

internally and was in a weak position in the party system. Even his most dogged critics within the party invariably paid tribute to his integrity and decency, and most of them acknowledged that, however much responsibility Bruton bore for the party's uninspiring record during the 1990s, many other factors had also played a part. Bruton's defenders argued that the heave against him epitomised the way the political process was becoming trivialised, with integrity seen as only a minor counterbalance to the apparently more important factor of a disappointing opinion poll result. Those outside the party, and some within it, also pointed to a patchy performance by the party's spokespersons on various policy areas. Any realistic evaluation of Bruton's leadership has to take full account of the difficulty of making an impact as the leader of a party in opposition, at a time when there was little to choose between the policies of the various alternative governments and when the country was enjoying unprecedented levels of economic growth. He was party leader for over 10 years, which is by no means a bad tenure given the demands on politicians. If he was not able to inspire very much enthusiasm among the electorate, or transform the fortunes of his party, it has to be acknowledged that he is not the only party leader about whom this has been said.

Once Bruton had lost the confidence motion, the race began for the vote to fill the vacancy. The bookmakers offered prices about eight possible runners, but the odds for Michael Noonan (5 to 2 on) made it clear that the race was not perceived as wide open. Noonan was a former schoolteacher who had been a TD since 1981, representing Limerick East. After less than eighteen months in the Dáil he was appointed Minister for Justice in December 1982 by Garret FitzGerald, and he had been a fixture in Fine Gael governments since then. From about 1993 onwards, following Fine Gael's disastrous performance in the November 1992 election, he had been clearly identified as highly sceptical of the wisdom of John Bruton's continuation as party leader and as the front-runner to succeed or displace him. He was dropped from the front bench after his role in the unsuccessful heave against Bruton in February 1994, but when the party returned to government in December of that year he was appointed Minister for Health, and when the party reverted to opposition in 1997 he remained one of the most high-profile frontbenchers in the eyes of the public.

When the second favourite in the race, the Wexford TD Ivan Yates, announced that he would not be a candidate and indeed would retire from politics at the next election, the road was left clear for Noonan. Four candidates declared themselves, but two of these – Bernard Allen and Jim Mitchell – withdrew on the eve of the vote, acknowledging that their had not found the level of support that they had hoped for. Noonan was opposed by just one other candidate, the Mayo TD Enda Kenny, who had been one of Bruton's most loyal supporters during the 1990s; Kenny promised that if elected he would "electrify" the party. When the vote took place on 9 February, Noonan won 44–28; although the ballot was secret, many TDs declared their voting intentions to the media, and it was clear that, by and large, Kenny's support was drawn from those who had supported Bruton in the confidence motion. Michael Noonan thus became Fine Gael's

eighth leader. At 57 he was the oldest person ever to become leader of the party,⁶⁸ and he took over the reins of a party facing into an uncertain future.

CONCLUSION

Fine Gael's record is one of qualified success. In electoral terms it has averaged around 30 per cent of votes at elections since 1932 (see Appendix D), which in many European countries would make it the largest party in the country. However, in Ireland it has trailed consistently behind Fianna Fáil, which has been the largest party at every election since 1932. Moreover, being consistently second has all too often earned it the position of being the country's leading opposition party; an honour of a sort, but not what any party aspires to. Over the twenty-five years between the elections of 1977 and 2002 Fianna Fáil spent about seventeen years and five months in government, Labour nine years and three months, the Progressive Democrats eight years and five months, and Fine Gael just seven years and six months. Not only is Fine Gael in government less than Fianna Fáil, which after all is larger; it also spends less time there than smaller parties do, since they have the option, which it does not, of going into coalition with Fianna Fáil. Too long a confinement to the opposition benches can undermine a party's morale, and this has been very apparent at times in Fine Gael's past, most notably the 1940s.

In our survey we did not ask Fine Gael members whether they are proud of their party's history, but if we had, we strongly suspect that the answer would have been a resounding yes. The party's image of itself is stated clearly in a booklet published in 1983 to mark sixty years of pro-Treaty organisation. Two quotes from it will convey a strong sense of the party's own perception of what it stands for and what its record has been. In a foreword, the then Taoiseach and party leader, Garret FitzGerald, wrote:

Fine Gael has so many new members that we run a risk of forgetting what a proud tradition we are part of. Maurice Manning's work clearly demonstrates the courage, patriotism and real sense of duty which has been the strongest thread running through our history. It is very important that members of Fine Gael and non-members too, are aware of the way in which the first Cumann na nGaedheal government built up the new State. It took over a country divided by Civil War, with no machinery of administration and government and no international standing. It built up the economic and political structures of the country, based as this book demonstrates, on the independent, self-reliant policy of Arthur Griffith. We will continue as a party with that sense of service to the Community, courage and openness which is our greatest inheritance.⁶⁹

The booklet finishes with the following paragraph:

60 years after the foundation of Cumann na nGaedheal, Fine Gael again finds itself in Government, leading and serving the Irish people. In the intervening years,