

The Absence of the Left-Wing in Irish Politics: A European Anomaly¹

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Introduction

The conventional wisdom regarding party politics among western nations has always been relatively simple: one from the left and one from the right, with a sprinkling of other parties from across the political spectrum with limited influence. Western European politics is generally a competition between a center-right party or alliance and a center-left party or coalition. However, Irish politics is somewhat of an anomaly compared to the rest of European politics in that there is an absence of a strong left-wing party.

The questions that I will attempt to answer in the following pages is why Ireland has not fit the traditional European party model and what circumstances have made the Irish left unable to play a significant role in Irish politics. In examining the absence of the left in Irish politics, I will focus on the Labour Party and the reasons for its inability to compete with Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, Ireland's two dominant center-right parties.

¹ The author would like to thank Professor Howard Whitcomb for his help and advice. This paper relies on parliamentary data through the 1997 election and the election of the 28th Daíl.

Specifically, I will address the following issues as they relate to Labour's failure:

Labour's stance on the national question, the presence of the Catholic Church in Irish politics, the absence of a strong industrial base in Ireland, the populist stances of Fianna Fáil, and Labour's recent position change regarding to the European Union and free trade.

The European Political Party Model

The political parties of Europe adhering to the center-right versus center-left model are organized differently according to national contexts, but the two main groupings in Europe are the socialists and the conservatives.² Socialist parties, which represent the center-left portion of the center-right versus center-left model, have emerged in nearly all Western European countries: the Social Democrats in Germany, Socialists in France and Italy, and Labour in Britain to give a few examples. Despite national differences, these parties all experience a certain amount of unity given their adherence to a similar social democratic political ideology. The unity that exists among socialist parties in Western Europe is unlike the varying conservative dogma of center-right parties. The Christian Democratic model that puts Catholicism at the center of the party's conservative ideology is successful in Germany and Italy, but unsuccessful in France and absent in the UK. (Gaffney, p. 8) The Conservative Party in the United Kingdom derives its ideology strictly from economic issues. While one would expect Christian Democratic model to be successful in France with Catholicism being the predominate religion, the Gaullists have favored French nationalism over religion as the

² Communist parties are reasonably strong in a few countries, most notably in Italy and France. However, their strength has always been limited to coalition governments, as occurred in the early 1980's

source for their ideology. The one issue that does tie the conservative parties together is dislike of intervention in economic matters by the state.

However, while the center-right versus center-left model applies in most of Western Europe, the model does not accurately describe the Irish political party system.

in France, and for the most part are an afterthought when looking at the political landscape of Western Europe.

Since Ireland's inception as a state, two center-right "catch-all" parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, have competed for power with very little competition from Labour, the very weak left-of-center party. (Holmes, p. 191) Some have described the Irish political system as having two and a half parties, the two being Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, with Labour occupying the half position. Not only is the absence of a strong socialist party unusual, but classifying Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael in terms of center-right party structure becomes difficult as well. Neither party fits any of the models of center-right parties with a distinct ideological underpinning for their conservatism. Rather, both Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil each take on all of the characteristics of the center-right parties of Western Europe: religion, economic liberalism, and nationalism. In the European Union party structure, Fine Gael associates with the Christian Democratic group in the European Union, while Fianna Fáil joins with the Gaullists in the European Progressive group, though Fianna Fáil would be as equally comfortable in the Christian Democratic group. (Holmes, pp. 194-5) The seemingly random grouping of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael among European center-right parties reiterates their position as "catch all parties" and raises the question of why Labour has been unable to compete, given that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael appear to be so close ideologically.

While Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are difficult to put into the European model, the Labour Party is clearly in the same classification of the other center-left parties of Ireland, belonging to the socialist grouping in the European Union. The situation in Ireland is unique that two center-right parties with nearly the same ideology have been able to hold on to power with extremely limited competition from center-left parties. According to Peter Mair, "In the 1980's and 90's, the Irish left (the Labour Party, the

Worker's Party, and Democratic Left) polled an average of 14 percent of the vote, as against an average of more than 40 percent in the other west European countries" (Mair, p. 29). Mair also notes that the Irish left's 14 percent of the vote placed it last in relation to the performance of the left in other Western European countries; Switzerland is ranked next to last, but even so the number of votes the Swiss left received was double that of Ireland's (Mair, p. 129). In looking at Irish history, society, and political traditions, it becomes clearer exactly why such a political anomaly exists in Eire.

Irish Political System

In order to understand the political party environment of Ireland, it is first important to understand the Irish political system. The Irish Prime Minister, the Taoiseach, is chosen by the majority party or coalition in the Daíl, the lower house of the Irish parliament, where a vast majority of the government's power is located. The members of the executive cabinet come from the ruling party or coalition in the Daíl. The upper house of the Irish parliament, the Seanad Éireann, is like the British House of Lords in that it is a deliberative body with little power. Seanad elections are held a few months after the Daíl's elections, and membership in the Seanad is chosen in large part from corporatist panels with the intention of providing representation for interest groups.³

An important part of the Irish political process is the unique method in which officials are selected to the Daíl. Ireland uses a system of proportional representation with a single transferable vote (PR-STV) in which voters rank their choice for

³ Gallagher includes an excellent discussion of the Irish Seanad on pp. 198-200 of his article.

candidates.⁴ Unlike the traditional “winner take all system” used in Britain, which facilitates a two party system, the system of proportional representation allows the possibility of small parties gaining seats in the Daíl, an outcome which has happened increasingly in recent years. PR-STV allows voters to rank their choices for office. Once a candidate receives the number of votes required to receive a seat, any more votes for him or her go to the next candidate indicated on the ballot. For a candidate who finishes last among those on the ballot on a given count, his or her votes are taken away and passed to the next indicated candidate on the voter’s ballot. PR-STV has contributed to the large number of parties that hold seats in the Daíl. As Giovanni Sartori notes, “PR formulas facilitate multi-partyism and are, conversely, hardly conducive to two-partyism.” (As cited in Sinnott, p. 115) Eight parties held seats in the Daíl following the 1997 election with six seats going to independents. In determining the relative strength of the parties, looking at the first preference vote statistics are excellent ways of weighing the relative strength of the various parties even though the measure does not necessarily represent how seats are distributed in the Daíl.

Irish Political Parties

Though it only ranks third in status and power among Irish political parties, the Labour Party was actually the first party to organize in Ireland. The party was first conceived in 1912 by the Irish Trades Union Congress and was formally founded in 1922. It was committed to “a moderate policy of defense of worker’s rights,” but was unable to compete with Fianna Fail and Fine Gael. (Coakley, “The Foundations of

⁴ Sinnott includes an excellent discussion of the PR-STV system on pp. 115-17 of his article.

Statehood,” p. 22) The party lost a significant amount of its support due to its inability to engage the question of Northern Ireland’s partition and has maintained the role of the weak third party since the inception of the Irish Free State. The continued weakness of the Labour Party stems from the absence of industry and strong trade unions in Ireland, the anti-socialist views of the Irish Catholic Church, and Fianna Fáil’s ability to attract Labour’s core constituency. Labour’s weakness demonstrates the unique position of the Irish left relative to the left of the rest of Europe.

Sinn Fein, the major player in the politics of early Ireland, was formed from a nationalist base in 1917 headed by a leader of the Easter Uprising and a giant of Irish politics, Eamon de Valera. (Coakley, “The Foundations of Statehood,” p. 14) However, after the ratification of the treaty with Britain that partitioned the country in 1922, leaving Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom, Sinn Fein split, causing a civil war between pro- and anti-treaty factions. The split of Sinn Fein evolved into Fianna Fáil, composed of the anti-treaty forces, and Fine Gael, which represented the pro-treaty forces. Fianna Fáil under the leadership of de Valera turned into the dominant party of Irish politics and is the majority party to this day. Fine Gael developed as a coalition among Cumman na nGaedheal (the pro-Treaty wing of Sinn Fein), the Blueshirts (the Irish fascist movement of the 1920's), and a minor party, the National Centre Party. (Coakley, “The Foundations of Statehood,” p. 21) Fine Gael quickly came to occupy the second position of Irish politics behind Fianna Fáil. Labour became Ireland’s small center-left party, unable to compete with Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael.

