

Explaining the Absence of Class Politics in Ireland

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Introduction: What Needs to be Explained?

IN RECENT YEARS there has been quite a gradual if nevertheless pronounced shift in conventional political science treatments of the Irish case, a shift which has seen an emphasis on the peculiarities of Irish political life being slowly replaced by a new emphasis on essential comparability. In part, this shift has resulted from the internationalisation of Irish political science, and from the incorporation of data and interpretations of the Irish case within cross-national research projects—particularly those projects which, focusing on the European context, go beyond an exclusive emphasis on the major countries or ‘pattern states’ (Daalder, 1987) in order to include data on the smaller democracies. Whether the topic in question has concerned the role of the cabinet, the policy-making process, the welfare state, the party system, or whatever, elements which once seemed distinctive to Ireland are now seen to fit within more broadly applicable models. In part also, this shift has resulted from a growing perception that Irish political life itself is changing, and that political processes which once seemed *sui generis* are now adapting to more conventional patterns. The keywords here are ‘Europeanisation’, ‘modernisation’, and ‘secularisation’, within interpretations which see Irish peculiarities as the hangover from an increasingly distant and irrelevant past.

The most evident signs of Irish political peculiarities were those highlighted by studies of mass politics and political ideologies. Here, the combination of two very distinctive features—an unusual, preference-based electoral system, on the one hand, and a partisan cleavage which

derived from an intra-nationalist conflict, on the other—were seen to have created a party system and a set of electoral orientations which were quite unlike those of the neighbouring democracies. The most classic statement of the case came from the late John Whyte, whose early survey of the relationship between social structure and political behaviour led him to conclude that, from a comparative perspective, Irish politics was deviant and even unique, its singularities stemming from its own idiosyncratic history. 'It is, then, perhaps a comfort to comparative political analysis that Irish party politics should be *sui generis*', he concluded, for 'the context from which they spring is *sui generis* also' (Whyte, 1974: 648). This refrain echoed more or less persistently throughout the literature on Irish politics in the 1970s and early 1980s, whether that literature was penned by Irish students themselves or by comparatively-minded outside observers. 'Over and over again', noted Carty (1981) in his Preface to a study of electoral politics in Ireland, 'the literature of comparative politics noted simply "except Ireland"'.

More recently, however, as observed, a bias towards a more conventional perspective has emerged. In the first place, while Whyte (1974) had emphasised the peculiarities involved in the sheer lack of correspondence between conventional social structural distinctions, on the one hand, and electoral support for Fianna Fáil, on the other, subsequent analyses found that the elaboration of more nuanced models did help to detect a degree of association between class and voting (see, for example, Laver *et al.*, 1987b; Mair, 1979: 457–9). Second, while many earlier analyses had assumed the persistence, and hence also the persistent non-comparability, of a *sui generis* nationalist political divide in Ireland (e.g. Chubb, 1970; Garvin, 1974; Cohan, 1982), subsequent studies found that the ideologies of the parties actually went beyond a simple nationalist opposition, and reflected policy stances which were quite in line with parties in many of the other European democracies (see, for example, Mair, 1987: 138–206; Laver, this volume). Finally, notwithstanding any ideological or sociological peculiarities, it was also rapidly becoming clear that the strategic behaviour of the parties was far from being unusual, and derived from much the same 'rational' calculus as that which informed (the many) comparable parties in comparable bargaining situations (Laver and Higgins, 1986). In short, despite the early impressions, and perhaps also a little disappointingly, Irish political life was proving to be just as normal and mundane as that in a large number of other countries (Mair, 1990; O'Leary, 1987, 1990).

Yet for all its new-found normalcy, there remains one key aspect in which Irish politics does continue to stand out as a deviant case among the European democracies, and that is in *the striking electoral debility of*

class-based, left-wing parties. For even now, despite 'modernisation', 'secularisation', and 'Europeanisation', and even despite the relatively recent emergence of the Workers' Party as an expanding electoral force on the Irish left, the aggregate voting support for 'class left' parties remains distinctively and substantially below that in *any* other country in Western Europe.

This particular Irish peculiarity is more than evident in the voting patterns shown in Table 1, which record the mean levels of electoral support for class left parties (that is, communist, social democrat, and left socialist parties) in the various countries of western Europe in each of the postwar decades.¹ Few, if any, other comparative indicators of political life would mark the Irish case out so distinctively. In the first place, the average support for the class left in Ireland (which is largely the average support for the Labour Party and the Workers' Party) never really rises above just one-third of the average of that won in *all* of the other countries. The Irish figure is 25.5 per cent of that in the other countries in the 1950s, 34.7 per cent in the 1960s, 33.6 per cent in the 1970s, and 32.6 per cent in the 1980s. Second, there is no other *single* country in western Europe which even approaches the weak position of the Irish left: the closest to the Irish position—that is, the second lowest country in terms of a rank-ordering—is Switzerland, where support for the class left averaged almost 29 per cent in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, and almost 26 per cent in the 1980s. At all times, therefore, even this low-ranking country recorded a level of support which has been double that in Ireland.

The purpose of this paper is to tease out a possible explanation for this persistent peculiarity of Irish politics. Two points should be made at the outset, however. First, the heuristic, but nonetheless plausible, assumption under which I am working is that the weakness of the class left in Ireland is something which needs to be explained.² Given that electoral support for class left parties in almost all other established western democracies, and especially in western Europe,³ is substantially above that in Ireland,

¹ More generally, the data in Table 1 also serve to emphasise that, contrary to much conventional wisdom, there has been no sustained and substantial erosion of electoral support for the West European class left parties over the postwar years (see also Bartolini and Mair, 1990: 68–124). To be sure, average support for these parties in the 1980s was lower than in the 1950s, 1960s, or 1970s, but an overall decline of just 3 per cent since the 1950s is much more indicative of continuity rather than collapse. In addition, it is also worth emphasising that in five countries, *including Ireland*, the average vote for class left parties in the 1980s was higher than that in the 1950s (the other four countries are Denmark, West Germany, Italy, and Sweden).

² On this, see also Gallagher (1982: 8–28), and especially Hazelkorn (1989).

³ Indeed, among all western democracies, one only really finds a parallel to the Irish case in the United States, where the class left is effectively non-existent.

Table 1. Mean electoral support for class left parties^a in postwar western Europe.

