

# Fianna Fáil: Past and Present

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Fianna Fáil were the dominant political party in Ireland from their first term in government in the 1930s up until their disastrous 2011 election. The party managed to enjoy large support from the working class, as well as court close links with the richest people in Irish society. Often described as more of a 'national movement' than a party, their popular support base has now plummeted. As this article goes to print, the party (officially in opposition but enabling a Fine Gael government) is polling at 26% approval.<sup>1</sup> How did a party which emerged from the losing side of the civil war come to dominate Irish political life so thoroughly? This article aims to trace the history of the party, analyse their unique brand of populist politics as well as their relationship with Irish capitalism and the working class.

Fianna Fáil was founded in 1926 by Eamonn DeValera following a split within the Sinn Féin party, of which he was president. The split centred around Sinn Féin's policy of abstention from the newly formed Free State Dáil. In order to understand their formation, some background analysis to the origins of the Free State is required.

The 'War of Independence' is often portrayed as owing its victory to a clandestine military operation, however it was a genuinely popular *revolution* in which the working class played a huge and crucial part.<sup>2</sup> Factory occupations and working class action effectively forced the British state to cease to function in Ireland, which led to negotiations resulting in the Anglo Irish Treaty of 1921. Supporters of the treaty split from Sinn Féin and formed Cumann na nGaedheal, while the remainder of the party remained opposed to the treaty. This

prompted what is usually referred to as a civil-war but as Kieran Allen argues in an earlier issue of this journal, the Free State in effect mounted a successful *counter-revolution* which was thoroughly opposed to the working class movement.<sup>3</sup> The defeat signalled the end of the aspirations of the Irish revolution and the stagnation of the state economically. Emigration was particularly high in this period, and the state was thoroughly conservative. The Catholic Church fostered strong links with Cumann na nGaedheal, often denouncing republicans in its sermons.

There were distinctive class elements to both the pro and anti-treaty sides. The Cumann na nGaedheal government drew its base from large farmers, who could rely on exports to Britain. Ideologically, they were close to the British establishment, having secured parity with the pound, and co-opting many British state institutions. The government had also presided over the victimisation and blacklisting of republicans during the 1920s. Sinn Féin were hostile to talk of class, but DeValera was astute to the feelings of workers. The inauguration meeting of Fianna Fáil stressed the need to address the social and economic problems of the time.<sup>4</sup>

Fianna Fáil, as an electoral organisation, went from strength to strength following their formation. DeValera took the Oath of Allegiance, as a formality, and led the party into the Dáil having won 57 seats in the general election of September 1927.<sup>5</sup> The party aimed to address the social problems of the time by offering improvements in wages and employment conditions, as well as the break up and redistribution of large farms. At the same time they promoted a version of economic nationalism whereby native industries

<sup>1</sup><http://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/editorial/irish-times-ipsos-mrbi-poll-results-underpin-uneasy-stability-1.2818066>

<sup>2</sup>See for example *Irish Marxist Review* Issue Number 14; Conor Kostick, 'Revolution in Ireland', (London, 1996)

<sup>3</sup>Kieran Allen, 'The 1916 Rising: Myth and Reality' in *Irish Marxist Review* Issue Number 14, (Dublin, 2015) pp.3-17

<sup>4</sup>Kieran Allen, *Fianna Fáil and Irish Labour : 1926 to the Present* (London, 1997) p.14

<sup>5</sup>J.J.Lee, *Ireland 1912-1914 : Politics and Society*, (Cambridge, 1989), p.155

would be built up through a system of ‘protectionism’. This was to be achieved by a series of tax breaks for native firms, while also discouraging foreign investment. Much of their early rhetoric was focussed on the negative impact of *British* industry and banks, rather than at capitalism itself. Allen argues that this had a large appeal in the context of the 1929 crash and global economic crisis.<sup>6</sup>

