

party. Accordingly I went to see my local TD, John A. Costello, to ask him how I should go about joining Fine Gael in Dublin. His response was, as usual, forceful, blunt, and idiosyncratic. "Forty years in politics; twice Taoiseach; never joined Fine Gael".<sup>9</sup>

Costello seemed to feel that FitzGerald need not bother joining either, but FitzGerald persisted and managed to persuade Costello to tell him where he could find a session of the local constituency executive, which proved to be "a small meeting, consisting mostly of fairly elderly people".

James Dillon, who succeeded Costello at the top of the party, was little different. He survived for ten years as an independent TD and clearly did not regard his departure from Fine Gael in 1942 as a high price to pay for standing by his principles. When he became party leader in 1959 he took some nominal steps to improve the organisation, which was in a run-down state, but in his own constituency of Monaghan he did not encourage the development of a strong organisation. He kept his distance from what organisation there was, and instead depended on a loose network of supporters for his local work.<sup>10</sup> Dillon was perhaps particularly unconvinced about the need for a strong party organisation. By the time he became party leader, he had been elected 10 times to the Dáil – but only five times as a party candidate, the other five times as an independent.<sup>11</sup> The idea of establishing a vibrant structured organisation peopled by members who might demand policy commitments in return for their labour would hardly have struck him as an attractive proposition. Other TDs, too, have been described as at best ambivalent towards the idea of strong local party organisation. For example, Oliver J. Flanagan represented Laois-Offaly as a Fine Gael TD from 1952 to 1987 (he had been an independent TD from 1943 to 1952), but an obituary suggested that he was "never a good party man" at local level and had often been in dispute with the local party organisation, which he had, perhaps not surprisingly, never tried to build up.<sup>12</sup>

This lack of commitment to, and indeed wariness of, organisation had been a feature of the pro-Treatyite camp from its earliest days. In the previous chapter we talked about the importance of "myths" that members might believe in – perceptions of the past that, regardless of whether they are accurate, play an important role in fostering a sense of identity. Many political parties appear to have a myth of a past golden age of high levels of activism, remembering a time a few decades ago when the local party branch was a hive of activity, when members participated enthusiastically in the social events it organised and discussed political affairs avidly. These glorious days of the past are contrasted with the current situation of declining levels of activism and organisational inertia. Admittedly, researchers who take the trouble to find out what really happened in the past often discover that the myths are almost completely inaccurate. Parties in both Britain and postwar Germany were never particularly active, and "some of the lamentations for formerly active constituency parties may be inspired by a nostalgic misperception of what members used to do".<sup>13</sup> Even so, the myth may at least serve a useful purpose in setting an ideal that the more committed members try to work towards.

In Fine Gael, there is no such myth – the only period that comes close to acquiring the status of a golden era was, as we have said, 1977 to 1983, after Garret FitzGerald became leader and before his second government started to lose popularity. Other than this, neither in reality nor in anyone’s imagination was there a time when the party was characterised by organisational vitality. Part of the reason for the generally marginal role of ordinary members within the party lies in the way in which the party was created. The political scientist Maurice Duverger distinguishes between parties created “internally”, in other words from the top down by existing parliamentarians, and those created “externally”, by an extra-parliamentary body or movement. He believes that the way in which a party is formed will determine its subsequent nature: in internally-created parties, the parliamentary group will dominate, with members being peripheral.<sup>14</sup> While his thesis has caused some debate, there is no doubt that had he known about Cumann na nGaedheal when he wrote his book, he would have cited that party as an archetypal illustration of his point.

### THE EARLY YEARS OF PRO-TREATY ORGANISATION

By the time the Cumann na nGaedheal party was set up in April 1923, the pro-Treaty government had in effect been in existence for over a year. Ministers had become accustomed to operating without any constraints from a membership-based organisation and, moreover, they had bad memories of the role played by the Sinn Féin organisation in the first half of 1922, when party congresses had to some extent tied the hands of the elite. Consequently, when Cumann na nGaedheal was established the organisational structure was one that deliberately downgraded the importance of the branch. The elite wasn’t even sure that it wanted a national organisation, and if there had to be one, it must not be allowed to challenge the primacy of the parliamentarians.<sup>15</sup> When the party’s founding convention took place in April 1923 a number of ministers ignored the event, as if the party had nothing to do with them. From the start the party relied on paid organisers rather than voluntary ones, and reports from around the country spoke of apathy, lethargy, and the difficulty in getting supporters to join the party or contribute time to it.<sup>16</sup> By the end of 1923 matters had if anything got worse. The party had only 247 branches compared with the anti-Treatyites’ 729, in several constituencies the local organisation had run into debt and simply disappeared, and a member of its standing committee declared that Cumann na nGaedheal was “a shell not an organisation”.<sup>17</sup>

Those within the party who wanted to strengthen the organisation tried to think of possible incentives that could be offered in order to attract members, but a suggestion that members should have the opportunity to be consulted on legislation was rejected by Kevin O’Higgins, who Tom Garvin concludes had “a positive contempt for the whole business of grass-roots organisation”.<sup>18</sup> Membership numbers grew in 1924, not least because there were hints that when the untenanted lands were redistributed, party members would have preferment.<sup>19</sup>