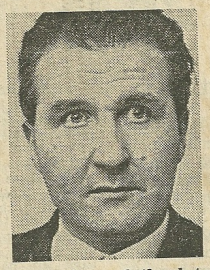
Birth of the party

by T. P. O'Neill



Biographer of the late Mr. de Valera and Lecturer in History, UCG.

IT IS impossible to understand the reasons for the establishment of Fianna Fáil in May 1926 without looking backwards to the history of the preceding few years.

The high hopes of 1919 and 1920 foundered on the Treaty of 1921. The united national movement of Sinn Fein, which dominated the political scene in the period, was split into pro-Treaty and anti-Treaty factions and the bitterness spilled over into Civil War in 1922 and 1923.

It was in the prison camps of that Civil War that the foundations of the political future of the anti-Treaty movement were laid. Lectures were organised by the prisoners on how proportional representation worked, on publicity and canvassing and on the various aspects of party organisation. They were being trained to transfer the Republican struggle to the political field.

One of the major difficulties, however, lay in the fact that the Sinn Fein party which emerged from the Civil War had become atrophied in a rigidity which hampered its development. The policy of abstention from the Free State legislature was being made an issue of principle. De Valera's view was put in a letter to Mary MacSweeney in August 1923:

"If the Oath were removed, to my mind the question of going in or remaining out would be a matter purely of tactics and expediency, and had best be left to be decided either by a convention or by the elected members. Circumstances will have them in a sufficent strait-jacket without our adding unnecessarily to its straitness."

In the years that followed it was the Mary MacSwiney view that took root. By the time de Valera emerged from Arbour Hill in the summer of 1924 the Sinn Fein party had taken up a rigid position. In vain did de Valera try to bring it back to a more realistic attitude.

Events at the end of 1925, the leaking of the Boundary Commission Report and the consequent consternation and disappointment at the outcome of the much vaunted boundary clause of the Treaty, found Sinn Fein in no position to offer an effective opposition. Indeed the party was unable to capitalise on the affair. As de Valera told Austin Ford, editor of the **Irish World** in New York, it was clear—

"That to remain as we were meant ultimate extinction as an effective political force—reduced to some such position as that of the French monarchists."

The Republican opposition could easily have gone that way. To make a final effort to stem this development de Valera put a resolution to a special Ardfheis Sinn Fein in March 1926, hoping thereby to make it possible for elected deputies to take their seats in the Dail if no oath of allegiance were imposed.

It was an unavailing effort defeated by a narrow majority. De Valera resigned from Sinn Fein and left.

He was followed by a substantial number of others — perhaps most notable among them Sean Lemass. Lemass had already won a by-election in Dublin city. He was to take the initiative which led to the formation of a new political party. First of all he gathered together a committee of those who had supported de Valera's policy at the Sinn Fein Ardfheis.

Gradually the new movement took shape. De Valera was not in attendance at the first meetings. The organisation was growing, however, round him and his policies. The original title, Republican Party, gave way, under de Valera's guidance to the more subtle Fianna Fail—an ancient Irish name which carried with it nuances of a more recent past.

If Lemass was the driving genius there was no doubt that de Valera was the key figure.

In the way in which the Fianna Fail party grew de Velera established himself in an unchallengeable position. He had not wasted the years in the wilderness. He was the leader with a policy and those who joined Fianna Fail did so in that knowledge. No other leader of the party could ever be in such a strong position of leadership.

At the very first public meeting of Fianna Fail, the inaugural meeting held in the La Scala Theatre 50 years ago, de Valera was still insisting that he was there "simply as a private" but his speech was no private's speech. He set out a policy for national advance to freedom—the isolation of the oath of allegiance as the first symbol of foreign supremacy to be destroyed.

Once it was gone he could see ahead promising lines for a further advance. He had ideas for economic development to improve social and material conditions. Basically it all depended on the people who had, such a short time before been riven by Civil War.

"The problem is", he said, "how to re-unite them and make their desire for independence effective". It was to do that that his policy was developed.

Fianna Fail had many advantages at its inception — willing workers throughout the state who had forged their loyalty in the prison camps. Enthusiasts like Gerry Boland, Dr. Jim Ryan, Sean MacEntee (interviewed elsewhere) Countess Markieviez, Paddy Ruttledge, Frank Aiken, Sean T. O'Kelly and a host of other lesser-known names were to gather together the support of Dublin and of the countryside.

By November 1926, the first Fianna Fail Ardfheis was called and there de Valera was elected to his first office in the party—President. It is notable that six of the 15 executive members elected that day were women.

The new party was committing itself to a policy but not tying itself too rigidly. "To pledge ourselves at this distance ahead as to every step we shall take, and the moment we shall take it, would be absurd", warned de Valera.

The first task, after the initial organising throughout Ireland had begun; was the preparation for a general election. The imminence of this, in fact, called for urgent and extended effort in forming Comhairli Dailceantair and local cumainn. The party had already a solid organisation behind it by the time the election came in June 1927.

While it might initially be expected that this general election would be fought between Fianna Fail and the Government party, Cumann na nGaedheal, in fact this was not really so. It was primarily to be a clarification as to which party would represent Republican voters, Sinn Fein or its new rival.