Country	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s
Austria	47.6	46.7	51.2	46.1
Belgium	39.3	34.7	29.5	29.4
Denmark	44.7	47.8	44.9	47.2
Finland	48.0	48.5	42.7	39.3
France	49.8	40.0	43.1	47.4
FRG	31.4	39.4	44.2	39.4
Iceland	35.9	31.3	38.5	32.4
Ireland	10.9	14.8	14.1	12.8
Italy	40.7	47.9	46.9	46.3
Luxembourg	48.7	49.0	43.6	37.4
Netherlands	35.7	32.0	39.3	35.8
Norway	51.8	51.2	46.7	45.1
Sweden	49.8	52.6	48.8	50.1
Switzerland	28.7	28.6	29.0	25.6
United Kingdom	46.3	46.1	39.1	29.2
Mean	40.6	40.7	40.1	37.6
Mean (excluding Ireland)	42.7	42.6	42.0	39.3

^a Socialist, Communist and New Left parties; only parties winning at least 1 per cent of the vote are included.

Source: Gallagher *et al.* (1991).

and given that these other European democracies provide a context in which studies of Irish political culture and behaviour can best be situated (see also Laver, this volume), this assumption seems to me to be an eminently reasonable one. To be sure, it might be argued that this Irish peculiarity exists only nominally, and that in reality Ireland does have a substantial working class party, which just happens to be called Fianna Fáil. Whatever one might think of Fianna Fáil's occasional claims to be a working class party,⁴ however, the key point here is that Ireland, unlike any of its European neighbours, does not now maintain, nor has it ever maintained, a *major* party which has *expressly* mobilised as a working-class party of the left and which, as such, has consciously sought to associate itself with the international political movement of the working class.

Second, in seeking to explain the weakness of the Irish left, I am working very much within Sartori's (1968/1990) understanding of the factors which facilitate and promote the development of class politics, in which a major stress is laid on the relevance of organisational intervention

⁴ Note, for example, de Valera's remark in 1951 that 'although we [i.e. Fianna Fáil] stand for all sections of the people, nevertheless the sections for which we have a special regard . . . are the small farmers on the one hand, and the workers on the other' (quoted in Mair, 1987: 51).

—that is, political intervention, as opposed to simply social structure. More generally, Sartori seeks to distinguish sociological explanations of political behaviour from more strictly political explanations of that behaviour, specifying the different levels of analysis which are involved in discussions of class conditions, class awareness, and, in politics, class action. I will come back to this argument at a later point; suffice it for now to underline that in this paper I will first seek to explore more sociologically-based explanations of the weakness of the Irish left before going on to emphasise a more politically-focused analysis. Hence I will first look at the question of class conditions and class awareness, then briefly examine evidence of class voting, and finally address questions relating to political culture and political style. As a word of warning, it should also be added that, largely for the sake of argument, the conclusions of this paper will tend to over-emphasise the importance of the political as against the social, while a more extensive analysis would inevitably have to take fuller account of both dimensions, as well as of their interaction.

The 'Class Conditions' Explanation

One of the most basic and time-honoured explanations for the weakness of the class left in Ireland concerns class conditions. More precisely, the debility of the class left is seen to derive from the combination of a poorly bounded class structure, and/or the relative weight of the non-labour intensive agricultural sector, and/or the essentially rural culture. Although such explanations have thankfully tended to prove less common in recent years (for a delightfully caustic assault on this perspective, see O'Leary, 1990), and although they have also tended to be primarily concerned with the failure of the left in the early years of the state (e.g. Orridge, 1976), some of the less sensitive comparative assessments still continue to include class conditions, and social conditions more generally, as key factors explaining the weakness of the class left in Ireland. An article by Inglehart is a case in point. Accounting for the dominance of 'conservative' material values, he notes, almost in passing, that 'everybody knows that Ireland is a largely rural nation' (Inglehart, 1987: 1294).

In fact, and this has finally begun to be widely accepted in the comparative literature, class conditions in Ireland are now much less distinctive than was once the case. To be sure, agricultural or other primary sector employment (15.1 per cent of the labour force in 1989)⁵ is still more than two-and-a-half times that of the average in the remaining

⁵ This and all other figures cited in this paragraph come from OECD (1991b).

fourteen countries listed in Table 1 (5.8 per cent in 1989). But the range among these other countries is also quite wide, and the Irish figure, while relatively high, is only little more than half as big again as that for Finland (8.9 per cent), Iceland (10.2 per cent), and Italy (9.3 per cent), where the class left vote is clearly very substantial. Moreover the Irish figure is also substantially less than the figure for Greece (25.3 per cent), and only slightly larger than that for Spain (13.0 per cent), yet in each of these latter two cases socialist parties constitute the largest single and most successful political force. In addition, in terms of one other indicator normally associated with support for class left parties, that is, the proportion of the labour force employed in industry, Ireland is quite unexceptional, with a figure of 28.4 per cent as against an average of 31 per cent in the remaining fourteen countries. Ireland here ranks higher than Denmark (27.4 per cent), the Netherlands (26.5 per cent) or Norway (25.3 per cent). Finally, there is also one other striking statistic which bears underlining as regards the supposedly 'rural' Irish economy, which is that the overall proportion of unemployed persons in the labour force (15.4 per cent in 1989), and male unemployment in particular (17.5 per cent in 1989), actually *exceeds* the proportion employed in agriculture.

Nor does rurality in the stricter sense of the term appear to offer any more reasonable basis from which to begin an explanation of the weakness of the Irish left. To be sure, urban environments do seem more favourable to left politics than are rural environments: thus, for example, at 16.4 per cent, the combined average vote for the Labour Party and Workers' Party in Dublin in the 1980s was markedly higher than that in the rest of Ireland. But this still begs the question, since even this city vote remains substantially less than the *nation-wide* vote enjoyed by the relatively low-polling Swiss left, and thus underlines the overall problem faced by the Irish left—even in its own 'strongholds'. Hence, while rurality may well be one of the major obstacles standing in the way of a *nationalisation* of left voting, it nevertheless hardly constitutes a satisfactory explanation of the debility of the Irish left in general, and of the urban left in particular.

Finally, and most evidently, the reality is that Irish society is indeed characterised by very high levels of working-class 'self-recruitment', or class reproduction (see Whelan, Breen and Whelan, this volume), which, when coupled with the more general lack of social mobility, underlines the reality of class conditions, and, in particular, make it highly likely that a distinctive working-class culture can be sustained. The evidence adduced by Breen *et al.* (1990) concerning the class structure as a whole is also compelling in this regard. Over and above their documenting of the undeniable realities of a sharply-bounded class structure in contemporary Ireland, they also clearly demonstrate how the low level of social mobility,

on the one hand, and limited state-induced redistribution, on the other, have combined 'to mould *economic* class categories . . . into identifiable, cohesive *social* classes' (1990: 60). Indeed, even if we were to disregard the data on class awareness (see below), this 'structural' evidence alone would incline one to doubt the notion that it is an absence of favourable class conditions which now stymies the Irish left. Rather, the problem would appear to lie beyond this, and to concern instead the translation of *social* classes into class *politics*.