The dynamic between Fianna Fáil and the working class bears some examination. The Labour Party had originated in earlier syndicalist movements but had abstained from the 1918 general election, and as a result had been sidelined in Irish politics from the outset. This trend continued throughout the 1920s as union membership and strike activity fell. As the decade progressed, The Labour Party moved away from the radical language of Connolly and embraced parliamentarism and legal respectability. In this regard they often became indistinguishable from Fianna Fáil, arguing in 1927 for the establishment of a native industry, for example. Allen cites the lack of Labour’s willingness to challenge capitalism as one of the key reasons that they were brought closer to Fianna Fáil, whose strategy was to reconcile the workers movement to native capitalism.<sup>7</sup>

In a few short years, Fianna Fáil had become a serious political machine, enjoying large success with its populist policies. The scale of their success even prompted a ‘red scare’ from Cumann na nGaedheal, who claimed Fianna Fáil were taking orders from Moscow!<sup>8</sup> In the 1932 general election, the party had secured enough seats to form a minority government with the backing of Labour.<sup>9</sup> Now in power, Fianna Fáil began their policy of protectionism by imposing tariffs on imports, while subsidising Irish companies. They also stopped the re-

payment of land annuities to Britain. In this time a number of state companies were formed including Aer Lingus, Bord na Móna, The Irish Sugar Company and Irish Life.<sup>10</sup> A large-scale and ambitious house-building project was undertaken to deal with the tenement conditions in Dublin, giving rise to housing estates such as Crumlin, Drimmagh, Finglas and others.

From its inception, Fianna Fáil began to court the approval of the Catholic Church. The church’s attitude had varied during the war of independence, but it backed the pro-treaty side in the civil war. DeValera’s Fianna Fáil attempted to appear even more fervently Catholic than Cumann na nGaedheal had been. This was despite the fact that many of them, as anti-treaty Republicans, had been excommunicated only a few years earlier.<sup>11</sup> Fianna Fáil deputy leader Sean T.O’Kelly made their position explicit during the ’32 campaign : ‘[O]ur policy was that of Pope Pius XI.’<sup>12</sup> The Eucharistic Congress was held in Dublin in 1932 with lavish state backing. The government built a high powered radio-station in Athlone in order to transmit a papal broadcast to the congress.<sup>13</sup>

Fianna Fáil adhered to catholic social teaching in their policies regarding the banning of contraception and the regulation of dance halls, to pick two examples. The Constitution of 1937 recognised the ‘special position’ of the Catholic Church. Bryan Fanning points to articles 40-44 of the Constitution as clearly influenced by Catholic social thought.<sup>14</sup> DeValera invited bishop Edward Cahill to write the preamble. Cahill desired that the Constitution for Ireland should be, ‘if not confessedly Catholic (which may at present not be feasible), at least definitely and *confessedly Christian*.’<sup>15</sup> The relation-

<sup>6</sup> Allen, *Fianna Fáil and Irish Labour*, pp.15-23

<sup>7</sup> Allen, *Fianna Fáil and Irish Labour*, pp.29-35

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<sup>9</sup> Allen, *Fianna Fáil and Irish Labour*, pp.36-37

<sup>10</sup> Allen, *Fianna Fáil and Irish Labour*, pp.38-39

<sup>11</sup> Allen, *Fianna Fáil and Irish Labour*, p.40

<sup>12</sup> John Cooney, *John Charles McQuaid : Ruler of Catholic Ireland*, (Dublin, 1999), p.72

<sup>13</sup> Cooney, *John Charles McQuaid*, p.72

<sup>14</sup> Bryan Fanning, ‘A Catholic vision of Ireland’ in Tom Inglis (ed) *Are the Irish Different?*, (Manchester, 2014), p.47

<sup>15</sup> Author’s emphasis. ‘Fanning, A Catholic vision of Ireland’, p.47

ship between church and state ran both ways; catholic social teaching became enshrined in law, while the state benefited from a docile population under the influence of a conservative religious hierarchy.<sup>16</sup>

Allen notes that Fianna Fáil's 'strong conservative edifice' was not a barrier to their efforts to appeal to the working class.<sup>17</sup> They introduced the Conditions of Employment Act in 1935, which established collective bargaining in labour disputes. This was done with the aim of curbing union militancy, and creating greater reliance on the state by co-opting union leadership. The increase in industrialisation also created an unwanted increase in strike activity, however.<sup>18</sup> The Act also attempted to ban women from certain industries, having entered the workforce in large numbers owing to industrialisation.<sup>19</sup> This attempt at cohesion between trade unions and state bodies also fit neatly with one of the Catholic Church's ideological inspirations at the time: corporatism. Corporatism offered a framework whereby employers and the state would form vocational organisations which could stem the perceived extremes of both capitalism and communism,<sup>20</sup> despite it having some influence on Salazar in Portugal and Franco in Spain.

