In the last two years, a series of events has occurred which, taken together, seemed to signify developments of such importance that even those observers of Irish politics most prone to relish or lament its apparent barren continuities have begun to contemplate the possibility of a radical opening of perspectives. Most attention has inevitably focused on initiatives concerning Northern Ireland, from the joint Declaration agreed by the British and Irish prime ministers on 15 December 1993, responding to unprecedented revisionist thinking amongst the leadership of the republican movement, through to the IRA’s cessation of hostilities announced on 31 August 1994, after a relentless ‘armed struggle’ against the British state for over twenty years.

Discussion of Irish politics in both Ireland and Britain has suffered from its narrow foci—on developments in Northern Ireland, on inter-governmental manoeuvring, and most breathlessly on the cryptic and often contradictory
statements by leading members of Sinn Fein. A political organization linked to a paramilitary force that can wreak devastation in the City of London is clearly going to command more attention than its unspectacular electoral performance would otherwise warrant. Nevertheless, no serious discussion of the current signs of a ‘thaw’ in militant nationalism’s rigidified postures can ignore an earlier event which indicated a new constellation of political forces in the southern state without which the Sinn Fein rethinking is incomprehensible.

This was the unprecedented performance of the Irish Labour Party in the general election of November 1992, in which it more than doubled its representation in the national parliament. That a national vote of 19.3 per cent should have generated such euphoria on the Irish Left was ironic comment on a historical experience which Peter Mair has summarized as ‘the striking electoral debility of class-based, left wing parties’. Five years before the party had won a miserable 6.4 per cent and there appeared to be a real danger that it would be supplanted by the relatively new Workers’ Party. The latter had emerged out of an earlier division in the republican movement and created a small but growing constituency as a leftist challenge to a Labour Party marked by an ideological minimalism symbolized by its regular participation in coalition government with Fine Gael, a party whose core support lay in the rural bourgeoisie. Labour’s recent success does little to detract from Mair’s assessment; its niche among young urbanites was astutely cultivated on the commodities of ‘morality’ and ‘principle’ cutting across class cleavage. This is unlikely to signal the realignment urged by the Left since the 1960s but it is clear that the juxtaposition of fiscal crisis, a secularizing agenda, and decomposition of traditional political culture has opened up the possibility that Labour could occupy a role in almost any future government.

The Legacy of the Irish Revolution

Like the hitherto predominant party in Irish politics, Fianna Fail, Fine Gael had its roots in the broad nationalist front, Sinn Fein, which had led the politico-military campaign that destroyed British rule in the bulk of the island between 1919 and 1921. The Treaty settlement with England split Sinn Fein and caused the Civil War out of which the ancestors of Fine Gael emerged as the victors in 1923. The vanquished were to split further into a radical populist party, Fianna Fail, and an irreconcilable nationalist and militarist rump, Sinn Fein and the IRA, who were convinced of the illegitimacy of both Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State.

Fianna Fail rose to pre-eminence through its capacity to rearticulate the powerful legacies of the nineteenth-century development of mass politics in Ireland which centred on two major cleavages—a nationalist and a Catholic mobilization against the Act of Union and its ‘internal’ manifestation, the Anglo-Irish, Protestant landlord class. The key to understanding the pervasively conservative disposition of the new state is

---

Table 1
Result of General Election, 25 November 1992

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Votes (%)</th>
<th>Seats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fianna Fail</td>
<td>39.1 (−5.1)</td>
<td>68 (−9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fine Gael</td>
<td>24.5 (−48)</td>
<td>45 (−10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour Party</td>
<td>19.3 (+9.8)</td>
<td>33 (+18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progressive Democrats</td>
<td>4.7 (−0.8)</td>
<td>10 (+4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic Left</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>4*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sinn Fein</td>
<td>1.6 (+0.4)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green Party</td>
<td>1.4 (−0.1)</td>
<td>1 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workers’ Party</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>6.0 (+2.1)</td>
<td>5 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0 (0)</td>
<td>166 (0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figures in parentheses show changes since the 1989 general election.

*In 1989, the Workers’ Party won six seats with 5.0% of the votes.

When the WP split in 1992, six TDs and the sole MEP went with the Democratic Left and one TD stayed with the Workers’ Party. The 1992 general election was the first they contested as two individual political parties.


the fact that the central class conflict expressed in nineteenth-century Irish nationalism—that between Protestant landlord and Catholic tenant—was resolved peacefully and with the assistance of the British exchequer prior to the ‘national revolution’. The ascendant social class in post-Famine Ireland was a Catholic rural bourgeoisie and in the narrative of the ‘rise of the Irish nation’ written around its interests there was no room for the registering of any conflicts or contradictions save those with English power and Protestant landlords.

When Sinn Fein replaced the Irish Parliamentary Party as the dominant political force in Catholic Ireland in the 1910s, it did so on the basis of a more militant and moralizing idiom which exploited the rebuffs the leader of the IPP, John Redmond, had received from British Liberalism. First was the acceptance by the prewar Liberal administration that Ulster Unionist resistance to the creation of a parliament in Dublin made some form of partition inevitable. Then came the formation of a Coalition government in May 1915 which included the leader of Irish Unionist resistance, Sir Edward Carson. The British execution of the leaders of the 1916 insurrection in Dublin and the subsequent threat of the extension of conscription to Ireland hastened the process of displacement.

There was, beneath this series of events, a substantive social content. By 1914 roughly two-thirds of Irish peasants had got what they wanted— their land. They no longer needed a party at Westminster to wring further reforms. Indeed, they were sometimes irritated by the Irish Party’s concessions to the rural poor. This was particularly the case for the rich cattle farmers, pejoratively known as ‘ranchers’, who capped the class structure of rural Ireland once the landlords were removed. That there was much basis for conflict between this stratum and the larger class of medium and small peasant farmers, particularly the bottom third of marginal peasants and rural labourers, was evidenced by a long history of class conflict which the nationalist narrative obliterated. There was little differentiation between the old Parliamentary Party, Sinn Fein and Fianna Fail on the sources of this conflict. All would, at various times, adopt a rhetoric of sympathy for the poorest strata of the peasantry and criticize the ‘ranchers’, but all were rigorously opposed to any agrarian struggle that threatened to disrupt national unity.

James Connolly, the only Marxist amongst the executed leaders of the 1916 insurrection, had hoped that the attainment of Home Rule would allow a class consciousness to quickly develop. The failure of this to occur in the new Irish state can partly be explained by the issue of partition, the lack of territorial completion of the national revolution, which allowed Fianna Fail to develop a vocabulary of ‘unfinished national business’. But much more powerful was the emergence of a new political culture with a stress on Catholic nationalist uniformity and homogeneity, a ‘culture of community’ with an emphasis on the uniqueness, unity and wholeness of the Irish nation, that represented a formidable obstacle to those attempting to develop a class alignment.