The 'Class Awareness' Explanation

But class conditions are one thing; class awareness is clearly something else, and it is obvious that class conditions cannot generate class politics unless there is at least some prior translation of these conditions into a sense of class awareness. Is this perhaps the problem in Ireland? Is the problem that while a class structure exists in reality, it is not perceived to exist by those whom it constrains, and particularly by those, in the working class, who might provide the basis for a class left politics?

There are two points which are relevant here, the first of which concerns comparative levels of subjective class identification. The data that are cited here come from the European Parliament Election Study of 1989, an EC-wide survey in which comparable questions were asked at more or less the same time in all EC member states, thus allowing the relative position of Ireland to be assessed with some degree of precision. The results are striking and, in some senses, surprising. In the first place, some slight support can be found for the suggestion that class distinctions have less relevance in the Irish context than is the case in other European countries, in that almost 9 per cent of Irish respondents either refused or were unable to assign themselves to a social class, a proportion exceeded only in Luxembourg (13.8 per cent) and Belgium (10.4 per cent). But this is of minor importance, for what emerges even more clearly is the remarkably high percentage of Irish respondents who assign themselves to the working class. Indeed, at 41.9 per cent, this figure is second only to that for Britain (45.9 per cent), and well in excess of those for countries such as Denmark (21.9 per cent), Germany (21 per cent), Italy (22.9 per cent) and particularly Spain (12.1 per cent). In sum, these figures not only suggest that class categories mean something to the vast majority of Irish voters, but also that Ireland is characterised by a relatively high level of working-class self awareness.

To be sure, data such as these may be regarded as of dubious value, since 'class' itself, together with its qualifying adjectives of 'working',

'middle', and so on, may mean different things to different people, and may also carry a normative baggage which clouds the cross-national comparability of those surveys which seek to probe class identification. In particular, certain cultures may encourage many 'objectively' working-class respondents to identify subjectively with the middle class, and vice versa. In the case of Ireland, however, as can be seen from Table 2, such confusion as does exist seems almost wholly a function of the misplaced identities of *non*-working class respondents. Thus while Ireland records one of the highest percentages of working class identification among non-working class respondents (27.8 per cent of those in non-working class occupations regard themselves as working class, as against an average of just 13.4 per cent in the other EC countries—the Irish figure is second only to the British figure of 34.3 per cent), it is even more striking to note that it also records the highest proportion of those in working-class occupations who, 'correctly', regard themselves as working class (69.6 per cent as against an average of 47.5 per cent in the other EC countries). Thus, while non-working class respondents in Ireland may be more inclined to regard themselves as working class than is the case in most other EC countries, this is less relevant to our present purposes than the fact that working-class respondents are more likely to regard themselves as working class than in any of the other countries. As far as the working class is concerned, therefore, there seems remarkably little confusion about class identity, a factor which makes the debility of a class left political alternative all the more striking. Indeed, the country which comes

Table 2. Subjective class identification in EC countries. 1989: percentage of respondents claiming to be working class from among different occupational categories (excluding respondents with no classifiable occupation).

Country	% Among unskilled and Workers	% Among other occupational categories
Belgium	58.7	13.5
Britain	60.2	34.3
Denmark	42.9	7.7
France	51.0	13.5
FRG	40.5	10.6
Greece	47.4	23.6
Ireland	69.6	27.8
Italy	43.9	12.0
Luxembourg	51.1	1.8
Netherlands	58.4	8.6
Portugal	49.2	18.0
Spain	19.0	6.5

Source: European Parliament Election Study, 1989.

closest to the Irish pattern in this regard, that is, the country in which a strikingly high proportion of those in both working-class and non-working class occupations regard themselves as working class, is Britain, where class has long been regarded as the main basis of political choice.

The third piece of evidence which can be cited here concerns levels of trade union density; that is, the proportion of the labour force which is organised within trade unions, and which, in this context, is being stretched in order to be read as an indirect indicator of the extent of popular awareness of collective interests in general and of class interests in particular. It must be emphasised that the figures which can be cited are relatively crude aggregates, which do not distinguish between white-collar and blue-collar unionisation, and which are therefore not specific to working class identity as such. Despite such qualifications, however, the reality is that at least up to the mid-1980s, according to figures on ten west European nations reported by Visser (1987: 21), and to Irish data reported by Breen *et al.* (1990: 163, citing Roche and Larragy, 1987, and see also Roche, this volume), Ireland is characterised by one of the *highest* levels of trade union density in western Europe. Indeed, with a figure of some 55 per cent of the labour force unionised, Ireland ranks in fifth position within the eleven countries covered, lagging behind Denmark (82 per cent), Sweden (80 per cent), Norway (63 per cent), and Austria (58 per cent), each of which has, of course, a strong socialist tradition; and exceeding the levels in the United Kingdom (46 per cent), Italy (36 per cent), Germany (34 per cent), Switzerland (29 per cent), the Netherlands (24 per cent) and France (15 per cent). Despite the crudeness of the indicator, we can therefore conclude that large sections of the Irish working class are aware of their identity as a class *and* of the need for collective action as a class—at least as far as the labour market is concerned.

The discussion so far can therefore be summarised as follows. First, a class structure exists in reality; second, Irish citizens are aware of this class structure; third, within that class structure, a relatively high percentage of citizens identify with the working class, including a particularly pronounced percentage of those in working-class occupations; and fourth, as indicated by levels of unionisation, a relatively high proportion of the labour force (and hence of the working class) appears to perceive—and to act upon—a collective interest which can be expressed in class (or, at least, in occupational) terms.

In other words, reasonably pronounced class conditions exist, and it is likely that a relatively high degree of class awareness also exists. Both factors would therefore suggest that, *ceteris paribus*, Ireland should possess a relatively strong class left political alignment. But, as we have seen, this

is clearly not the case. However, before going on to widen the search for explanations of this increasingly perplexing peculiarity, it is necessary to take a tangential look at the precise character of the left electoral support that does exist in Ireland.

