

INTRODUCTION

It was May 1978. Garret FitzGerald looked up to where his hand was waving, all by itself as it were, to the cheering Ard-Fheis crowd. He wanted to disown the hand – you knew that by the smile of acute embarrassment on his face – but the Fine Gael handlers had insisted that their new and popular leader must wave to his adoring public. FitzGerald hated it.

He hated the deification of the leader, hated being carried shoulder high through unthinking, enthusiastic supporters, hated being an object of admiration whose form he couldn't always dictate. But he did it because he knew this was the price a man of ideas had to pay for power. By the late 1970s, the era of the presidential leader had begun. For thirty years it has shaped the way party politics is conducted in this country. If this book is largely about party leaders, that's why.

Blame some of it on Séamus Brennan. As a young Fianna Fáil general secretary, he was charged with helping to ensure that Jack Lynch won the 1977 election. So he spent two months with the Democratic campaign in the US to pick up some tips from the 1976 Carter *v* Ford Presidential race.

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What he saw was the future style Irish electioneering must take, shaped for an age of television and consumerism.

He came back with plans for giant posters, campaign battlebuses, TV ads. He persuaded Jack Lynch to challenge Liam Cosgrave to a TV election debate. Cosgrave refused, saying it was a gimmick but Fianna Fáil got all the right headlines. Singer Colm Wilkinson recorded an election song, 'Your Kind of Country'. It was banned after a week by RTÉ, one way of ensuring that everyone wanted to hear it. The same slogan appeared on thousands of party T-shirts. Everyone wanted one – it was hot that summer. An exasperated Des O'Malley rang Brennan from Limerick asking: 'Has the whole place gone mad? There's a crowd of nuns out here looking for forty T-shirts!'

Election songs, party hats, balloons – these were all the tricks used by advertisers to sell a commercial product – in this case, the candidate. For this sort of mass publicity campaign in a television age, most policy messages were too complicated, too confusing. You needed a single product with easy brand recognition. It was simple. You marketed the leader.

If, that was, you had a leader who was marketable. Jack Lynch was fine. He was already a sporting hero, and likely to appeal to a wide electorate including the large number of youngsters voting in 1977 when the voting age was lowered to eighteen. Lynch also suited an age which was moving away from megaphones and chapel-gate meetings. Ireland's public debate now happened on the national television

service which had expanded and moved from black and white to colour, and people had got used to the shorter, feel-good messages of commercial advertising. Lynch's avuncular, pipe-smoking presence suited the more intimate atmosphere of a television studio. People watching from their armchairs at home felt reassured.

The same couldn't be said for his political rival and Taoiseach since 1973, Liam Cosgrave. On the hustings, there was no better man to belt out a rousing speech, to call up the tribal loyalties. But Cosgrave's bristly moustache and his stiff military bearing looked out of place on television. He was uneasy with the informal style of television interviewing and refused to allow any intrusion into his private life. He avoided the lime-light as much as he could and let the many stars in his cabinet shine instead. He belonged to another age.

Cosgrave was the last of the non-presidential leaders. Since then, politics has been all about selling the leader, with slogans like 'Bring Back Jack', 'Let Garret Lead the Way', 'Dessie Can Do It' and 'Arise and follow Charlie' – and the lines that Young Fine Gael are already using to sell Enda Kenny give a foretaste of the next election: T-shirts saying 'I'm with Enda', and banners claiming somewhat blasphemously, 'In Enda we Trust'.

On Charlie Haughey's election campaigns, they used to give out bottles of 'Charlie' perfume. They're a bit more sophisticated nowadays but the tracking of the leaders' popularity ratings is as important in political polling now as is the position of the parties. Party fortunes depend on the

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leaders, and when they lose elections they're dropped – look at the serial regicide in Fine Gael and the Tory Party. Whereas when they win, as our Bert knows, they survive.

And these days they have to fight for every vote. Tribal loyalties are fading fast and people don't vote party so much any more. There's much less inertia selling when competition breaks down the old loyalties, as the Irish banks have now discovered. Political leaders have to trawl for every transfer, from every quarter. Fianna Fáil TDs who instructed their supporters for years to vote only the party ticket, are now writing to known Fine Gael voters, asking humbly to be considered for a second or third preference. Times have changed.

In this tough market, the leader has to have the widest possible appeal and the simplest message. As Fine Gael's canny Strategy Review Group report pointed out in 2003, 'those parties who add the largest proportion of the least politically conscious to their already traditional vote, win elections.' On the mass media, leaders compete with every other product and every other voice. Increasingly, party handlers are pushing the leaders away from harder-edged current affairs programmes and on to entertainment and chat-shows. Here they try to set up a rapport with viewers, talking about their hobbies, their childhood memories, their personal lives – in other words selling themselves and, in the process, the party, reinforcing the brand.

The selling goes on all the time, during and in between elections, and image is everything. There's an increasing

concentration on presentation, on clothes, on make-up for television (and not a bald man in sight because it's true, as Hillary Clinton once told Yale students: hair matters in politics). Bertie's had an elocution teacher working on his 'th's' – not too much, just enough to keep middle-class voters from wincing; Enda Kenny has been tutored to sound more decisive – not less nice, just more decisive.

Of course, there's a price to be paid for a presidential system where all the power and attention goes to the party leader, where the leader dominates the media and the coverage of parliament. Increasingly, ordinary backbenchers find themselves dealt out of the game. Squeezed out of local government by the ending of the dual mandate, the abolition of the health boards, they find that their role in parliament has been reduced and bypassed by the Partnership Process, and that the presidential leader system leaves them little chance to make their mark. They have to fall in behind the brand. The only muscle they have is their power to change the leader and they flex it every so often as a reminder, particularly when they judge that the leader's performance is putting their seats in danger.

All they can hope now is that the leader has got it right, as they burrow down in their constituencies and focus on the election. For the rest of us, it will all boil down to a choice between two men as head of government, and it's a measure of how far Enda Kenny has come in four years that there is a genuine choice: Bertie or Enda, who do we trust?

Politicians live from one election to the next and the

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pieces in this book and its companion volume, *Politicians and Other Animals*, do the same, covering a period between the general election of 2002 and the forthcoming election of 2007. They are mainly, but not all political. They track the rise and fall in party fortunes, in individual careers, but most of all they look at leaders – past present and future. What do we know about them? What shaped them? Can we trust them?

Read on.