The key role in the construction of that culture was played by Fianna Fail whose leader Eamonn De Valera was skilled in the populist absorption of class grievances and conflicts. With its Gaelic name, its subtitle ‘The Republican Party’ and its first programmatic aim the ending of partition, it stressed down the decades the importance of territorial unity. Important though this was in maintaining its internal cohesion and electoral appeal, it impinged little on its governmental priorities which were firmly ensconced in 26 of Ireland’s 32 counties. However, what would prove ultimately much more significant in both its politics of power and of support was its ideology of development based on social harmony: of economic growth achieved with the minimum of social conflict.

The Left, composed of the Irish Labour Party and a tiny Communist organization, was characterized for much of the existence of the state by its peripherality. The Labour Party provided a pale shadow of Fianna Fail’s national/popular project—it was so besotted by the need to transcend ‘sectionalism’ that in 1930 it broke the organic links its original

---

constitutional structure had established with the unions. It gave parliamentary support to the first Fianna Fail administration in 1932 and then had increasing difficulty in differentiating itself from the predominant party’s projection of itself as a national movement which would be particularly responsive to the ‘plain people of Ireland’—Fianna Fail-speak for the small farmers and urban workers. When the limits of this initial phase of Fianna Fail radicalism were reached with the exhaustion of the potential of protectionism and land redistribution, and Fianna Fail’s grip on power developed an increasingly conservative disposition, Labour responded by an unsurprising readiness to displace a faltering and unpopular administration through coalition with a party, Fine Gael, that represented the rural bourgeoisie and had flirted with fascism in the 1930s. From its first experience of such a coalition in 1948 down to its nearly terminal embrace of the strategy in the 1982–87 government, Labour displayed a decided preference for building governmental alternatives to Fianna Fail rather than attempting to articulate a serious opposition to the cloying politics and ideologies of ‘unity’ and ‘community’. Allied in government with Fine Gael it could only mimic the Fianna Fail claim that legitimate government was to be in the interests of all sectors and classes.

Before the 1960s, Labour had no secure base of electoral support outside a number of rural constituencies where it relied on a class of agricultural labourers working on the large arable holdings that were always atypical of Irish agriculture. These rural fastnesses ensured that the party was dominated by a group of staid rural deputies whose inclinations and attitudes were little different from those of the bulk of a predominantly localistic, insularly Catholic and nationalistic legislative body. What critical thinking emerged in the period of maximum Irish isolationism—from the accession of De Valera to the end of the 1950s—came from a disenchanted republican/literary demi-monde exemplified by the group centred on the journal *The Bell*, edited by the Cork writer and sceptical ex-republican activist Sean O’Faolain. This diffident and conventional public profile was given clear expression as late as 1960 when its new leader defined its programme as ‘a form of Christian socialism. It’s a policy that provides for all classes.’ A timid, subordinated voice in the period of maximum efflorescence of the ideology of national solidarity and distinctiveness, any subsequent progress was dependent on the largely unintended effects of Fianna Fail’s own departure from its original policy dispositions.

From De Valera’s first administration to the end of the 1950s what can be termed a ‘new-old order’ was constructed in the 26-county area. The basic structures of the state apparatus and parliamentary forms were inherited, substantially unaltered, from the Union period. Fianna Fail’s implementation of the Sinn Fein ideal of autarky allowed a certain development of an import-substituting manufacturing sector. The policy included heavy

---

8 For a recent analysis of O’Faolain, see Maurice Goldring, *Pleasant the Scholar’s Life*, London 1993.
9 *The Dynamics of Irish Politics*, p. 147.
reliance on protection, exclusion of foreign capital and substantial subsidies to a newly emerging native bourgeoisie. De Valera’s own arcadian fantasy of a largely rural Ireland based on small family farms was reflected in a degree of land redistribution and associated measures which provoked the ‘Economic War’ with Britain in the mid 1930s. But the radical pretensions were limited by a pragmatic acceptance that the crucially important export of livestock to the British market would continue to be the pivotal sector of the economy. Thus despite its pronounced Anglophobia, Fianna Fail did little to alter the structural dispositions of the economy and as a result failed to challenge the social evils which the nationalist mainstream had claimed would vanish with an end to British rule—a rural order dominated by extensive agriculture with resultant high levels of unemployment, emigration and population decline. Eighteen thousand people emigrated annually between 1936 and 1946, rising to 42,000 a year between 1956 and 1961. In an important sense, therefore, the rhetorical separatism encouraged by De Valera and the associated use of state policy to emphasize a Catholic-Gaelic ethos through education, compulsory Irish, and moralistic social policies (the 1937 constitution with its ban on divorce, endorsement of Catholic teaching on women and the family, and the strict censorship of books and films) can be interpreted as a form of compensation/displacement activity for a polity and social order still so enmeshed at a range of levels with Britain, which continued to be its main market and absorber of surplus population.

In the wake of the postwar consensus in the UK, Sean Lemass, who was to succeed De Valera as leader of Fianna Fail, promoted Keynesianism, initially within an economic nationalist framework and reluctant to contemplate the liberalization of trade or the renunciation of self-sufficiency. The crisis of 1956–57, provoked by the failure of agriculture to expand exports, raise national incomes or stem unemployment and emigration, was, however, a watershed for protectionism. After a brief interlude of laissez-faire, Lemass’s 1958 ‘Programme for Economic Expansion’ jettisoned the prevailing strategy. It was highly interventionist, putting liberalization of trade, encouragement to foreign capital, and state subsidy of capital-intensive export-oriented production at the heart of economic policy. Lemass believed that economic development and social objectives, including a commitment to full employment, were unattainable without state intervention and regulation, and the politicization of the market.

Domestic conditions improved so significantly that Ireland was transformed within two decades from a traditional agricultural society with a class structure based on family property to an urban industrial society with a class structure based on skill and education opportunity. The population decline registered over the previous hundred years was

---

10 Brian Girvin, Between Two Worlds; Politics and the Economy in Independent Ireland, Dublin 1989.
reversed, and the early 1970s recorded a slight net immigration. The link between strategy and economic transformation was argued; indeed, the transmogrification was more rapid and state-inspired than in other Western societies. While these initiatives enabled Ireland to take advantage of the long wave of economic expansion experienced elsewhere—essentially to free-ride—they proved inadequate for resolving fundamental problems: little indigenous manufacturing; virtually no commercial exploitation of national resources; small-scale and inefficient agriculture; poor dispersal of public resources; and weak infrastructure. High productivity growth was unable to raise output sufficiently to permit simultaneous progress on the twin national aims of absorbing labour surplus and raising living standards.¹³ In these respects, the ‘boom’ was both short-lived and superficial. O’Malley claims that the rapid industrial growth of the 1960s and 1970s was an ‘exceptional experience . . . a temporary phenomenon . . . which eventually pass[ed]’.¹⁴