Though Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil evolved differently, the two parties are ideologically center-right parties. Both parties owe their existence more to the history of

Ireland than to policy disagreements. According to the logic of the center-right versus center-left model, one party should be able to represent the right of center ideology. However, both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have been able to maintain a stranglehold on Irish politics with little competition from Labour, the strongest representative of the left.

Peter Mair describes three major events in discussing the evolution of the Irish political party system. First was Fianna Fáil's decision to belatedly accept the treaty in 1927 and take their seats in the Daíl. Its action changed the nature of the pro- and anti-treaty battle, making the contest purely political and no longer fought as a civil war (Mair, p. 144). The second important event that Mair describes occurred in 1948 when Labour and Fine Gael chose more social democratic policies that led to Fianna Fáil claiming the mantle of "the national interest." (Mair, p. 144) With Fianna Fáil the party of "the national interest," the political situation would pit Fianna Fáil against a Fine Gael/Labour Party coalition, a situation that would continue until 1989. Mair's third important event occurred in 1989, when Fianna Fáil entered into a coalition with a fellow center-right party, the Progressive Democrats. This marked the first time that Fianna Fáil had entered into a coalition. Since 1989, no party has held sole control of the Daíl, and it appears that coalition governments will be ruling Ireland in the future.

Labour participated in coalition governments with Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael between 1992 and 1997. Labour began the coalition with Fianna Fáil in 1992 with Fianna Fáil's Albert Reynolds as Taoiseach. Labour dissolved the coalition in 1993 due to policy differences with Fianna Fáil and formed a coalition with Fine Gael, making John Bruton of Fine Gael Taoiseach. The coalition change is significant because it is the first time in Irish history that a new coalition formed without an intervening election.

The increasing involvement of the smaller parties in the Daíl and the declining strength of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael made such an event possible.

The National Question

The controversy that has defined Ireland since the inception of the Irish Free State has been the “national question”: whether or not to accept the treaty with Britain that partitioned Northern Ireland from the Free State. The treaty was approved in 1921 and the formal transfer of power occurred in 1922. The party that would evolve into Fianna Fáil was against the treaty, the party that would become Fine Gael was in favor of the treaty, and Labour was unable to make a significant contribution to the issue. As the most important issue in Irish politics was being discussed, Labour sat on the sidelines as it later would during the Troubles in 1968 and during the negotiation of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998.

As a party dedicated to the rights of workers, Labour has refused to play a role in the nationalist question. Instead, the party viewed the national questions as an issue that had little to do with “matters of immediate concern to its working class constituency.” (Mair, p. 133) Parties to the left of center traditionally view issues on a class basis and not on a nationalist basis; they see the world with a socio-economic view instead of from a nationalistic perspective. However, the national question was the single most important issue at the start of the Irish Free State. A party that did not address the question of Northern Ireland could not compete, and this has pushed Labour into the second tier of Irish politics. (Mair, p. 133) Labour’s inability to speak in terms of the nationalist argument pushed its constituency to embrace the nationalist rhetoric of Eamon de Valera

and Fianna Fáil. According to Michael Gallagher, “For as long as Ireland is politically divided Fianna Fáil will have something to stand for, a cause far more inspiring than either of the other main parties can offer, and will continue to win votes which in other circumstances would go to Labour.” (Allen, p. 8) This point is remarkable when looking at the election statistics: Fianna Fáil has never received less than 40 percent of the skilled and unskilled working classes, Labour’s core constituency. (Allen, p. 2)

Labour and the Catholic Church

A significant hindrance to the development of the Labour Party has been the strong presence of the Catholic Church in Ireland. John Coakley notes that “nationalist and Catholic elements in Irish culture encourage a conservative outlook.” (Holmes, p. 193) Nearly all the center-left parties in Europe have embraced socialism in some form. However, the Catholic Church’s adverse opinion of socialism combined with the political strength of the Church in Ireland prevented socialism from ever leaving the realm of the political taboo. The inability of the Labour Party to actively embrace at least some mild socialist principles has prevented the party from ever breaking free of the mold of Irish political parties. The seemingly paradoxical relationship between socialism and Catholic nationalism played a large role in preventing the Labour Party’s success.