The 'Blueshirt' movement was an attempt to muster a fascist styled response to the new government. Known formally as the Army Comrades Association (ACA), their membership was limited to 'Christians of Irish birth'.<sup>21</sup> Headed by ex-Garda commissioner Eoin O'Duffy, they emulated European fascists and attacked communist meetings around the country, with mobs inspired by clerical speeches following suit.<sup>22</sup> DeValera reacted to this activity by launching the Public Safety Act in an attempt to ban

the ACA. The ACA merged with Cumann na nGaedheal and the Centre Party to form Fine Gael. This was another factor which drew Fianna Fáil and the labour movement closer together, with the union leaders keen to use the state machine to halt the fascists, despite several major anti-fascist riots emerging.<sup>23</sup>

As the decade drew to a close Fianna Fáil had managed to create a boom on the back of their industrialisation policies. They were able to deliver some gains for workers in the form of housing and employment, all while managing to co-opt both the Labour party and the union leadership. They had also managed to woo the Catholic Hierarchy, having gone from being pariahs to embracing Catholic social teaching. The benefit of this alliance meant that when material aspirations for workers could not be realised, Fianna Fáil could rely on the teachings of the Catholic Church to offer the population 'spiritual comfort.'<sup>24</sup>

Despite remaining officially neutral in the Second World War, *The Emergency* as it was referred to had a significant impact upon Ireland. Sean Lemass as Minister for Supplies ramped up the protectionist policies of the party in an attempt to make the state the largest sector of the economy by far, even toying with the idea of introducing labour camps for the unemployed.<sup>25</sup> Measures to ban industrial action for the duration of the war were mooted, but met with resistance from the ITGWU. Fianna Fáil backed down and once more attempted conciliation with the union leadership. The Labour Party managed to grow in this period owing to the hardship suffered by workers. Anti-communist rhetoric re-appeared with the aim of blurring class consciousness in favour of rallying around 'the community'.

<sup>16</sup>Allen, *Fianna Fáil and Irish Labour*, pp.46-47

<sup>17</sup>Allen, *Fianna Fáil and Irish Labour*, p.47

<sup>18</sup>Allen, *Fianna Fáil and Irish Labour*, pp.47-49

<sup>19</sup>Allen, *Fianna Fáil and Irish Labour*, p.58

<sup>20</sup>Fearghal McGarry, *Irish Politics and the Spanish Civil War* (Cork, 1999), pp.154-156

<sup>21</sup>Allen, *Fianna Fáil and Irish Labour*, pp.51-52

<sup>22</sup>Mike Milotte, *Communism in Ireland: The pursuit of the Workers' Republic since 1916*, (Dublin, 1984), p.117

<sup>23</sup>Allen argues that it was the lack of an urban middle-class base which halted the growth of fascism. Allen, *Fianna Fáil and Irish Labour*, pp.53-55

<sup>24</sup>Allen, *Fianna Fáil and Irish Labour*, pp.62-63

<sup>25</sup>Bryce Evans, *Seán Lemass – Democratic Dictator*, (Cork, 2011), pp 145-148

In essence, the war provided cover for Fianna Fáil to consolidate its efforts around a 26-county framework, dropping much of its founding rhetoric of being a 32-county republican organisation. This helped with Fianna Fáil's professed image as a catch-all, classless party.<sup>26</sup>