Liberalization and National Identity

Within a decade of jettisoning the economic philosophy of Sinn Fein, as Ireland prepared for membership of the Ec and an accelerating pace of social transformation, another process was initiated which even more profoundly challenged the territorial pretensions of the De Valerian project. Terence O’Neill’s failed attempt to modernize aspects of the Unionist regime in the north and the onset of the civil rights movement in 1967–68 unleashed an irresolvable crisis of the northern state out of which emerged a rejuvenated republican militarism and a new and reluctant reinvolvement of Britain in the affairs of an area which had for half a century enjoyed de facto autonomy within the UK state.¹⁵

Sean Lemass had attempted to be as iconoclastic in relation to Northern Ireland as in economic policy and to shift Fianna Fail nationalism away from its irredentist obsessions. As a natural concomitant of the massive expansion in the role of the state in the areas of economy, education and welfare from the 1960s on, there was a growth of popular expectations which focused on its performance within the 26-county area and intensified a competitive compulsion on all parties to focus practical attention within the southern state.”¹⁶ The trajectories of the two economies since the sixties have strongly reinforced the shift from irredentism. Both have seen massive structural shifts associated with a decline of indigenous industries and in both the sixties and seventies saw a large expansion of the role of the state and the public sector. However, in the north the onset of two decades of severe political turmoil and violence


made the compensatory inflow of external investment—so crucial in southern restructuring—an impossibility.\textsuperscript{17} The result has been an increasing and now massive dependence on financial subvention from London.

This has been the material substratum to the so-called ‘revisionist’ intellectual movement in the south which has challenged the legitimacy and practicality of the demand for territorial unity.\textsuperscript{18} Unity would now mean overcoming two formidable challenges to the southern state and its civil society. First there is the question of the capacity of a state whose population was characterized by a pervasive national and religious uniformity—Protestants comprised less than 10 per cent of the Irish state—to absorb a large and embittered Unionist population whose opposition to a united Ireland had intensified as a result of the post-1968 conflict. The other challenge is how to sustain a social order in the north without the British subsidy. A united Ireland without the British subvention to Northern Ireland would face either a massive collapse of incomes in the north or substantial tax rises and/or increases in public borrowing in the south. All the evidence of public opinion surveys is that while the population of the 26-county state would ideally like unity the vast majority are not prepared to pay any significant price to attain that end.

Since the publication of the report of the New Ireland Forum established by Garret FitzGerald in 1984, there has been increasing evidence of a shift in mainstream Irish nationalist discourse towards acknowledgement of the difficulties for its project created by the economic dimension of any unification proposal. This has produced increased interest in an interim stage of ‘joint sovereignty’ over the north under which British financial support would be maintained if at a tapering level and could be supplemented by increased support from Europe. There are clearly major political and economic problems with this new nationalist agenda but it has had some impact on shifting republican thinking towards a more nuanced view of what is meant by ‘British withdrawal.’\textsuperscript{19} It also reflected increasing evidence, particularly since the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985, that an important section of the British governing class see Northern Ireland as an intractable problem, a drain on resources and a potential source of international embarrassment. Accordingly Britain’s interest is perceived to be in creating conditions for ultimate extrication.

Irredentism was a variety of nationalist ideology appropriate to a society where the dominant forms of economic activity mirrored the naturalistic imagery centred on a pervasive ‘map image’ of the Irish nation as

\textsuperscript{17} Paul Teague, ed., \textit{The Economy of Northern Ireland: Perspectives for Structural Change}, London 1993.


\textsuperscript{19} On the formidable obstacles to unity, see John Whyte, \textit{Interpreting Northern Ireland}, Oxford 1991, pp. 159–61. The economic argument against unity and the positive economic and social advantages of the maintenance of the Union are at the centre of current Unionist arguments; see The Cadogan Group, \textit{Northern Limits: Boundaries of the Attainable in Northern Ireland Politics}, Belfast 1992.
coterminous with the island. The ‘imaginary community’ of De Valerian nationalism was to be completed by a process of spatial extension. Lemass instituted an ideological process of reconstructing that imaginary community in terms of a deepening at the expense of the priority once accorded to extension. The very process by which the southern state was extended domestically as it entered into more spheres of production and reproduction gradually reconstituted the basic structures of national sentiment. The dynamics of national aspiration became increasingly complex and cross-cutting as the ‘external’ horizon shifted increasingly to a European instead of a simple Anglo-Irish axis.

For a nation dominated by peasants there was a homology between the predominant locus of national aggrandizement—reclaiming the ‘six lost counties’—and their own mode of production where the dominant form of increasing surplus was the extension of area, not improvement of methods of production. In the Ireland that has emerged since the 1950s this homology has broken down. National sentiment has been in an increasingly contested process of reconstitution. For a majority of the population, the ‘imaginary’ of De Valera’s Ireland—family farms, ‘comely maidens and athletic youths’—is a burlesque. Liberalization of the economy was accompanied by an opening up of an involuted culture with the advent of a national television service in 1962. Unlike the practice of the national radio station for which most programmes were home-produced and any material which affronted Catholic principles was self-censored, from the start Irish television made considerable use of American and British programmes. The practice and discourse of television—the heavy emphasis in many imported programmes and in an increasing number of home-produced ones on the situation and problems of individuals in an urban context instead of portrayals of Catholic ruralism—challenged the cultural forms of De Valera’s Ireland. Alternative narratives subversive of traditional discourses appeared, reflecting both new and suppressed experiences—from the onset of ‘second wave’ feminism in the late sixties to literary representations of the lives of the underclass on the bleak estates which ring Dublin’s outskirts in Roddy Doyle’s trilogy about the Rabbitte family.

The decomposition of the dominant discourse of ‘traditional’ Ireland has produced some determined counter-attacks, ranging from the fundamentalist campaigns against moral liberalization manifest in the divorce and abortion referenda in the 1980s to the attempts of some neo-nationalist intellectuals to portray the so-called ‘revisionist’ movement in the writing of Irish history as part of a British counter-insurgency strategy. Politically, Fianna Fail under the leadership of Charles Haughey attempted to exploit this backlash in the 1980s. This move reflected more its own severe internal divisions over economic strategy and Northern Ireland policy than a serious commitment to battling against what was increasingly recognized as an irreversible shift. However, its decided

---

22 This is argued by Fennell in *Heresy*. 
lurch backwards under Haughey served to accelerate a process of change and fragmentation in the Irish party system.