The Catholic Church in Ireland plays a strong role in all aspects of Irish life, and political life is no exception. According to Jean Blanchard, author of *The Church in Contemporary Ireland*, “The Bishops of Ireland appear to have more power, in practice, than those of any other country in the world. As the natural outcome of a long historical tradition...a member of the congregation listens more readily to his Bishop than he does,

for instance, to his deputy.” (As quoted in Chubb, p. 101) The political clout of the Catholic Church is extremely visible within Labour Party itself. As a Labour Party leader stated in 1953, “I am an Irishman second; I am a Catholic first...If the Hierarchy gives me any direction with regard to Catholic social teaching or Catholic moral teaching, I accept without qualification in all respects the teaching of...the Church to which I belong.” (Chubb, p. 103) Given such strong religious sentiment, it is not surprising that the Labour Party, with pressure from the Church, removed the phrase “Worker’s Republic” from the party constitution in 1939. (Chubb, p. 101) The willingness of the Labour Party to bend to the will of the Church demonstrates the Church’s political power.

A schism within the Labour Party in 1944 clearly indicates the problem that the party had with the double standard of adhering to the principles of the party without going too far to the left and alienating the Church. The Labour Party split into two factions, with one retaining the same name and another calling itself the National Labour Party (NLP). The cause of the split was whether to allow a former Irish Communist Party member, Jim Larkin, to run for a seat in the Dáil. (Allen, p. 79) The ITGWU (Irish Transport and General Workers Union), Ireland’s largest trade union, left the Labour Party to form the NLP on grounds that the Labour Party had permitted communist influences to infiltrate the party and that the party would be unable to ever recover. (Allen, p. 79) Afraid to be accused of embracing communist elements, Labour responded to the NLP’s splintering by ordering a McCarthy-style purging of the party. Rather than remain true to the mild socialist principles of the party’s doctrine, the Labour Party tried to match the level of the NLP’s “Catholic nationalism,” which included the expulsion of six party members (Allen, p. 80)

The NLP and the Labour Party would reconcile eventually in 1950, but Labour's inability to maintain a coherent message in the face of fear of reprisals from the Catholic Church and its supporters underscores the fine line that Labour had to walk between leftist ideology and Irish nationalism. The strength of the Church pushed the party far enough to the right that it was in many ways indistinguishable from the center-right parties. It is possible that a stronger embrace of socialism would have never been popular in Ireland, but it is also clear that the Labour Party's bland version of Irish socialism never became very popular either.

However, in recent years the political power of the Catholic Church has been in decline as exemplified by more open debates regarding birth control and abortion. The decline in political power of the Church and its conservative view of social policy could allow the parties of the left to procure more support than they could previously.

Labour's Working Class Constituency

As is the case of nearly all center-left parties, the Labour Party depends on the support of labor unions for its success. However, Ireland's predominately agrarian economy made that constituency very small. The Labour Party completely dedicated itself to industrial related issues which did not result in a constituency large enough for a significant political base. The number of people in Ireland involved in non-agrarian pursuits did not even rise above 50 percent until the late 1950's. (Coakley, "Society and Political Culture," p. 38) In order to achieve political success, Labour needed to attract a constituency larger than just the industrial working class. Its failure to produce a broader membership contributed to its inability to compete with Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael.

