in Irish governments on a number of occasions, clearly cannot adopt the garb of an outsider, a protest or anti-establishment party. On the other hand, many of its members evidently feel, as we saw in chapter 8, that the Fianna Fáil government with which they were confronted in 1999 did lack many of these ordinary virtues, and a desire to get and keep Fianna Fáil out of power is undoubtedly a galvanising factor for a significant number of members.

As those readers who have made their way this far through the book will know, we do not really subscribe to the pessimistic point of view that we have just outlined about the future of parties. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that the information on what is happening at the grass roots of Fine Gael is by no means