A liberal moral agenda provided a new cleavage which created the possibility of different electoral coalitions. It had been Fine Gael, in search of a way out of a seemingly permanent electoral ghetto, that had briefly appeared under the leadership of Garret FitzGerald (1977–87) to champion a process of constitutional reform that would attenuate the confessional features of the southern state. But this was a weak liberalism determined more by FitzGerald’s revisionist nationalist project of improving relations with northern Unionists than by any radical domestic agenda. The rural bourgeois core of the party’s support was uneasy both with FitzGerald’s moral liberalism and with his proclaimed desire to develop the party’s ‘social democratic’ potential—an ambiguous vocation first mooted in the mid sixties. His coalitions with Labour in the 1980s were characterized by ignominious retreats on both fronts. The increasing difficulty encountered by both the larger parties in maintaining a ‘catch-all’ profile was a direct product of the severity of the economic crisis of the early 1980s. A crippling level of foreign debt had been accumulated in the previous decade, particularly under the Fianna Fail administration from 1977 as it attempted to maintain its commitment to developmentalist policies in a deeply recessionary international environment. By 1984 the outstanding national debt had risen to 128 per cent of GNP, the highest in the OECD area, while interest payments on the debt amounted to 11 per cent of GNP and 20 per cent of current government expenditure.

Both possible governmental formulas—Fianna Fail or a Fine Gael–Labour coalition—were clearly traversed by the same internal contradictions between a neo-liberal response to the debt crisis and electoral imperatives of their catch-all vocation which demanded a muting of any too rigorous assault on the working class. The result was a Fianna Fail party that almost imploded due to internal divisions, when ‘left’/‘right’ fissures were cut across or overlain by a ‘traditionalist’/‘modernizer’ split on policies towards the north and by the liberal agenda. The emergence, in 1985, of a new party with a clear neo-liberal economic philosophy, the Progressive Democrats, was a product of the travails of Fianna Fail and with a strengthening of support for the Workers’ Party helped to place class issues on the political agenda in an unprecedented way. Labour was forced to move away from coalitionism and towards a more politically independent stance to halt the process by which the Workers’ Party had overtaken it in the crucial Dublin area.

But the strategy decided upon by the Labour leader, Dick Spring, aimed not at a return to the leftist-tinged independence of the sixties but at a reordering of the system of party competition around a new type of coalition between Labour and Fianna Fail. Whilst this was destined to produce much anguish amongst Labour supporters accustomed to years of anti-Fianna Fail rhetoric—intensified at the end of the eighties by a series of financial scandals—it represented a shift of major strategic

significance. Spring’s rapprochement with Fianna Fail was only possible because of a historic decision by Haughey in the wake of the 1989 general election. Faced with the loss of his Dail majority, Haughey discarded the traditional Fianna Fail ‘principle’ that it would never enter into a coalition arrangement and made one with the Progressive Democrats. Once jettisoned, Fianna Fail’s pretensions to be more than a ‘mere’ political party were definitively shattered. The negative impact of Haughey’s recidivism on moral questions and the ‘national question’ was capped in 1990 by the defeat of Fianna Fail’s presidential candidate by a secularizing radical woman, Mary Robinson, whose candidature had the support of Labour.25 Labour’s 1992 victory which clearly built on the Robinson triumph was brought about by an unprecedented middle-class swing towards it. This was an endorsement of a pluralist and liberal agenda and a revulsion against alleged corruption in high places, no shift to the left. However, it forced Albert Reynolds, the relatively new leader of Fianna Fail, to contemplate an alliance with a Labour Party which, while it had still only 33 seats, was nevertheless clearly the major victor of the election. Thus although the new coalition represented little that was new on the social and economic fronts, it did provide the space for a significant shift on the part of the leadership of the dominant party towards a revisionist agenda on Northern Ireland.

The shift was a product of a combination of trends and circumstances. The Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 has made it more difficult to conceive of the British state as a major obstacle to unity. Unity itself, as has been argued earlier, despite remaining a ‘constitutional imperative’ according to a recent judgement of the Irish Supreme Court, had ceased to be the defining aspiration within southern visions of national identity. The increasing concern of a group of Irish intellectuals around the Field Day venture which aimed to reconstitute a sense of ‘Irishness’ was eloquent, if ironic, witness to the degree to which popular consciousness had become too fragmented and diverse to be reconfined within any type of national project.26 Popular attitudes to the ‘north’ are a contradictory amalgam of reflexive tendency to blame ‘Unionism’ and the ‘British’—the detritus of the classical period of De Valerian nationalism—together with an increasing emotional and moral distancing from what is perceived as the possibly contagious violence of the north and the inflexible stridencies of both militant loyalism and republicanism.27

As far as the southern political class is concerned, the Agreement gave it for the first time an institutionalized, if largely consultative role in the governance of the north. This has had contradictory effects. The Agreement created a context in which it became logical for the southern state to argue for a form of joint authority, perhaps with a European dimension. However, British concern with the extent of Unionist opposition to the Agreement, together with disenchantment with Dublin on the area of joint security policy against the IRA, led from 1987 to a desire to produce a new and more widely based agreement through a

---

27 Mair, ‘The Irish Republic and the Anglo-Irish Agreement’.
The unexpected discovery of political flexibility on the part of the main Unionist party during the talks process exposed the unpreparedness of the southern regime for serious engagement with the major political force in Northern Ireland.

As long as Haughey was leader of Fianna Fail, it would have been impossible to expect more than a de facto shift away from its traditionalist public posture on Northern Ireland. Haughey had opposed the Anglo-Irish Agreement because of the recognition it gave, ambiguous though it was, to the constitutional status of Northern Ireland. Many of the Fianna Fail modernizers on Northern Ireland had ended up in the Progressive Democrats and traditionalist impulses could still emerge in a rampant form at party conferences. Nevertheless, Reynolds’s attempt to resurrect a more recent ‘tradition’ of Lemass’s moderate and conciliatory nationalism represents his own businessman’s inclination to abjure visionary politics and a conjunctural urge to reach a ‘historic’ settlement. It was also made possible by the major processes of social and cultural transformation produced as the unintended effects of the Lemassian reorientation of economic policy since the fifties. It is these changes that have fundamentally blocked off the militant Catholic communalism that underlies much of the republican movement’s northern success from any substantial echo in the south. It is this block to the radical perspectives of the early 1980s which has been a powerful factor in shifting the republican movement from a position which was, rhetorically at least, committed to overthrowing the Dublin regime to one where the Reynolds administration is now given a central and positive role in the realization of republican objectives.

This is accompanied by a fundamental recasting of the way the role of Britain is perceived. No longer the source of the problem, which is now identified as the recalcitrant Protestants of Ulster, the revisionists in the leadership of Sinn Fein and the IRA want Britain to adopt the role of ‘persuading’ the Protestants that their future would be best served in an Irish context. Unity is now thought of as coming about in ‘generations’ and in the interim some form of joint sovereignty would be acceptable. As the Irish political mainstream and its hitherto revolutionary nationalist scourge increasingly coalesce around positions which reflect the ambiguities and increasing porousness of the Irish ‘imagined community’, the possibility of a historic compromise between nationalism and unionism has moved tantalizingly closer.