A Note on Class Voting

Since the publication of Whyte's seminal essay (1974) on the relationship between social structure and voting, appropriately entitled 'Politics Without Social Bases', a sporadic debate has ensued within Irish political science concerning the real extent to which class, and other social variables, can be related to voting preferences in Irish elections. In general, it seems that they cannot. Gallagher's (1976) extensive ecological analysis of voting patterns over time, for example, largely confirmed Whyte's findings on the lack of social rootedness of the Irish parties. And while my own re-analysis of the data used by Whyte did note a substantial social effect in relation to the particular division between Fine Gael and Labour supporters, even this social effect was obliterated once the cross-class support for Fianna Fáil was added to the equation (Mair, 1979: 457-9). More recently, Laver *et al.* (1987b), partly employing a more sophisticated categorisation of classes and occupations, have noted that a limited social effect does exist, and that Irish politics may be regarded as having 'some' social basis. In general, however, the broad conclusion of this debate, at least so far, has been that any relationship which does exist between social divisions, on the one hand, and party preference, on the other, is, at most, quite marginal.

The new European Parliament Election Study data which were cited above, and which, being based on actual as opposed to intended vote, provide a reasonably reliable source of information, also tend to confirm this pattern, and also emphasise Irish exceptionalism within western Europe. But it is important to note that they do so with one major caveat: for while the Irish left enjoys relatively little overall support within its 'natural' working class constituency, it enjoys a strikingly *high* share of the working class vote *relative to* its share of the non-working class vote. In other words, while its share of the overall working class vote is relatively low, its support is nevertheless pronouncedly biased towards the working class. The relevant figures are reported in Table 3, which shows voting support for the left among both working class and non-working class voters, as defined both in terms of occupations (objective class) and in terms of class identification (subjective class).

As these simple data indicate, the lack of a distinct social base of

support for the Irish left is evident in its ranking in one of the lowest positions among the twelve EC countries in terms of its share of the working class vote. In terms of subjective class, Labour and the Workers' Party actually polled just 20.5 per cent of this vote, as against an average for the left of 34.2 per cent in the remaining eleven countries, and with only the Portuguese left lagging behind the Irish left in this regard. The same pattern is apparent with the objective class indicator. The Irish left polls just 21.7 per cent of the skilled and non-skilled working class vote, as against an average of 32.6 per cent in the other countries. And here again it is only Portugal which lags behind Ireland.

What is also striking about the Irish case, of course, is the low level of left support within the *non-working class*,⁶ with Ireland ranking in the lowest position among all twelve countries as far as both class indicators are concerned. And it is this which necessitates the caveat: for in terms of the *ratio of the share of the working class vote to the share of the non-working class vote*, the Irish left ranks towards the top of the list of those included in Table 3. In fact, the ratio in the Irish case is a remarkably high 3.10 as far as the objective class indicator is concerned, ranking highest of all twelve countries; and is 2.23 as far as the subjective class indicator is concerned, being exceeded only by Belgium, Britain and Denmark. Thus, while the Irish left is far from being composed of *parties of the working class*, in that Labour and the Workers' Party win only a small minority of working class support, however defined, it is, nevertheless, in large part composed of *working class parties*, since it relies more heavily on the working class vote than almost all the comparable lefts in the twelve other countries considered. If nothing else, these data confirm that it is not so much the *character* of the left vote in Ireland which is peculiar, but rather, and more simply, its *size*.

In short, the peculiarity of the class left in Ireland is not that it is fundamentally different from that elsewhere in Western Europe; it is just that it is smaller. And since an adequate explanation of this smallness cannot (easily) be derived from the peculiarities of class conditions or class awareness, that is, from a more *sociological* perspective, then it seems appropriate to address the question from a more *political* perspective, in which two distinct categories of explanation are relevant: first, an explanation based on the institutional and behavioural characteristics of Irish politics; and second, an explanation based on political culture and political strategy.

⁶ A factor which, as Kieran Kennedy and Chris Whelan have emphasised to me, may well be due to the pronounced and very intense attachment to property in the Irish case. This particular cultural phenomenon has long roots in Irish society and, while neglected in this present discussion, does merit substantial analysis.

Table 3. Class support for left parties in EC countries, 1989.

Country ^a	Subjective Class ^b			Objective Class ^c		
	% Support in working class	% Support in other classes	Ratio (1)/(2)	% Support in working class	% Support in other classes	Ratio (3)/(4)
	(1)	(2)		(3)	(4)	
Belgium	37.9	13.9	2.73	28.7	14.6	1.97
Britain	28.5	12.3	2.32	24.1	15.2	1.58
Denmark	33.0	14.7	2.24	23.8	16.6	1.43
France	22.0	15.0	1.47	26.0	16.6	1.57
FRG	35.3	29.7	1.19	36.3	29.3	1.24
Greece	48.6	37.0	1.31	50.0	45.2	1.11
Ireland	20.5	9.2	2.23	21.7	7.0	3.10
Italy	40.3	27.3	1.48	43.0	29.0	1.48
Luxembourg	41.2	21.0	1.96	44.4	20.9	2.12
Netherlands	32.6	19.0	1.72	27.0	22.0	1.23
Portugal	15.0	14.3	1.05	14.4	15.0	0.96
Spain	42.2	28.4	1.49	40.5	21.1	1.92

^a All class left parties included, with, in addition to the main social democratic parties, the Danish Socialist People's Party, the French Communist Party, the Greek Left Coalition, the Irish Workers' Party, the Italian Communist Party, Social Democratic Party (PSDI), and Proletarian Democracy, the Luxembourg Communist Party and the Spanish United Left. It should be noted that the levels of support shown do not always correspond closely with the aggregate figures reported in Table 1. There are two reasons for this: first, the earlier figures concerned decade averages, whereas these are from survey data from 1989; second, the preferences of a number of respondents who were not classifiable in terms of either objective or subjective class have been excluded from these calculations.

^b All respondents defining themselves as belonging to the working class or as belonging to other (specified) classes.

^c All respondents in skilled and unskilled working class occupational categories, or in other (specified) occupational categories.

Source: As for Table 2.

The 'Institutional and Behavioural' Explanation

Clientelism

One of the first, and most obvious explanations for the apparent inability of class conditions and class awareness to translate into class action, at least politically, lays particular stress on the perceived lack of political relevance of collective, class interests. (I emphasise the political here simply in order to accommodate the fact that, as indicated by the level of trade-union density, collective industrial and labour market interests are clearly perceived as being of relevance). And the most obvious explanation for this perceived lack of relevance is explained, in turn, by the priority

accorded to individual interests and individual action, which, it can be claimed, is reflected in the pervasiveness of *clientelistic networks* in Irish politics.