Ireland did not experience a post-war boom, as had happened in much of Europe and elsewhere. The ending of the war also posed serious problems for Fianna Fáil, who were no longer in a position to deliver on their earlier promise of solid material improvements for the population. These years saw an upturn in workers' struggles including the Irish Women's Workers Union strike, as well as strikes by millers, the ESB, bus workers and other sectors. The Industrial Relations Act was introduced to deal with this militancy, and focussed around a process of 'mediation'; a measure which was to set the tone for industrial relations in Ireland for years to come. Fianna Fáil also faced two by-elections in 1947. Clann na Poblachta, a newly formed left-leaning organisation whose programme emulated much of the early Fianna Fáil, gained one of the seats in Dublin.<sup>27</sup> Their newly elected TD, Noël Browne, recalled in his memoir some years later: '[Establishment politicians] had offered nothing but unemployment, much human distress, and mass emigration.[...] There were many of my age with a general radical outlook who were weary of the gross incompetence of a succession of civil war politicians.'<sup>28</sup>

The general election of 1948 saw Fianna Fáil ousted after an unbroken run of 16 years in power. They were replaced by a mixed coalition of Fine Gael, Clann na Poblachta, Clann na Tamhlan and National Labour (a right-wing offshoot of the Labour Party). In the short lifetime of this mixed-bag government, they had managed to declare Ireland a Republic, but soon fell apart over opposition to the ill-fated 'Mother and Child Scheme' by the medical profession and the Catholic

hierarchy. Fianna Fáil returned to power in 1951, increasing their vote by 61,000, but still falling short of an overall majority.<sup>29</sup>

The 1950s exposed the limits of Fianna Fáil's protectionist strategy of building up Irish capitalism. Industrial output declined and, as before, promises of material improvement could not be met. The unions began to drift from their association with the party and efforts were made to introduce 'development councils' a forerunner of social partnership (more of which below).<sup>30</sup> By 1958 the party, now under Lemass' leadership, began to abandon protectionism in favour of the free market, with Ireland also making attempts to join the EEC. The years '58-'63 saw something of a boom in the building trade, but was also met with union militancy, once more with action by ESB and bus workers. These strikes were particularly significant as they demonstrated something of a split between the rank and file, who were willing to organise activity themselves, and the union leadership. This was yet another factor which brought the union leadership closer to the Fianna Fáil party. Lemass' reaction to this was to encourage a system of 'social partnership', which was somewhat similar, but not identical, to the policy of 'corporatism' favoured by the Catholic Church of the 1930s. The implications of social partnership meant that union leaders would try to curb militancy in return for small wage increases and a consultancy role in national policy making.<sup>31</sup>

The boom of the 60s saw Ireland's economy begin to move away from agriculture, with the arrival of multi-nationals into the state. These companies were attracted by low wages and state incentives. Greater numbers of women entered the workforce than ever before, changing the role of the family, which began the slow undermining of catholic hegemony over the following decades. Access to secondary education was made free and provisions were introduced for the introduction of third level grants. De-

<sup>26</sup> Allen, *Fianna Fáil and Irish Labour*, pp.70-84

<sup>27</sup> Allen, *Fianna Fáil and Irish Labour*, pp.87-91

<sup>28</sup> Noël Browne, *Against the Tide*, (Dublin, 1986) p.97

<sup>29</sup> Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985*, p.319

<sup>30</sup> Allen, *Fianna Fáil and Irish Labour*, pp.103-104

<sup>31</sup> Allen, *Fianna Fáil and Irish Labour*, pp.106-115

spite the opportunities afforded by these developments, workers still bore the cost of the grants to multi-nationals through taxation. With an increasingly enlarging workforce came further militancy, with some efforts to unionise large companies being successful.<sup>32</sup>

It was during this time that the influence of wealthy party backers was beginning to carry significant sway, particularly with the formation of TACA, a group of 200 businessmen, who were allowed direct access to ministers. The shift in the economic landscape of Ireland changed Fianna Fáil's image from a professed 'workers party' to an explicitly pro-business one.<sup>33</sup> The party were criticised from some of their younger members for this turn towards embracing large capitalists (particularly from the building trade) and thus efforts were made to keep the associations more subtle. There was also some resentment about the personal wealth being amassed by one Charles J. Haughey, son-in-law of Lemass, and later Taoiseach.<sup>34</sup>