**Economic Contradictions**

This shift in terrain produced a remarkable increase in the present government’s popularity, coalescing around a soft national consensus. That both Spring and Reynolds chose to become deeply immersed in and identified with the ‘peace process’ was not surprising given the massive public outcry over allegations of nepotism, mishandled monetary crisis, rocketing interest rates, a dramatic rise in redundancies, and threats to the national airline that marked their first year in office. But the lessons of

---

28 The shift in the British position is clear from Margaret Thatcher’s own account, *The Downing Street Years*, London 1993, p. 415
history were already clear. Despite its powerful iconography and cohesive dynamic, no government, not even Fianna Fail's initial 1932 victory, has won power on the strength of its commitment to resolving the national question. While this government has clearly benefited from the short-term effects of the media fixation on the current peace process, the longer-term prospect is highly volatile. Already, as Mary Holland observes, 'public opinion has begun to weary of . . . the peace process'.\(^{29}\) Polls continue to confirm that Irish public opinion rates the problems of unemployment, taxation and public services as by far the most important, and it is precisely in this domain that the most glaring contradictions and potential crises—particularly for Labour—reside.

A year after its historic formation the fragility of the 'partnership' was in evidence and Labour's appetite for 'change' in question. An *Irish Times/ MRB* opinion poll showed Fianna Fail soaring to 50 per cent while Labour tumbled to a pre-election low of 12 per cent.\(^{30}\) Despite significantly higher cabinet representation, the traditional problems for Labour as a minority partner had resurfaced quickly. While Reynolds had won public admiration for his handling of the joint Declaration and its aftermath, Labour bore the brunt of public outrage levelled against both the 1993 and 1994 budgets. Symptomatic of Labour's ideological disarray was its embrace of a neo-liberal proposal for the taxing of unemployment benefit. As such policies resurrect internal tensions between 'socialists' and 'pragmatists' over the coming months, the party of Connolly and Larkin will find it increasingly problematic to satisfy the demands of its newly-acquired base among the highly volatile middle class without alienating its historic class roots.\(^{31}\)

These contradictions are not new. Labour has survived by articulating various interpretations of social and economic planning, income restraint, social conscience, liberal agenda and nationalist values to potentially conflicting constituencies. It has enhanced its integrative role by using periods out of government to renew links with the working class and organized labour but arguing for social and national responsibility when elections are imminent. From its initial drawing back from electoral politics in 1918 to enable the 'national question' to be resolved, Labour has consistently been more 'comfortable' building alternative governments rather than posing as a 'genuine political alternative'.\(^{32}\) While favouring a political realignment, a 'grand coalition' or merger of the Civil War parties of Fianna Fail and Fine Gael, it has consistently undermined this strategy by choosing government with first the latter and now the former.\(^{33}\) The message may be ideologically confusing or deliberately fudged, but even in the wake of a devastating drop in the opinion polls, there was little doubt that Spring had seized the


\(^{30}\) *Irish Times*, 7 February 1994.


\(^{32}\) Mair, 'Explaining the Absence of Class Politics in Ireland'.

\(^{33}\) For Spring's version of realignment, see his interview with Mark O'Connell, 'Spring: Unity of Labour, Workers' Party is Inevitable', *Sunday Business Post*, 25 November 1990.
opportunity of a ‘new politics’ in which Labour is likely to be part of any future government equation. In the process, however, he risked undermining Labour’s credibility as a party of ‘honesty’ and ‘integrity’, and diluting its already minimalist adherence to a social-democratic agenda, a possibility signalled in successive polls which showed public perception of Fianna Fail as the dominant partner.

For many commentators, Labour’s unprecedented surge in 1992 was a watershed, forged by a ‘sober and healthy disillusion’ among the electorate. As Spring described it, ‘Change is what we campaigned for in the election and change is what we will have to bring about.’ A more realistic assessment would attribute its success to a strategy of marketing Labour as ‘the social-democratic centre ground’—a deliberate tactic of emulating Clinton. Its election manifesto, however, was remarkably vague. Its subsequent governmental performance suggests that, despite the rhetoric, Labour is better able to apply itself to the expansion of the state apparatus and the expenditure of European funds than to the really difficult questions of industrial and macroeconomic policy. Even within the tired discourse of European social democracy, Spring’s variant is particularly limp. In a state which has the second highest rate of unemployment in the EU, it should have caused at least some frisson of alarm to be told that ‘Education is the single greatest project of the state . . . the most important mechanism available to us for the promotion of equality throughout society.’ This distorted and massively exaggerated view of the significance of the education system was combined—in the same speech—with an unquestioning acceptance of the orthodoxy of the Department of Finance on the need for a budget that ‘sends the right signals’ to the European currency markets. That efforts to please market forces should so occupy Spring’s attention derives from Labour’s capitulation to Irish economic orthodoxy. That view sees Irish economic growth as almost wholly dependent upon integrating Ireland more fully and rapidly with global expansionism, acquiring the accoutrements of industrialization and leapfrogging peripherality, a strategy that enabled Ireland to free-ride to remarkable growth levels in the late 1960s, and momentarily between 1987 and 1989.

There is little doubt that Maastricht, the Euro-response to global restructuring, raises the spectre of a two-tiered or two-speed Europe, confirming Irish peripherality. A very public row between Spring and Jacques Delors in the autumn of 1993 focused on exaggerated claims made by the government about its capacity to extract EC structural and cohesion funds. The government claims that the EC billions provide the greatest single injection of capital expenditure in the history of the state, aimed at ‘transform[ing] the economy of this state . . . and provid[ing] hope for the 300,000 now crowding our dole queues’. More soberly, it represents public affirmation of Ireland’s failure to succeed as a self-reliant entity. Having jettisoned the De Valerian strategy of constructing a national bourgeoisie, Lemass had aimed at ‘importing innovation’ or

34 Quoted in Irish Times, 5 April 1993.
35 Ibid.
Table 2
Employment and Unemployment in Ireland, 1926–91 (thousands)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Agriculture</th>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Services</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Labour Force</th>
<th>Unemployment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1926</td>
<td>653</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>406</td>
<td>1,220</td>
<td>1,300</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936</td>
<td>614</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>415</td>
<td>1,235</td>
<td>1,331</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1946</td>
<td>568</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>432</td>
<td>1,225</td>
<td>1,289</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>496</td>
<td>282</td>
<td>438</td>
<td>1,217</td>
<td>1,262</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961*</td>
<td>360</td>
<td>252</td>
<td>405</td>
<td>1,018</td>
<td>1,176</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(380)</td>
<td>(259)</td>
<td>(414)</td>
<td>(1,053)</td>
<td>(1,108)</td>
<td>(56)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>272</td>
<td>320</td>
<td>457</td>
<td>1,049</td>
<td>1,110</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>363</td>
<td>587</td>
<td>1,146</td>
<td>1,272</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>318</td>
<td>648</td>
<td>1,121</td>
<td>1,331</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*There is a discontinuity in the data at 1961; the figures in parentheses are comparable with the earlier years. Because of the difficulties of measuring unemployment over a long period, the pre- and post-1961 unemployment figures should be treated as comparable.