However, not only is Labour's core constituency small, but Fianna Fail has always targeted and won a significant portion of the working class vote total. When Eamon de Valera formed Fianna Fail in 1926 from a split within Sinn Fein, he specifically targeted the poor and disenfranchised of the industrial class. He was no longer only interested in only exploiting Fianna Fail's success with the national question; he was now inclined to form a populist base with both economic and nationalistic grounds. He said that he wanted Fianna Fail to "take an effective part in improving the social and material conditions of the people." (Allen, p. 15) He would achieve this aim by appealing to the nationalistic urges of Labour's core constituency, the working class. Labour made the traditional center-left argument that Irish poverty was a by-product of the capitalist system and that the wealthy were to blame for the plight of the poor. However, de Valera made the much more exciting nationalist argument that the wealthy were not to blame for Ireland's poor; it was instead the British who were the culprits.

Looking away from the economic model put forward by Labour, de Valera wanted what he described as a "a program for the national good, not a class programme." (Allen, p. 18) He needed to get away from potential class cleavages in order to steal Labour's support. He argued that the British were the cause of Irish poverty, and he stated that he wanted a program of developing Irish industries "that minister to the needs of the people and...protect them by adequate tariffs." (Allen, p.16) The nationalistic argument was exactly what the impoverished Irish wanted to hear, and de Valera's resulting success was considerable. Fianna Fail has never taken less than 40 percent of the working class vote, and Fianna Fail would be the dominant party in Irish politics for

the next seventy years. The result of Fianna Fáil's success among the working class helped prevent any future success of Labour.

Irish Politics in the Last Twenty Years

In the last twenty years, the diminishing power of the two main parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, has changed the landscape of Irish parties. Since the middle 1960's, the two major parties would consistently get a combined share of more than 80 percent of the total first preference votes. However, that percentage has consistently declined through the 1980's, and the combined vote total for Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael was 63.6 percent in 1992 and 67.2 percent in 1997. (Coakley and Gallagher, Appendix 2)

The result of the fall of the vote shares of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael has not been a rise in Labour's vote share (with the exception of 1992), but rather an increase in the vote share of small parties such as the Progressive Democrats, the Democratic Left, and Sinn Féin. The decline of Fianna Fáil's vote share has also precipitated a movement towards coalition governments, as demonstrated in all of the governments of the 1990's. The results of the 1989 election pushed Fianna Fáil into a coalition with the Progressive Democrats. Fianna Fáil also formed a coalition in with Labour in 1992 which lasted until 1993 when Labour dissolved the coalition and entered into a government with Fine Gael, a coalition that stayed together until the 1997 election. Following the 1997 election, Fianna Fáil entered into a coalition with the Progressive Democrats.

Present Problems for the Labour Party

Given Ireland's recent economic advancement, nearly all political parties, with the notable exception of Sinn Fein, have rushed to embrace free trade and involvement with the European Union. The structural funds that the European Union has sent to Eire as well as the foreign direct investment that membership in the EU has brought make it very difficult for the Labour Party to make an anti-free trade argument as it did for so many years. The economic success that Ireland has experienced makes criticizing economic policy very difficult. Labour's old position had been that both membership in the EU and free trade hurt the Irish worker, but that position is difficult to maintain when the unemployment rate has reached an all-time low and the GDP continues to grow. As a result of Ireland's economic growth, Labour's economic policy has become identical to that of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. Labour's platform had always been a solely economic one; and now that that its platform is identical to those of the other parties with respect to trade and EU policy, a decline in Labour's standing has resulted since the 1992 election.

However, in 1992 Labour had gained more seats in the Daíl than ever before and had received more than double its first preference vote total compared to 1989. (Mair, p. 147) Labour's strongest showing since 1922 had given the party 33 seats in the Daíl, and the party then joined with Fine Gael to form the coalition government. (Nealon, 1993, p. 6) However, Labour's success would not continue. The party had a dismal showing only five years later in the 1997 election when it only secured 17 seats in the Daíl. (Nealon, 1997, p. 6) Labour's decline could be attributed to the platform changes that it made between 1992 and 1997.