There is little need to rehearse the various arguments which seek to demonstrate the importance of clientelism in Irish politics; nor is it necessary to refer to the vast array of evidence which reveals how politically relevant grievances are often processed in a particularistic or personalistic fashion, constituting an exchange between the individual voter, on the one hand, and the individual (and, in this case, essentially non-partisan) politician, on the other. Unlike in other political systems, therefore, where organised mass parties mobilise collective identities among voters, Irish politics is characterised by a pattern of individualistic mobilisation which is inimical to the pursuit of collective interests. Clientelism therefore acts to disaggregate potential collective interests, including, most obviously, class interests. This point has been highlighted by a number of observers of Irish politics, and little needs to be added to their conclusions. For Higgins (1982: 133), for example, clientelism 'disorganises the poor in that it serves as an impediment to their aggregating their demands or mobility in horizontal associations for the prosecution of such demands'. In a similar vein, Hazelkorn (1986: 338) writes that clientelism 'ensures that incipient (class) conflict can be redirected through acceptable channels which emphasise the role of individuals and not groups or classes'. More importantly, she adds that 'insofar as this is the dominant mode of political organisation, class or mass mobilisation is that much more difficult to achieve. . . . [C]lientelism has helped to keep the working class outside the sphere of active politics . . . [and] retards the political development and consciousness of the economically dominated classes'. Hence, if we can assume that clientelistic practices tend to operate much more extensively within the political sphere, as opposed to the industrial sphere, we can advance at least one attractive and distinctive explanation as to why class action at the level of the trade unions fails to translate into class action at the level of politics and voting behaviour. Indeed, the Labour Party currently affiliates more trade union *members* than it wins popular *votes*.

But, however attractive, clientelism in itself does not seem to offer a really plausible or adequate explanation of this particular Irish peculiarity. And the main reason for this inadequacy, as I have argued elsewhere (Mair, 1987), is that the pervasiveness and exclusiveness of clientelistic links and particularistic ties has tended to be overestimated, as has the degree of individualistic mobilisation; while the importance of party, and hence of more collective mobilisation, has correspondingly tended to be underestimated.

There are several considerations involved here. In the first place, the peculiarity of the Irish electoral system, which, in its preference voting procedures, is one of the factors most often cited as sustaining clientelistic practices, does not derive from its favouring individualistic ties *instead of* party orientations; it derives, rather, from its capacity to promote individualistic ties *as well as* party orientations. Irish voters may well orient towards clientelistic (that is, individualistic) ties; but the evidence of Irish voting studies clearly suggests that they *also* orient towards partisan (that is, collective) commitments, since what is distinctive about the single transferable vote electoral system within multi-member constituencies is its ability to allow both types of orientations to co-exist with one another. Thus, for many (albeit not all) voters, it appears that they *first*, as partisans, choose a party, and *then*, as clientelistic voters, choose an individual within that party as their first-preference selection (Mair, 1987: 66–86). Hence, at least in this case, evidence of the importance of clientelism does not necessarily imply evidence of lack of partisanship, and in this sense the notion of party, and of collective identifications, would appear to be no less strong in Ireland than in a number of other countries.

Second, many of the arguments which have emphasised the importance of clientelism have done so more or less by default, in that they have (mistakenly) assumed an absence of policy differences between the parties (see, for example, Carty, 1981; and, more recently, Lee, 1989: 545–7). Since the parties do not really differ from one another, it is argued, voters are unable to use party *per se* as a guide to voting choice. There is little to sustain this assumption, however. On the contrary, as an analysis of election programmes clearly indicates, the parties do differ substantially, and meaningfully, in terms of their policy preferences, and real policy competition does exist (Mair, 1987: 138–206). Moreover, when Irish parties do enunciate their policy preferences, it is striking to note that they tend to focus more on economic and social policies than is the case in most other west European party systems—an emphasis on the mundane which stands in sharp contrast to the widely held assumption that the Irish parties are interested only in their idiosyncratic divisions on nationalist issues (see Table 4).

Third, and finally, the orientation towards party, and hence the non-exclusiveness of clientelism, can also be seen in that party as such, and particularly the policy performance of parties, matters to voters, as is evidenced by the existence of a clear relationship between the general sense of economic well-being, on the one hand, and the electoral popularity of incumbent parties, on the other (Mair, 1987: 76–7). In short, and as elsewhere in Europe, Irish politics *is* party politics, even if, in contrast with many other countries, it is *also* personalistic politics.

Table 4. Percentage of contents of election programmes devoted to social and economic issues.

Country	% of contents
Austria	49.8
Belgium	40.5
Britain	43.3
Denmark	37.8
France	38.8
Germany	34.9
Ireland	57.5
Italy	23.1
Netherlands	46.2
Norway	55.9
Sweden	52.6
<i>Mean</i>	<i>43.7</i>

Source: Calculated from the data from the ECPR Manifesto Study.

But there are other, and arguably more important, questions to be asked about the supposed impact of clientelism on the fortunes of class politics. For example, while clientelism may be cited as a factor which acts to disaggregate the working class and therefore impinges directly on the fortunes of the class left, why does it not appear to have had a similarly powerful impact on the collective interests of farmers, which readily, and frequently, translate into political action (a point also emphasised by Hazelkorn, 1986: 357)?⁷ Moreover, if clientelism is so important in the political sphere, and if it has been responsible for a political disaggregation of collective interests, why then has this not also spread over to the industrial sphere? Why should collective class interests and collective class action be manifestly relevant at the industrial level, and yet absent at the political level?⁸

⁷ Unfortunately there is no room here to explore the development of agrarian politics in Ireland, and the revealing contrasts which it provides with the development of working class politics. One point which should be emphasised, however, relates to an argument which is dealt with later, concerning the bias against the politicisation of social conflict. For, interestingly enough, farmers' parties, in their unabashed avowal of the farmers' interests, seem to have proved much more immune to this bias than have workers' parties, a contrast which may be due to their ability to put themselves forward as reflecting the *national* interest: what is good for the farmers is good also for the country, whereas what is good for the workers is good only for the workers.

⁸ Indeed, given the organisational fragmentation of the trade-union movement (see the papers by Roche and by Hardiman in this volume); the disaggregation of welfare clienteles and the importance of means-tested benefits (see the papers by O'Connell and Rottman, and Callan and Nolan in this volume); and the sheer territorial dispersion of the unskilled manual class (see the paper by Whelan *et al.* in this volume), it is surprising that collective action proves to have any real potential at all in the industrial sphere.