‘economic development, off-the-peg’.36 Initially, this strategy had coincided with US domination of the global economy and a surge in massive state transfers through access to unlimited external (EC) funds. Employment had expanded and emigration stabilized, but the strong performance of a small number of mainly foreign exporting industries gives a ‘fundamentally wrong account of economic health’. Huge profits for leading US corporations, rising from 27.5 per cent (1983) to 36.8 per cent (1990) compared with indigenous rates of 0.2 per cent and 3.9 per cent respectively, were repatriated at a rate equal to over 10 per cent of GNP in 1989, allowing Ireland to fraudulently record a persistent balance of payments surplus. With per capita income 40 per cent below the EU average, the unemployment record the second worst in the OECD (see Table 2), long-term unemployed comprising 67.2 per cent of the total out of work, and approximately one-third of the population surviving solely on state subsidy, Ireland is close to a Third World pattern of growth.37

This dichotomy is equally evident in the class nature of Irish emigration—peaking at 46,000 per annum in 1988–89 (Table 3). In the 1940s and 1950s, male emigration predominated, accounting for the image of


Irish migrants as male, rural, semi- or unskilled labourers. The decline in agriculture was, however, inadequately reciprocated in the growth of manufacturing and construction. In so far as social mobility was a major social force in the 1960s and 1970s, it was available only to those for whom the expanding opportunities in education were already accessible. Since 1981, social mobility has been polarized between two main courses: upward mobility for the middle class and unemployment for both skilled and unskilled manual workers. The collapse in traditional manufacturing employment has disproportionately affected males; with the contraction in low-skill employment in key host designations, such migration is effectively closed. In contrast female labour has risen sharply in expanding foreign and service sector employment. Throughout the 1980s, 25 per cent of graduates left to work in the core economies of the EU and the US while low and unskilled labour formed part of an increasingly transient, casual labour market. This pattern—hidden by official statistics—is likely to persist despite a fall in the absolute birth rate, as economic growth will be unable to deal with the numbers looking for work. With 28 per cent of its population under fifteen, Ireland has the youngest population in western Europe. Mass emigration and unemployment—the latter officially 20 per cent—threatens an already polarized social structure and labour market.38

The National Development Plan, 1994–99, is essentially a £20 billion spending programme financed through a combination of EC, private and public-sector funds. Job targets will, by the government’s own admission, only rise by 60,000 net over the entire period. But even this target is conditional; it assumes a return to emigration of the magnitude of the late 1980s, further reclassification of unemployment, significant capital input from the private sector, and a European, if not a global, upturn—repeating a former pattern. The state’s willingness to lavish funds on the small indigenous sector is a recognition that Ireland can no longer depend on the migration of (US) capital as a source of employment,

---

### Table 3
**Irish Emigration, 1979–92**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Migrants</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Migrants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1979–80</td>
<td>8,000</td>
<td>1986–87</td>
<td>27,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980–81</td>
<td>&lt;2,000&gt;</td>
<td>1987–88</td>
<td>32,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981–82</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>1988–89</td>
<td>46,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982–83</td>
<td>14,000</td>
<td>1989–90</td>
<td>31,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983–84</td>
<td>9,000</td>
<td>1990–91</td>
<td>1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984–85</td>
<td>20,000</td>
<td>1991–92</td>
<td>&lt;2,000*&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985–86</td>
<td>28,000</td>
<td>1992–93</td>
<td>6,000*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*CSO preliminary estimate. Bracketed figures represent net immigration.

Source: Census, 1986; CSO, Dublin.

---

but this fails to concede the impact of the new international division of labour, by which Ireland is in danger of fast becoming a labour-intensive, low-cost, low-wage production centre. In fact, elements of the plan and the budget—with special concessions for employers of low-paid workers—underscore this trend. Essentially, the strategy to ‘transform Ireland’ is predicated on pay restraint or cuts—clandestinely piggy-backing on British disapproval of the Social Chapter—and productivity increases even though Ireland has the highest output per employee of 17 industrial countries examined.\textsuperscript{39} A current submission to the EC argues that a minimum wage or any regulation of the labour market would be detrimental to employment.\textsuperscript{40}

In government, Labour’s contribution to economic policy bears all the trade marks of ‘populism at its interventionist worst’,\textsuperscript{41} viewing capitalism as a fixed set of arbitrary powers which can be dealt with by policies of redistribution and administrative controls. It has favoured the proliferation of state agencies—most notably the industrial development agencies—embellished by free-marketism. The myriad of social and economic task forces established at Labour’s initiative within the first year has obscured the absence of any economic strategy by the junior partner. Much was made of Labour’s capture of the education ministry—long equivalent to a fiefdom of the Catholic Church—and the formation of a ministry for law reform and equality, but these ‘successes’ only draw further attention to Spring’s deliberate refusal to take any economic ministry himself, preferring the role of international statesman. Thus far, his deputy leader Ruairi Quinn has, as minister for employment and enterprise, been dubbed the man with the ‘most nebulous presence in the cabinet’.\textsuperscript{42} Labour’s equivocal support for Aer Lingus restructuring, doublespeak on whether selling state assets equals privatization, attacks and innuendoes against the public sector, approval for a wide-ranging tax amnesty, introduction of a 1 per cent levy on wages, erosion of contributory and non-contributory social insurance benefit, and opposition to wealth or land tax are symptomatic of the degree to which under Spring’s leadership the links to even the most attenuated of social-democratic agendas have been broken. Equally alarming was the speed and extent with which Spring chose to discipline four Dail members who opposed government support for management restructuring of Team (an air maintenance subsidiary of Aer Lingus) and Irish Steel, reminiscent of the circumstances which lead to the collapse of another state company, Irish Shipping, during the 1982–87 coalition.