The resignation of Labour Party head Dick Spring, the deputy Taoiseach under the coalition governments between 1992 and 1997, has left the Labour Party with no clear leadership. Spring was by all accounts a skillful leader and was a big reason for the Labour Party's success in 1992. His absence has caused problems for Labour since the 1997 election.

However, Labour's performance in the next election may be improved by its absorbing the Democratic Left (DL), a party to the left of Labour which had strong representation among Dublin's blue-collar workers. (Holmes, p. 192) The merger formally took place in January of 1999 and should assist the Labour Party in surpassing its 1997 performance in the 2001 elections. Assuming that nearly all of the Democratic Left's supporters will support the combined Labour-Democratic Left party, the merger would give Labour roughly 2.5 percent more of the first preference votes and about four more seats in the Daíl. (Nealon, 1997, p. 6)

Will There Be a New Representative of the Left?

With Labour's abandonment of its traditionally pro-worker stances, Sinn Fein remains the only anti-Europe and anti-free-trade party in Ireland. A significant number of unskilled workers who used to work in labor-intensive areas are unable to find employment in Ireland's new technology-based economy. These unemployed workers have traditionally looked to Labour to defend their interests, but Labour's support among such constituents is declining with the movement of Labour to a pro-EU, pro free-trade platform. Thanks to Labour's switch, some of these disenfranchised voters voted for

Sinn Fein, as demonstrated by its gaining a seat in 1997 compared to having no seats in 1992. (Nealon, 1997, p. 6 and Nealon, 1993, p. 6)

The success of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael is assured for as long as Ireland's economy continues to grow. However, if the economy should ever worsen, Labour and possibly some other parties as well may change their stances on the EU and free trade. Sinn Fein would have the most to gain from any economic downturn because they will be able to blame Irish trade policy for the decline. If Sinn Fein softens its nationalist rhetoric, it is not inconceivable that it could pick up a few more seats in the next election and continue to erode Labour's traditional position of representative of the working class. Of course, Sinn Fein's giving up its nationalist rhetoric would be a major departure from the established platform of the party; but if it did alter its position even moderately, the political dividends could be significant. The move of Labour to the middle creates a vacuum on the left, however small it may be in Irish politics; Sinn Fein could move into it, thus altering the Irish political landscape.

Conclusion

The basic reason that Ireland's political party structure does not look like that of the rest of Western Europe is that the Irish experience in the development of political institutions is much different. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael each owe their origins and their subsequent success to the conflict over the national question. However, on the reverse side, Labour can trace its lack of success to its inability to address the "national question" adequately. Labour's continued failure can also be attributed to Ireland's conservative

social environment and Labour's attractiveness to only a small portion of the Irish population.

However, with the recent political and social changes in Ireland, the prospects for the Irish left may be getting better. The strength of the Catholic Church is diminishing, as is the stranglehold of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael on the Irish electorate. But the parties of the Irish left must avoid moving too far to the middle where they would be swallowed up by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. The opportunity for the success of the Irish left exists only if it can provide a clear alternative to the policies of the two major Irish political parties.

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Abstract

The political party systems of nearly all Western European countries consist of a center-right party against a center-left party. However, in Ireland two center-right parties compete for power with very little competition from any parties left of center. In this article the author explains why the Irish left has been so weak in the past and what its prospects are for the future.

Biography

Nick Strasser graduated with high honors from Lehigh University in June 2001 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in international relations. While at Lehigh, he served as president of the Lehigh College Democrats for two years. He also served as a tutor-mentor in the STAR Academy tutoring program and as a Student Ambassador with the Office of Admissions. Nick was a Roy Eckardt College Scholar and a member of Phi Eta Sigma, Phi Beta Delta, and Phi Beta Kappa Honor Societies. He was also selected for *Who's Who Among Students in America's Colleges and Universities 2000-2001*. A cadet in Lehigh's Army ROTC program, he was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the United States Army in June 2001. Nick is currently attending Temple University's Beasley School of Law in Philadelphia, PA.