The need for an independent working class party

If clientelism is not the (only) answer to the puzzle of the failure of the class left in Ireland, then perhaps an alternative explanation might be that the class left does not constitute a strong, independent electoral force simply because there is no real *need* for such a force. In other words, as far as the potential constituency of the class left is concerned, things are fine as they are, and, in any case, the sort of demands which might be advanced by such an independent movement are already being met by the existing political parties, and particularly by Fianna Fáil.

One way in which to assess the potential of this argument is to consider the sort of outcomes which, in a comparative perspective, might be expected to have followed from the successful mobilisation of a strong party of the left. Were these outcomes actually realised in the Irish case, notwithstanding the absence of such a party, then we might reasonably assume that the need for a strong party of the left had been satisfied through other means. Were these outcomes absent, on the other hand, then an alternative explanation would be required. Three sets of outcomes or demands are relevant here, since in each case comparative analysis suggests that their realisation can be considered as having required a strong class left party: first, participation by a working-class party (or parties) of the left in decision-making; second, the incorporation of the trade unions into the public policy-making process; and third, the creation and maintenance of a strong welfare state.

Let us first address the question of *involvement in decision-making*. The argument here would simply be that unless it can acquire the status of a strong and substantial party, the class left will experience persistent exclusion from government office and from an influence on the policy-making process. In Ireland, however, this is evidently far from being the case. The Labour Party was first established just before World War I, and already by 1918–19 it was being regarded by Sinn Féin as having a legitimate voice in determining the programme of the new Dáil. Up to the late 1920s, in the context of Sinn Féin and Fianna Fáil abstentionism, the party constituted the major ‘legitimate’ opposition in parliament. In 1932, it provided external support for Fianna Fáil’s first (minority) government, being a coalition partner in all but name; and in 1948 it actually entered government as one of the junior partners to Fine Gael. The party was again in government in the late 1950s, and then again in the mid-1970s and for a large part of the 1980s. Given its small size, therefore, its record of sheer length of incumbency compares favourably with that of its counterparts in continental Europe. In the last two decades, for example, the Irish Labour Party has enjoyed a more sustained period in government

than has the major party of the left in Italy, the Netherlands, or the United Kingdom.

The second outcome is less directly concerned with formal governmental participation, and relates to *the role of the wider labour movement in the policy-making process*. The argument here is simply that unless a strong class left party exists, and, more arguably, unless it can gain regular access to government, the trade-union voice will be excluded from the more generalised, day-to-day process of public policy formation. To put it another way, the regular political participation of working class parties in government will facilitate the emergence of a more corporatist mode of decision-making (see, for example, Lehbruch, 1979), and this in turn implies that it is in the trade unions' interests to have a strong class left party in politics. Again, however, the Irish case suggests otherwise. While acknowledging Hardiman's well-taken scepticism about the applicability of a full-blooded neo-corporatist model to the Irish case (Hardiman, 1988; and this volume), it is nevertheless clear that the trade-union movement, however fragmented and inchoate, has rarely been denied a legitimate voice in the policy-making process. Its participatory role was clearly evident in the centralised agreements and 'national understandings' of the 1970s and early 1980s, as well as, if not more markedly so, in Fianna Fáil's Programme for National Recovery in the late 1980s and now in the more recent Programme for Economic and Social Progress. To be sure, this is no fully-fledged 'social partnership', which does perhaps require a sustained governmental role for the left; but, as Hardiman concludes, it is at the same time a process which has given the trade unions 'direct access to government and . . . an unprecedented input to public policy' (1988: 247). And since such access has not only proved possible, but has also been strengthened, under the aegis of 'non-left' (that is, Fianna Fáil) governments, it therefore seems likely that the trade-union movement, at least, does not suffer markedly from the absence of a strong independent political voice on the left.

The third demand which is of relevance here concerns the *creation and maintenance of a strong welfare state*, as well as the acceptance of a concept of social citizenship—a demand which, to judge from the more mechanistic exponents of the 'Do Parties Matter?' school of political science, would appear to require either governments of the left or, at least, a strong voice for the left. In reality, however, the Irish case (together, indeed, with the Dutch and Italian cases) again suggests otherwise, and demonstrates that a commitment to welfare is far from predicated upon a substantial left input into the policy-making process. The most relevant source here is the comprehensive analysis of Maguire (1986), who emphasises how, since the 1960s, Ireland has increased its expenditure on

welfare substantially beyond the average increase recorded by other OECD nations:

In 1960 social expenditure amounted to 11.7 per cent of GDP compared with an average of 13.1 per cent across OECD countries. By 1981 the Irish expenditure share had risen to 28 per cent, compared with an OECD average of 25.6 per cent. The growth of social spending is particularly impressive considering that Ireland is not an especially wealthy country by OECD standards. In 1981, Ireland ranked twentieth in the OECD area in terms of per capita GDP, but eighth in terms of the GDP share of social expenditure (Maguire, 1986: 286–7).

Moreover, much of this expansion was the result of wholly 'non-left' governments, that is, Fianna Fáil governments, rather than of those coalition governments in which Labour played a minor, but not in-substantial, role. Ignoring the very exceptional 1948–51 government, for example, when postwar reconstruction led to an annual growth of social expenditure of some 12.7 per cent, annual growth under coalition governments averaged some 4.5 per cent. Under Fianna Fáil governments, on the other hand, the average annual growth rate of social expenditure reached 5.4 per cent, with the party holding office during all but two of the years from 1963 to 1975, that is, the period in which the welfare state experienced what Maguire refers to as its 'major expansion'. To be sure, Maguire also points out that much of this difference can be explained by differential rates of economic growth, and that the partisan contrasts all but disappear when one controls for changes in the level of GDP. Even then, however, the real point remains: wholly non-left governments have proved at least as willing welfarists as have those in which the left is involved (Maguire 1986: 334–8).

In all three instances, therefore, it appears that Ireland has not suffered unduly from the absence of a strong left party, and in this sense the best explanation as to why the class left remains so weak in electoral terms may perhaps also be the simplest: there is nothing in particular which is offered to voters by the left, and *only* by the left, and hence Irish voters perceive no real need for a strong left party or parties.