Labour ambivalence coincides with the erosion in the power and prominence of the trade unions. During the 1960s and 1970s, the unions had been in the ascendancy; industrial militancy was led by skilled craftsmen living, in the main, in local authority housing. By the 1980s, the surge in public and private sector service workers with mortgages,


\textsuperscript{42} Fintan O’Toole, ‘Out of a Job’, \textit{Fortnight}, October 1993.
changes in work practices, new streamlined industrial relations procedures confirmed in law and years of centralized bargaining had left the unions with little industrial or political leverage. The 1980 National Understanding was the last centralized wage agreement until 1987, transposing earlier experiences when it had been the employers, facilitated and encouraged by the state, who had been keenest to reach an accommodation on wages in return for industrial peace. A massive decline in industrial production, dramatic rises in unemployment, sharp acceleration in employment in ‘private’ or ‘traded services’—particularly in those sectors hostile to unionization with high levels of part-time and casual employment—led to a rapid decline in union membership. This was accompanied by hardened attitudes in a reorganized and enlarged employers’ association advocating tougher stances towards employees, new management strategies and an insistence on ‘realism’ in the face of a seriously escalating fiscal crisis of the state. Support for the latter was underpinned by a barrage of economic data from national and international sources, and an emerging national consensus favouring tighter control over public expenditure.43

The result was the Programme for National Recovery (1987–90) and Programme for Economic and Social Progress (1990–93). Both were effectively incomes policies with industrial peace secured against promises of employment growth and increased social spending.44 However by 1993, there was little evidence of the job increases, the targeted spending or overhaul of the tax system. The latest document, entitled A Programme for Competitiveness and Work, 1994–1997, formally embraces the ‘buzzword’ of neo-classicism, with its assumptions linking pay and inflation to the maintenance of a low budget deficit, balance-of-payments surplus, and competitiveness, amid a welter of promises on job creation and training already announced and with little union resistance. Primarily a pay agreement, it includes provisions to erode benefit for incoming public-sector employees—a signal that their security of employment may be under threat. Labour’s relationship with the unions, despite its birth at their hands, has always been ambiguous; nevertheless, the latter actively nurtured the possibility of a government with Fianna Fail believing it would rekindle fond memories of alliances in the 1920s and 1930s and unite two Irish parties with the strongest trade-union and public-sector pedigrees. The evidence of the latest centralized agreement, coupled with the budget’s inclusion of vulnerable sectors within the tax net with no reciprocal attention to capital, suggests that, in hand with Fianna Fail, Labour is using its particular relationship with the trade unions to pursue conventional economic restructuring and dismantling of the welfare state in the interests of capital.

Realignment?

For the past decade, an intense battle, hastened by rapid transformation in the economy and social structure, has been waged in Irish civil society

---

43 For a fuller discussion, see Bew, Hazelkorn and Patterson, The Dynamics of Irish Politics, ch. 4.
between ‘traditionalists’ and ‘modernizers’ on questions of national unity versus accommodation with the Northern Ireland state, further internationalization of the economy, and Church–state relations. The recent case of a fourteen-year-old rape victim prevented from travelling to England with her parents to procure an abortion (a similar case was recently heard in camera) and recent government mishandling of divorce legislation have occurred in tandem with the legalization of condoms (long manufactured in Ireland for export but illegal until 1992) and homosexuality. While progress has been uneven, Irish feminism has presented the only coordinated and sustained challenge to the prevailing ethos, successfully exploiting the contradictions in the position of the Catholic Church and the nature of democracy in Ireland.

Increasing polarization between urban and rural Ireland, symbolized in 1979 by mass marches of urban workers protesting against the almost total exemption from taxation of Irish farmers and by a political class whose allegiance is less towards the west of Ireland and more towards Brussels and the continent, has undermined the primacy of the countryside in national life, long the embodiment of the national ideal. The decline of the political power of the farming class and its usurpation by the new, urban middle strata has been a key factor in this process. This ‘war of position’ has led to the decomposition and near-collapse of Fianna Fail’s traditional hegemony, constructed in the 1930s around a matrix of populist social and economic policies, familial and nationalist themes.

Fianna Fail has not been the only loser; Fine Gael, whose raison d’être since losing power in 1932 has been to present itself as the only other viable government player, has experienced a major decline in public support since the collapse of Garret FitzGerald’s self-declared liberal agenda in 1987. Unlike Fianna Fail, whose spectacular hold on power has insulated its clientelist base and provided space in which to rebuild, Fine Gael fell victim to the emergence of the vocal, confident and self-obsessed interests of the urban, professional and middle strata, who preferred the neo-liberal claims of the Progressive Democrats. Repulsed by some of the more blatant scandals arising from the long-standing imbrication of Fianna Fail with the state, there was an unprecedented middle-class surge towards Labour in the 1992 election. This volatility was not surprising, given Spring’s ability to market Labour as a secular, non-nationalist and ethical constraint on Fianna Fail; in this, Labour shared much common ground with the Progressive Democrats. Fine Gael survived the PD onslaught in the recent European elections because of a combination of poor electoral decisions, weak leadership and in-fighting in its ideologically more astute competitor. Nevertheless, the right wing of the Irish political spectrum is too crowded for comfort; the Thatcherite message that brought the Progressive Democrats to fame in the mid to late 1980s has been largely absorbed by both Fine Gael and Fianna Fail. The battle for the hearts and minds of the Irish Right is still in balance,

45 Both Fennell, Heresy, and John Waters, Jiving at the Crossroads, Belfast 1993, have decried this transformation.
46 For an interesting discussion of these issues, see David Cairns and Shaun Richards, Writing Ireland: Colonialism, Nationalism and Culture, Manchester 1988.
thus pleas from members of either party for a merger are likely to be ignored in the short term.

The Left is equally disoriented. The Democratic Left was formed in the wake of a split in the Workers’ Party in 1992 over allegations of involvement in paramilitary activity in Northern Ireland and internal reverberations from the collapse of communism. Still reeling, its performance in the 1992 general election was disastrous; its parliamentary representation fell from an original seven (when known as the Workers’ Party) to four and one MEP. The party has failed to rise above derisory recognition in consecutive opinion polls, a factor partially related to the spectacular performance of Labour but also to its difficulties constructing a viable, radical Left alternative. What remains of the working class and radical politics, which the WP earmarked in the 1980s, has been continually weakened by mass unemployment and emigration, international competition and competitive demands, and neo-corporatism. While its problems are not as fundamental as Fine Gael’s, the party faces a formidable task despite a historic by-election victory in June 1994 and good European performances. Given the fact that few, either within or without the Labour Party, suggest that the latter will not lose votes and seats in the next election, a more predictable election situation could see Democratic Left recover ground and lay claim to a base of 5 per cent nationally. This verdict assumes that it can overcome major organizational problems at a time of social fragmentation and political de-alignment.