The late 60's also saw the emergence of a civil rights movement in Northern Ireland, aimed at ending anti-catholic discrimination.<sup>35</sup> With the escalation of state violence against protestors and the resurgence of the IRA, some members of Fianna Fáil, including Haughey, were sacked and put on trial for alleged importing of arms to the North. Haughey was later acquitted, but this episode would serve to drive a wedge between the Labour Party and Fianna Fáil, the former wishing for containment of the violence, and reacted with a view to propping up state institutions and appealing to respectability.<sup>36</sup>

Despite claiming 'The 70's will be Socialist', Labour entered into a coalition with Fine Gael in 1973, a pattern which would repeat throughout the 70s and 80s. Fianna

Fáil had managed to present a more nationalist view than Labour in relation to Northern Ireland. An anti-republican campaign by the coalition, along with a rise in unemployment helped Fianna Fáil return with a landslide victory in 1977.<sup>37</sup> The party adopted a more Keynesian policy in order to stimulate industrialisation and employment, as well as continuing the social partnership arrangement with the unions.<sup>38</sup> The cost of this policy led to an increase in PAYE tax, and was met with some of the largest marches in the history of the state.

Fianna Fáil also continued to court stronger links with the capitalist class at this time. This was embodied in the figure of Charles J. Haughey, seen as something of an aristocrat, who had a massive personal wealth. He had won the leadership of Fianna Fáil in a factional struggle in 1979. The policy of Keynesianism faltered in the midst of an international slump, leading Haughey to hypocritically profess that the Irish were living beyond their means.<sup>39</sup> The failure to provide material gains once more saw Fianna Fáil slide back onto the conservatism of the church, however Ireland was now liberalising somewhat and the church could not provide the disciplinary role it had in earlier decades. Fianna Fáil also suffered a split in the mid-80s, with the formation of the Progressive Democrats (PDs), who would later return to prop up a number of Fianna Fáil governments. Haughey resigned over a bugging scandal in 1992.

Despite a decline in Fianna Fáil support politically, the copper-fastening of social partnership had laid the ground for the emergence of the 'Celtic tiger' boom of the mid 90s onwards, by restricting strike activity and providing a base for the expansion of capital.<sup>40</sup> The Haughey years also saw Fianna Fáil establish further personal links

<sup>32</sup>Allen, *Fianna Fáil and Irish Labour*, pp.124-131

<sup>33</sup>Allen, *Fianna Fáil and Irish Labour*, pp.137-138

<sup>34</sup>Diarmaid Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland: 1900-2000*, (London, 2004) pp.560-561

<sup>35</sup>For a socialist analysis of the Northern civil rights movement and subsequent 'Troubles' see Eamonn McCann, *War and an Irish Town*, (London, 1993)

<sup>36</sup>Allen, *Fianna Fáil and Irish Labour*, pp.129-131

<sup>37</sup>Allen, *Fianna Fáil and Irish Labour*, pp.149-150

<sup>38</sup>Allen, *Fianna Fáil and Irish Labour*, pp.151-156

<sup>39</sup>Allen, *Fianna Fáil and Irish Labour*, p.158

<sup>40</sup>Allen, *Fianna Fáil and Irish Labour*, pp.172

with foreign multi-nationals. One such relationship was that of Ray Burke, Minister for Energy in the late 80s, and the oil industries. Burke, who was later jailed for corruption, removed royalties relating to the exploration of oil and set up a scheme whereby oil companies could offset their costs against tax over a 25 year period.<sup>41</sup>

Fianna Fáil, now under Albert Reynolds once again courted the Labour Party, and despite earlier protestations about their credibility, the labour leader Dick Spring eventually agreed to form a coalition. Commenting on the pre-governmental negotiations, Brian Lenihan (Snr) wrote in his book *For the Record*: 'There was a shared understanding between Labour and Fianna Fáil in the 1930s when de Valera was Taoiseach. That understanding must be recast for modern times to ensure future stability in the political system. It would be a stability based on the principled support of people sharing similar social and national values.'<sup>42</sup> Reynolds himself was dogged by various scandals, including granting of passports to backers of his family beef business, questions over the appointment of the Attorney General, as well as allegations of a cover-up in an extradition case for paedophile priest Brendan Smyth.<sup>43</sup> The collapse of the coalition led Labour to form yet another alliance with Fine Gael.