Yet it might also be argued that this assessment is actually too simple, and that it subordinates the more important question of the redistribution of resources to the less revealing one of the overall level of welfare expenditure. In this sense, a strong class left party might have been expected to effect not only a growth in general welfare spending, as was the case under Fianna Fáil, but also, and more crucially, a *more equitable redistribution* of national resources. But even in this case, the actual record of the Irish welfare state does not appear so ineffective. In the sophisticated comparative analysis of income distribution reported in this

volume by Callan and Nolan, for example, the Irish 'welfare effort', as measured in terms of cash transfers and taxes, is seen not only as comparable to that of other, more developed economies, but also as associated with a distribution of income which is somewhat *more* equal than the level of economic development alone might lead one to expect. In addition, the combined effect of cash transfers and direct taxes is reported as having as large an impact on income redistribution in Ireland as elsewhere, and, moreover, as having improved in effectiveness in the 1970s and, probably, in the 1980s also. In these terms, at least, Ireland not only enjoys a relatively well-financed welfare state but also one which seems reasonably, and increasingly, progressive.

At the same time, though, this is still not the whole story. When one looks at the experiences of the different *social classes*, as opposed to different *income groups* (and thus separates out the experiences of the relatively deprived unskilled working class, on the one hand, and the relatively favoured property-owning small farmers, on the other), the image of egalitarianism, redistribution and progressivity begins to dissipate. As Maguire has further observed, for example, 'the extent to which social programmes have contributed to a more equal sharing out of the fruits of economic progress must be questioned. . . . Such evidence as is available indicates that the redistributive process operates unevenly from a social class perspective, treating the property owning classes in a relatively favourable fashion' (1986: 320). Breen *et al.* draw a similar conclusion, noting that 'the high levels of [social] expenditure and the taxation needed to finance it . . . certainly failed to abate the importance of class in determining life chances' (1990: 97). Their conclusions on the impact of family policy are even more starkly stated: 'the Irish State's policies combine today to perpetuate and even exacerbate class inequalities' (1990: 121). And finally, as Whelan, Breen and Whelan's new data, reported in this volume, clearly indicate, differential levels of various forms of social deprivation are also strongly class-linked.

In short, when looking at occupational categories, and when looking at the class structure, there is little to counter the view that modern Ireland remains a profoundly inegalitarian society. The purpose of this observation is not simply to suggest that the situation might have been different had there been a successful mobilisation of a major class left party. Rather, the point is to emphasise the now very apparent paradox that, despite the existence of favourable class conditions, despite seemingly widespread class awareness, and despite the evidence of large-scale, class-based inequalities and of disadvantaged class interests which might benefit from being served in politics, there has never been a successful mobilisation of a class left party in Irish politics. In other words, the puzzle still remains,

and this particular peculiarity, now all the more striking, still needs to be explained.

The Political Culture and Political Strategy Explanation

Before reviewing this final kind of explanation it is necessary to return briefly to Sartori's (1968/1990) theoretical analysis of the factors which both facilitate and promote the development of class politics and class parties. In his closely argued and innovative essay, which seeks to clarify the distinction between the sociology of politics and political sociology, Sartori argues against the pervasive belief that political preferences and behaviour can be seen as the essentially 'automatic' or 'natural' reflection of social divisions—a belief most aptly summarised by Lipset's classic assertion that 'in every modern democracy conflict among different groups is expressed through political parties which basically represent a "democratic translation of the class struggle"' (Lipset, 1960: 220). Were such a translation to be automatic, then it is clear that not only would all modern industrial societies give rise to major working-class parties (which has clearly not been the case in the United States—or modern Ireland) but also that similar social conditions would create similar partisan structures, which, given the long-term presence of radical communist parties in certain western democracies (for example, Finland, France and Italy), and the long-term irrelevance of such parties in others (for example, Britain, Norway and Sweden) is clearly not a sustainable thesis. On the contrary, as Sartori emphasises, the partisan structure of class politics is much more contingent than is implied by any notion of simple 'reflection' or 'translation', and depends on a variety of factors, including the extent of class awareness, class consciousness, and class action, at least as much as on the existence of appropriate class conditions.

The existence of a class structure can therefore be regarded as a *necessary* but a far from *sufficient* condition for the emergence of class politics, which depends also on the degree to which members of different classes, and of the working class in particular, feel themselves to be members of a class, and, most crucially, are willing to act together, *in politics*, on that basis.⁹ And this, in turn, depends on the extent to which class identity is seen to be relevant to politics or, as Sartori puts it (1990: 70), on the extent to which members of the class have been 'class persuaded'. Which, rather neatly, brings to the forefront the persuasive role of class organisations and class parties, for the 'most likely and apt

⁹ For a later version of much the same argument, see Przeworski (1985).

persuader is the party (or the union) playing on the class appeal resource'. In other words, 'it is not the "objective" class (class conditions) that creates the party, but the party that creates the "subjective" class (class consciousness) . . . [W]henver parties reflect social classes, this signifies *more* about the party end than about the class end of the interaction' (Sartori, 1990: 169).¹⁰

In the Irish case, then, the most reasonable explanation for the absence of a class alignment in politics, and for the absence of a major class left alternative in the Irish party system, is what at first sight may also appear as the most tautological: unlike in the rest of western Europe, no party, or union, has sought sufficiently hard 'to persuade' such an alignment, and the 'class appeal' in politics has been persistently muted. In concluding, I would therefore like briefly to suggest three related factors which might account for this eschewal of the class motif in political mobilisation, all of which can constitute elements of what might be referred to more generally as a *politics of the national interest*.

The legacy of past cleavages

The first factor is that of the legacy of past conflicts, or past cleavages, in modern Irish history.¹¹ Two major cleavages dominated the early development and formative years of mass politics in Ireland, involving a nationalist mobilisation, on the one hand, and a Catholic mobilisation, on the other. These cleavages were clearly related, and alike expressed an opposition which might loosely be defined as that between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots', an opposition which acquired a degree of autonomy in most other European states and which, in these other countries, was eventually reflected in the mobilisation of mass working-class parties. In Ireland, however, and unusually so, it is important to realise that the

¹⁰ It is interesting to note that although operating from a perspective far removed from that of Sartori, Marxist political strategists have often theorised in a similar way about the class-party linkage. Thus, in *What Next?*, Trotsky writes: 'The proletariat acquires an independent role only at the moment when, from a social class *in itself*, it becomes a social class *for itself*. This cannot take place otherwise than through the medium of a party. The party is that historical organ by means of which the class becomes class conscious.' (quoted in Cannon, 1975: 5).