Would the policy of de Valera carry the day? Of the outgoing Republican deputies 23 had stayed with Sinn Fein. Twenty-two had joined Fianna Fail. As a result of the election Fianna Fail had 44 deputies returned; Sinn Fein was reduced to 5.

In the second election that year, in September, Sinn Fein failed to enter the contest while Fianna Fail increased its first preference votes from 300,000 to 412,000 and won, at the same time 57 seats to the Government party's 62. Sinn Fein had been wiped out almost as completely as it had done to the Irish Parliamentary Party in 1918. The challenge now lay between Fianna Fail and Cumann na nGaedheal.

The next five years were to be ones for consolidation of the Fianna Fail organisation—a task which was to play a great part in the party's future success. The barrier of the oath had been surmounted between the two general elections in a manner which was always to rouse criticism from opponents but which in fact won ballot box approval.

Those years were to see the establishment of **The Irish Press.** It was to break down a communication wall erected by a hostile national press and help to pave the way for the electoral success which brought Fianna Fail to office in 1932.

It was the first and only party to get over half a million first preference votes in Ireland and it was never to get less than that number. Indeed in many of the elections over the following four decades it was to get the support of over 600,000 voters.

The first Fianna Fail government included, of course de Valera as head and such notable ministers as S. T. O'Kelly, in Local Government and as vice president, Dr. Ryan in Agriculture, Frank Aiken in Defence, Sean MacEntee in Finance, T. O Deirg in Education and P. J. Ruttledge in Lands—all names to be long associated with the government of the State.

In ways the most remarkable of them was in Industry and Commerce, Sean Lemass. He was to hold that portfolio for a total of 22 years and was never to be out of that Department in any Fianna Fail administration until he became Taoiseach in succession to de Valera in 1959. In the economic sphere he was to leave his mark on modern Ireland in a distinctive way. He was an important figure who never sought to rival his leader. Indeed the remarkable feature of all these men was their loyalty to de Valera.

The Labour Party supported the Fianna Fail government of 1932, and indeed without its support it could not have been elected as no party had an overall majority. The taking of office was to start an era of assertion of independence, beginning with the removal of the oath of allegiance and culminating in the new Constitution passed by plebiscite in 1937. It was an era of depression made worse by British economic sanctions aimed to prevent the movement to independence.

Within a remarkably short few years the Treaty arrangements were dismantled and the final dissolution of that instrument came with the Anglo-Irish agreement of 1938.

Without fanfares great progress had been made. The war years were to show how much had been achived. Ireland's neutrality was in fact something more than a standing aside from a world conflict. It was an assertion of the freedom of the State and it was pursued with all the skill and determination of the leader of Fianna Fail, de Valera, who was both Taoiseach and Minister for External Affairs.

In this period new political challenges were to emerge in Clann na Talun and Clann na Poblachta and in 1948 a coalition between these and other opposition parties brought about the end of the first 16 years of Fianna Fail power.

Inter-party governments between 1948 and 1951 and from 1954 to 1957 were to be but intermissions in an era of Fianna Fail dominance. This period did not see great contributions to the development of Irish politics except in one sphere —that of Church-State relations. This handling of the difficulties in this area under the guidance of Eamon de Valera was tactful and prim.

De Valera's long era of leadership was, however, already drawing to a close. In the last election he led Fianna Fail to the greatest victory it ever achieved—78 of 147 seats in the Dail.

In 1959 de Valera resigned from the presidency of Fianna Fail and leadership of the government and was elected President of Ireland. His successor was Sean Lemass under whose leadership new economic horizons were opened by the 1960s. He was also to succeed in opening lines of communication with Captain Terence O'Neill, leader of the Northern Ireland government.

There was new hope of normalising relations between Irishmen within Ireland. The Fianna Fail party supported Lemass in his activities in which he made contacts in Belfast which had eluded his predecessor. The aim of the party regarding reunification had hirtherto made little progress.

The 1960's were not, however, to meet the political needs of a Northern Ireland minority long discriminated against. It was the slowness of progress that brought about the explosion of the Civil Rights campaign — an outbreak which de Valera foretold as long ago as 1938 when talking to Neville Chamberlain, the British Prime Minister.

The troubles in the north-east of this island had repercussions south of the border. There was considerable heart-searching. The leader of Fianna Fail, Jack Lynch, who had succeeded Sean Lemass in 1966, won a great electoral victory in 1969.

Lynch became the only Irish leader, apart from de Valera, to lead a party to an overall majority since the foundation of the State. The disturbances and the heart-searching raised difficulties for his government. It led to differences in the Cabinet and consequent resignations and demotions.

One might have expected all of this to cause a rift in Fianna Fail.. In fact it did not erode the support of the party. In the 1973 general election Fianna Fail received more first preference votes than it had got in any election since 1938. Those votes were not reflected in electoral victory largely because of the unity of an alliance between the opposition parties:

Fianna Fail was out of office again after a second 16-year term of office. Yet it remained the largest single party, with its public support as strong as ever.