

IT'S MY PARTY



The One Road

I had a great aunt, the youngest of four sisters, who lived in a staunchly Fine Gael household. She was a gentle person, and we feared for her when her strong-minded older sister died, leaving her alone in her late seventies. My father drove her to Mass the Sunday following the funeral and afterwards he offered to buy her the paper. 'I'll get it myself,' declared Aunt Nan, stepping down from the horse and trap. Minutes later she emerged from the local newsagent triumphant, waving the *Sunday Press*. After fifty years, Aunt Nan had finally come out – she was an ardent supporter of Fianna Fáil.

She made the best of the years left to her. She learned Irish, wore her Fáinne, wrote to us in Irish and passionately supported the party. And that assertive identity, that public declaration of allegiance, is very typically Fianna Fáil. Traditionally, Fine Gaelers preferred the Masonic signal and the quiet word. But Fianna Fáilers always took a public pride in the party badge. And they had their own world: their own newspaper, the *Irish Press*; their own language because, after all, they made it clear that they owned the Irish language; their own Trinity – God, Patrick Pearse and de Valera – indeed anything to do with de Valera was sacred. One friend told me her parents were especially overjoyed when her brother joined the Holy Ghost Fathers, because that was the order which educated Dev.

Fianna Fáil always regarded members of other parties as not properly Irish or at best tepidly Irish. Fianna Fáil's aim was to be more Irish than anybody and since that meant it had to be more Catholic and more suspicious of foreign influences, well, it was all that too. And Fianna Fáilers are still more Catholic (watch them

make the sign of the cross at Dáil prayers), more nationalist, more populist, than any other major party, though if the Irish people change, well, they'll accommodate that as well. All in all, there is a ruthless pragmatism about them which may well stem from their military past.

They make a religion of being 'ordinary', of belonging to the people, the *gnáth-daoine*. They snigger at plummy accents, or social pretensions, and even the increasing numbers of lawyers, doctors, teachers and accountants who pepper their ranks are expected to slum it with everybody else. In Fianna Fáil, everyone serves their time. There are few examples, apart from Martin O'Donoghue, of new deputies being appointed to cabinet, or of deputies joining the cabinet before they have served as junior ministers.

They have also pulled off the extraordinary trick, despite having been in power twice as much as any other party, of portraying themselves as the underdogs, the outsiders. They feel they get a raw deal from the establishment media. They complain that RTÉ and *The Irish Times* are full of middle-class leftwingers who look down on Fianna Fáil. They complain that Independent Newspapers is full of middle-class right-wingers who look down on Fianna Fáil. And this from a party whose parliamentarians are now predominantly middle-class university graduates. With all the power they have, they still manage to present themselves as victims.

Fianna Fáil remains the most successful political party in modern Irish history and, despite the decline in its vote (as bad in the last two general elections as ever recorded, though nothing like the catastrophic collapse in Fine Gael's), a joint study by TCD's and UCD's Departments of Politics after the last general election showed three vital trends:

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- Fianna Fáil retains better voter-loyalty down the generations than any other party.
- While both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael retain the support of church-going, GAA-supporting country people, Fianna Fáil isn't suffering anything like the decline Fine Gael has suffered among young, urban, non-church-going, non-GAA-supporting voters.
- Fianna Fáil transfers less generously than do other parties but it, on the other hand, benefits from transfers and has recently started actively to canvass third and fourth transfers from known supporters of other parties.

Fianna Fáil also manages and spreads the vote better than anyone else. All these factors helps it to arrest decline, helped by the fact, of course, that so far it faces no credible threat from the opposition.

But what exactly does Fianna Fáil stand for? Well, it could be said that all great catch-all parties stand for relatively nothing – that's how they become great catch-all parties. But two things Fianna Fáil has always tried to embody:

The first is the promise of material success, and every Fianna Fáil leader including de Valera promised that. Despite his liking for maidens at rural crossroads, he started the process of industrialisation that Fianna Fáil is still pursuing. Fianna Fáil's slogan in the 1938 election was 'Speed the plough, speed the wheels', backing not just the development of tillage farming but industrialisation too. Dev may have wrapped his policies up to look like what the *Irish Press* in the thirties praised as 'Christianity turned into economics', but as historian and political commentator Professor Joe Lee puts it, you 'talk Christ and think money'.

Fianna Fáil knows that people may protest loudly about wanting better services, but in the end will that decide the way they vote? One senior Fianna Fáiler put it to me this way, talking about

the next general election: 'People will talk to their accountants – and then they'll decide how to vote.' Which is fine, of course, for those who have accountants.

The other quality Fianna Fáil stands for is an almost military-style discipline, a hangover perhaps from the old soldiers who founded the party. The party songs are soldiers' songs:

*Legion of the Rearguard, answering Ireland's call,
Hark, their martial tramp is heard from Cork to Donegal,
Tone and Emmet guide you, though your task be hard,
De Valera leads you, soldiers of the Legion of the Rearguard.*

And another favourite:

We're on the one road, swinging along, singing a soldier's song.

See them at Bodenstown, or Arbour Hill, or at the annual Featherbed Mountain graveside commemoration for Noel Lemass, who was killed in the Civil War. Fianna Fáilers stand to attention, chests stuck out, like soldiers on parade. No other party does that, except for Sinn Féin.

That's why the party is losing its way at the moment. Spending cuts have replaced Fianna Fáil's traditional promises of material success and, maybe more important internally, that legendary discipline has broken down. Under any other Taoiseach, mutineers on the Hanly report would be out of the cabinet and backbenchers would be at once warned against rebellion, and heartened by the possibility of promotion. If they judge that nothing will change, they might as well kick over the traces locally on Hanly, on incinerators, on stem-cell research, on anything that threatens their seats.

'Bertie won't confront,' one Fianna Fáiler has been heard to say, 'and he won't defend. I mean, his use of the third-person plural in

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relation to government decisions is just masterly. When people complain about a decision his government has made he says: “Did they do that to you, love? Is that what they did?”

‘It’s about time,’ said another deputy, ‘that he behaved as though he’s responsible for the country. The people who vote for us expect, at the very least, competent government.’

Fianna Fáil, more than any other party, believes in the cult of leader, but Bertie has made a career out of not leading. He lets his ministers decide and then take the blame. People who demand that he be forthright and decisive miss the point: for politicians like Bertie the trick is to put off decisions for as long as possible. That way you can avoid the consequences for as long as possible.

But what Bertie stands for is even more central to Fianna Fáil’s culture. He called it his code of ethics and he explained it succinctly in the Dáil to the Opposition Leader: ‘Deputy Kenny, you and I are around a long time. The code of ethics here is that people get in here, and try to stay in here.’ Winning power and keeping it – now that’s everything you need to know about Fianna Fáil.