'He's the man, he's the best, the most skilful, the most devious and most cunning'.<sup>44</sup> These were the words used by Haughey to describe Bertie Ahern. A loyal Haughey supporter since the 70s, Ahern had served as both Minister for Labour and Minister for Justice, before assuming leadership of the party following Reynold's exit. More than anyone else, Ahern embodied the two sided nature of Fianna Fáil. Ahern had

close links with Ireland's elites, and was to be dogged by scandals over his personal finances. Ahern also presented himself as a regular working class person with a passion for pints of Bass and Manchester United Football Club. Once infamously describing himself as a socialist, Ahern at one time drew the largest salary for a serving prime minister in the world!<sup>45</sup>

Fianna Fáil formed a minority government with the Progressive Democrats in 1997 on the back of a growing economy and rapidly expanding foreign investment and building trade. In this time they could boast about the party adopting the 'spirit of the 1916 Proclamation' throughout their 70 years in existence.<sup>46</sup> The FF/PD coalition was renewed in the general election of 2002. Despite their confidence, the economy was increasingly becoming enveloped in a property bubble. As Fintan O'Toole pointed out, employment in manufacturing was in serious decline in the years 2000-2006, but this was masked by a huge increase in the numbers involved in the building trade.<sup>47</sup> One publication makes the links between Fianna Fáil and the building trade explicit. *Republican Days : 75 Years of Fianna Fáil* contains a number of contributions on the party's history, as well as photocopies of archive material. Brazenly, the publication also includes a whopping 43 paid advertisements from property developers, estate agents, surveyors and construction companies, many of whom offered their congratulations, proud associations and best wishes to the party!<sup>48</sup> Despite this boom, there were serious problems in the Irish school and health systems. As O'Toole points out, Fianna Fáil dropped all mention of alleviating poverty in their 2007 election manifesto.<sup>49</sup>

Ahern came under increasing fire over

<sup>41</sup>Amanda Slevin, *Gas, Oil and the Irish State : Understanding the Dynamics and Conflicts of Hydrocarbon Management*, (Manchester, 2016) pp.72-73

<sup>42</sup>Stephen Collins, *The Power Game : Ireland Under Fianna Fáil* (Dublin, 2001), p.252

<sup>43</sup>Collins, *The Power Game*, pp.276-292

<sup>44</sup>Charles J. Haughey, quoted in Arnold and O'Toole : *The End of the Party*, p.24

<sup>45</sup>Fintan O'Toole, *Ship of Fools : How Stupidity and Corruption Sank the Celtic Tiger*, (London, 2009), p.89

<sup>46</sup>Bertie Ahern, 'Celebrating 70 Years and Towards the New Century', in *Taking the Long View : 70 Years of Fianna Fáil*, Edited by Philip Hannon and Jackie Gallagher, (Dublin, 1996), p.1

<sup>47</sup>O'Toole, *Ship of Fools*, pp.20-21

<sup>48</sup>Máirtín Breathneach (Ed), *Republican Days: 75 Years of Fianna Fáil*, (Dublin, 20

<sup>49</sup>O'Toole, *Ship of Fools*, pp.93-94

statements made to the Mahon Tribunal relating to the signing of blank cheques while serving as Minister for Finance. The *Irish Times* printed leaks from the tribunal which claimed Ahern received ‘dig-out’ money from a cabal of businessmen in the early 90s while going through a marriage separation.<sup>50</sup> Ahern attempted to brush off these payments as personal favours, however a number of his benefactors were later to be given jobs on boards of state companies. Even more astoundingly he claimed that he didn’t have a bank account while serving as Minister for Finance.<sup>51</sup> Ahern managed to weather this storm, returning to power in the 2007 general election with the PDs and somewhat surprisingly, the Green Party. In little over a year, further allegations forced Ahern to step down, to be replaced by serving Táiniste Brian Cowen.

Fallout from the collapse of Lehman Brothers in the US impacted heavily on the Irish property market. This led to the much criticised bank guarantee of September 2008. Minister for Finance Brian Lenihan Jnr met with representatives of Bank of Ireland, AIB, the Irish Central Bank, and the Department of Finance and agreed to ‘guarantee all the liabilities - the customer and interbank deposits, and also the vast majority of bonds - of the six Irish banks’.<sup>52</sup> Irish house prices collapsed, with the average family losing half of their assets. The State also established the National Assets Management Agency (NAMA) in order to take over bad loans to developers,<sup>53</sup> making the Irish state liable for massive private debt.