The complexity of the Irish political landscape does not constitute the realignment long advocated by the Left, which envisioned a clear Left–Right divide along traditional European lines. Despite a very shaky performance thus far, Labour’s coalition with Fianna Fail has produced the potential for the prolonged dominance of a centre-left bloc. The opposition in the Dail is clearly split into divergent right and left polarities but with little ability to maximize public opinion; the Progressive Democrats are reeling, Fine Gael is seeping support and visibly divided on whether to plump for ‘social democratic’ policies or a reconstructed neo-liberal/moral-crusade position while the Democratic Left appears afraid to be too ‘radical’. Within the governing coalition the domination of Fianna Fail in the key areas of economic policy, particularly acute in its current atavistic attitude towards state companies, has been clear from the beginning. This has made it difficult for the Labour Party—which bore the brunt of electorate dissatisfaction in recent elections and opinion polls47—to maintain its strengthened position in the working class. At the same time, its very embrace of coalition with Fianna Fail has deeply wounded its capacity to hold on to the middle-class surge of 1992 which reflected a deep aversion to the dominant party. The 1994 report of the tribunal investigating allegations of illegality and political corruption in the beef industry threatens to sour coalition relations due to Spring’s indictment of policy decisions made by Reynolds during a previous government, although ‘Spring is suspected by his former admirers—including many within the ranks of his own party—of bonding with Fianna Fail like a limpet to a rock.’48

European elections in June 1994 provided further evidence of electoral volatility and disillusionment with Labour. Although its performance was slightly better than in the previous European election of 1989, it was a radically disappointing 11 per cent when compared with 1992. In the Dublin Euro-constituency which contained many of the Dail constituencies where its candidates had spectacular victories in 1992, the poll was topped by a practically unknown Green candidate and Labour's only MEP in the country was just returned for the final seat. Its Dublin humiliation was made complete when in a Dail by-election held at the same time, the Labour candidate polled miserably and the Democratic Left won the seat.49

It is these factors which promoted Spring's increasing absorption in Anglo-Irish relations and in the 'peace process' in Northern Ireland—a breakthrough here would help shore up Labour's participation in government as catalyst of a historic achievement. Spring is certainly one of the few politicians in the Republic who has indicated much desire or capacity to comprehend the Ulster Unionist position.50 Together with Reynolds's pragmatism, his was a formative influence in Dublin agreeing the joint Declaration with Major in December 1993. The salience of Northern Ireland in Ireland's domestic politics is unprecedented in the history of the state. While this holds out the possibility of a major 'peace dividend' if the republicans can be enticed into a ceasefire, it is very much a leap in the dark with real possibilities of failure.

In the eight months since the Downing Street Declaration the republican movement has at one level luxuriated in an unprecedented amount of media attention as Gerry Adams and other Sinn Fein leaders organized a long-winded process of discussion and debate on what their response to the Declaration should be. The Irish government attempted to induce a positive response by a benign attitude as the months passed, with incentives like the lifting of the broadcasting ban on Sinn Fein and intervening with Clinton to get Gerry Adams a visa to enter the USA. However, it became increasingly clear that the more flexible elements in the leadership of Sinn Fein faced a formidable task in shifting the grassroots of the movement away from obdurate and uncompromising commitment to the traditional verities. The special Sinn Fein conference in Letterkenny, co. Donegal, delivered a response which, despite the best subsequent efforts of Adams, was widely perceived as a rejection of the Declaration.51 While it is still possible that the republican movement will be persuaded towards a more radical response, there is an increasingly


50 'Our besetting failure on the nationalist side has been a persistent tendency to underestimate the depth and strength of the Unionist identity'—Address by Tanaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr Dick Spring, T. D., to the Irish Association, Dublin, 5 March 1993, Department of Foreign Affairs, Dublin 1993.

51 The Irish journalist most knowledgeable on the internal republican details and sympathetic to Adams and other 'revisionists' described the conference as a 'dialogue of the very nearly deaf'; Mary Holland, 'The Hunger for Peace Cannot Be Ignored', Irish Times, 28 July 1994.
obvious disjuncture between the very different dynamics of its internal debate and the pressing demands of Irish electoral politics. Partition has allowed the Republic to insulate itself from the obdurate dynamics of northern communalism. While success in the peace process would bring a new source of political buoyancy to the government, failure and deeper involvement in northern violence would threaten Labour with decline to its more traditional levels of electoral support.

However, precisely because Fianna Fail has jettisoned its pretensions to be a ‘national movement’ rather than a ‘mere political party’ as a result of the remaking of national identity which has occurred since the 1950s, there is no reason why the two parties should not forge a deeper and longer-term alliance. If this were to occur then Labour’s 1992 surge would signify in the end Fianna Fail’s protean ability to periodically revivify itself. It would however mark the end of Labour’s pretensions to be the vector of realignment and open up a new era in Irish politics: one characterized by the radical shifts and uncertainties which have dominated the economy and society since the 1960s but from which the political system has hitherto been largely insulated.

The IRA Ceasefire

The announcement by the IRA of a ‘complete cessation of military operations’ on 31 August was an event of potentially transformative significance. Ironically it had been the generally negative response in Dublin, London and Washington that had forced the pace of internal republican debate and allowed Gerry Adams, now clearly the most innovative republican strategist since the Civil War, to persuade the leadership of the IRA that a continued ‘armed struggle’ would never break the politico-military stalemate and that a new phase of ‘unarmed struggle’ should be embarked upon. Such radicalism is of course highly risky. For while it may well produce movement from London on a range of issues: the broadcasting ban on Sinn Fein, early releases of republican prisoners, reduction in troop levels and eventually the admission of Sinn Fein to inter-party talks on the future of Northern Ireland, there is little evidence of a disposition on Major’s part to depart from the principle that the future constitutional status of Northern Ireland can only be determined by majority consent within that area.

The cessation of ‘armed struggle’ is aimed at Dublin and Washington in the first instance. Adams believes that an alliance between ‘nationalist Ireland’ and the White House could pressure Major to move towards a more radical posture. If not, then he appears to be willing to wait for a British general election to deliver an administration not dependent on the votes of the Ulster Unionist MPs. Already former comrades and the redoubtable Bernadette McAliskey (née Devlin) are accusing him of a ‘sell-out’. It is certainly the case that he and his associates have taken the republican movement into uncharted territory—less than two years ago representatives of the IRA leadership were asserting that there would never be a ceasefire until the British government gave a declaration to withdraw from Ireland. Adams has set out an ‘interim’ stance in which he demands that the political, economic and security structures in Northern Ireland be radically transformed to provide ‘equality of esteem’ for
Catholics. Of unspecified length, it could allow the explosive question of statehood to be postponed and create the conditions for a lessening of the communal tensions which continue to fuel the nightmarish scenarios of prophets of imminent civil war like Conor Cruise Ó'Brien.\textsuperscript{52} Despite his frequent attacks on ‘revisionists’ and his incantatory declaration of his republican credo, Adams may ironically emerge as the ultimate proof of the strength of the revisionist intellectual assault on traditional Irish nationalism.

\textsuperscript{52} See his analysis of the conjuncture in \textit{The Independent}, 1 September 1994.