Anglo Irish Bank was known for being close to Fianna Fáil and property developers, and the nationalisation of its bad loans contributed enormously to the devastation suffered by the workers of Ireland. Revelations over corruption at Anglo marred Brian Cowen, who had previously given a speech at their investors dinner, as well as being a

golf-buddy of its Director, Seán Fitzpatrick. Despite these close links, Cowen claimed to have no prior knowledge of potential insolvency at Anglo.<sup>54</sup>

The subsequent years of ECB/IMF bailouts, as well as austerity measures contributed to Fianna Fáil’s annihilation in the election of 2011, losing all but one seat in their heartland of Dublin. Conor McCabe notes that the bailout effectively meant that ‘[Fianna Fáil] could no longer sugarcoat its business-led economic policies with political gestures and tax breaks for PRSI workers.’<sup>55</sup> Their current leader Micheál Martin summed up their position : ‘I am sorry for the mistakes we made as a party and for the mistakes I made’. As Arnold and O’Toole note, he never made explicit just what these mistakes were.<sup>56</sup>

In the aforementioned publication *Republican Days*, Bertie Ahern boasted that : ‘Any reading of the 75-year history of Fianna Fáil indicates the extent to which the party has been a force for political progress and radical social reform. It was Fianna Fáil after all which to all intents and purposes, removed the link with Britain and placed a Republican Constitution before the people. On the social front, it was Fianna Fáil which introduced the massive programme of slum clearance and social housing. We are also the party which established our public health service and the system of free secondary education we enjoy today.’<sup>57</sup>

This self assessment offers no insight into why these policies were initiated, or the material conditions in which they were introduced. Kieran Allen has observed in his book *Fianna Fáil and Irish Labour*, that there are a number of concrete reasons for their domination of Irish politics. Returning to the 20s, their initial appeal was based on protectionism, and their radical social programme made sense for workers alienated by the hardship of the decade. The

<sup>50</sup>Arnold and O’Toole : *The End of the Party*, p.38

<sup>51</sup>Arnold and O’Toole : *The End of the Party*, pp.38-42

<sup>52</sup>Conor McCabe, *Sins of the Father*, (Dublin, 2011) p.170

<sup>53</sup>O’Toole, *Ship of Fools*, p.9

<sup>54</sup>Arnold and O’Toole : *The End of the Party*, pp.58-59

<sup>55</sup>McCabe, *Sins of the Father*, p.154

<sup>56</sup>Arnold and O’Toole : *The End of the Party*, p.221

<sup>57</sup>Breathneach, *Republican Days*, p.5

defeats of syndicalism also meant that the Labour Party was to remain a weak organisation. Fianna Fáil successfully co-opted union leadership through their philosophy of 'social partnership'. This had the aim of curbing union militancy. Material benefits were afforded to workers at certain times, but these were generally only available when an economic boom was underway, via protection or laissez faire policies. Where material benefits could not be provided, they could rely on the Catholic church to act as a 'spiritual anti-depressant'. As the century drew on, the material benefits and increasing workforce led to the slow dismantling of the catholic church, which could no longer instil discipline upon the population.<sup>58</sup>

As this article goes to press, Fianna Fáil are currently at an all time low in terms

of seats. The Fine Gael minority government is extremely weak, itself consisting of a shaky alliance with several independent TDs. The Labour party is utterly discredited for their hand in implementing austerity on the working-class, including the hated water charges, which Fianna Fáil originally planned to introduce, but now make statements opposing them. The lack of a large scale labour movement in Irish history has left Fianna Fáil in a unique position to be able to appeal to the working-class while maintaining close personal links with Irish capitalism. The task remains for the Irish left to offer a genuine alternative movement of the working class, in the interests of the working class. The decline of the Fianna Fáil party helps us immensely with this task.

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<sup>58</sup>Allen, *Fianna Fáil and Irish Labour*, pp.181-182