¹¹ For reasons of space, I am deliberately avoiding an account of the Irish experience of the more generalised process by which cleavages and party systems were 'frozen' in the wake of mass enfranchisement in western Europe (see Lipset and Rokkan, 1967; Bartolini and Mair, 1990), despite its obvious relevance for the development of the Irish party system and for Labour's failure in particular. Useful discussions of the applicability of the Lipset-Rokkan model to the Irish case can be found in Garvin (1974) and Sinnott (1978, 1984). Cf. also Farrell (1970) and Mair (1987: 43-60).

opposition between 'haves' and 'have-nots' did not really correspond to an internal national divide. Rather, being subsumed within both nationalist and Catholic mobilisation, it was seen to reflect the opposition of the under-privileged Catholic Irish, on the one hand, and the privileged non-Catholic British, on the other. This is, of course, well-known, and has accounted for most of the problems facing the Irish left in its attempts first to cope with, then to absorb, and, most recently, to differentiate itself from, a radical nationalist politics.

An oppositional movement imbued with a nationalist and Catholic identity, which incorporated virtually all of the citizens in what was to become the Irish Republic, left little space in which to mobilise an internal opposition, which might have polarised privileged and under-privileged *within* the Republic itself. Rather, there emerged a new political culture which, in its constant stress on Catholic nationalist uniformity and homogeneity—and through the early development of an institutional structure which had been built on the assumption that partisan politics would fail to develop—proved quite hostile to any notion of politicising internal social divisions. To be sure, such divisions did quickly develop in the new state, and, within the terms of reference of an intra-nationalist opposition, did prove to have substantial social underpinnings and hence to pit the relatively privileged against the relatively deprived. Even then, however, the explicitly social side of this conflict proved short-lived, and was often denied by the actual rhetoric of the mobilisers themselves. This was certainly the case with Fianna Fáil, for example, which, as Bew *et al.* (1989: 78) emphasise, 'sought to mobilise an agrarian constituency of small farmer and labourer aspiration and resentment . . . [while] confin[ing] this constituency within a national project which self-consciously eschewed class polarisation'. In class terms, as in social terms more generally, and despite all polarising political conflicts, the Irish people were to be seen as one. To divide this united people, and especially to promote a politics which would pit class against class, was both anti-national and irrelevant, for there could only be common enemies, and these all lay outside the boundaries of the state. In short, there developed a 'culture of community', an emphasis on the 'uniqueness, unity, and wholeness' of Irish political culture (O'Carroll, 1987: 83–4); and to 'persuade' a necessarily divisive class alignment in such an environment would inevitably prove a most difficult task (cf. also Hazelkorn, 1989).

The role of Fianna Fáil

The second factor which must be highlighted here is the long-term appeal of Fianna Fáil, which has acted to sustain a sense of political homogeneity

and uniformity—long beyond the period in which the momentum of both Catholic and nationalist triumphalism might have been expected to fade.¹² Fianna Fáil's ideological posture is based on two mutually reinforcing appeals—the emphasis on territorial unity and traditional nationalist politics, on the one hand, and the emphasis on social harmony and social cohesion, on the other. As early as 1933, for instance, de Valera had insisted that Fianna Fáil was 'a National Party, representing all sections of the community' (*Irish Press*, 20 January, 1933), while on the eve of his retirement as party leader his message was that 'Fianna Fáil is a national movement rather than a political party organisation' (*Irish Times*, 18 May, 1954). More recently, in 1969, Jack Lynch began a review of party policy by declaring his pride in being leader of 'this great democratic organisation, of this broadly based national movement representative as it is of all the people—and I mean all sections of the people—farmers, workers, businessmen and employers. Representing such a broad spectrum of Irish life, Fianna Fáil is in a unique position to produce and put into effect the policies best suited to the needs of the Irish people' (Lynch, 1969: 1). His successor, Charles Haughey, has spoken in similar terms. In 1983, for example, he insisted that 'our hopes, our beliefs, and aspirations are not sectional. They are national. They are not confined or limited by any regional boundaries or attitudes' (Haughey, 1983: 1). And so on.

In general, of course, such Fianna Fáil claims were not without foundation; the party did consistently win support from farmers and from workers, from professionals and employers, from young and old, such that its enduring constituency seemed like a microcosm of Irish society as a whole. Nor was Fianna Fáil averse to employing this cross-class appeal to its advantage, and in this sense the emphasis on social solidarity came easily. Given its constituency, Fianna Fáil could more credibly claim a national political project than could its more sectionally-based opponents. In 1943, for example, when the notion was mooted of replacing a single-party Fianna Fáil government with an inter-party national government, Fianna Fáil leaders argued that 'a government which came from a party representing all sections of the community was much more entitled to be called a national government than would a government composed of the odds and ends of little sectional groups' (*Irish Press*, 16 June, 1943). And it was precisely because Fianna Fáil drew substantial support from all the major social groups that such promotion of social solidarity favoured it electorally. In the first place, and to the extent that the general interest was perceived by the electorate as being of greater importance than any specific sectional interest, then one could anticipate a general drift towards

¹² The following remarks draw heavily on Mair (1987: 177–184).

Fianna Fáil as the most broadly representative 'national' party. More specifically, however, insofar as the promotion of social solidarity militated against the politicisation of social conflict, it also acted against any possible break-up of the party's broad, cross-class coalition. To set one group against another would be to divide the party against itself. To mobilise the town against the country, or worker against employer, would be to undermine the very social solidarity on which the party depended. It was in just such a context that Sean Lemass urged the incorporation of working class interests in party policy in the 1950s and 1960s (Bew and Patterson, 1982): no single social group could be excluded from the remit of the party.

The more widely documented emphasis on territorial nationalism, which has accompanied that on social solidarity, is of course also crucial to an understanding of the Fianna Fáil appeal. As Haughey (1981: 33) once stated in one of his more memorable rhetorical flourishes, 'in the broad sweep of [Fianna Fáil] membership and their faith and devotion to their country, there resides what one might well call "the Spirit of the Nation"'. But it is also important to note that this particular appeal to the nation finds expression in social, as well as in strictly territorial terms. The nation must be united, but it is a unity which derives from social solidarity. Of course, the appeal may also be accompanied by an emphasis on territorial nationalism *per se*, but, in more recent years, it was the social rather than the strictly territorial element which received greater attention. What must be emphasised, however, is that the two appeals do reinforce one another, in that it is precisely a record of militancy in terms of territorial nationalism that lends credibility to appeals to social solidarity and the national interest. The link between the two was perhaps most clearly expressed by Jack Lynch in an interview with the *Irish Times* (28 June, 1975): 'the soul of Fianna Fáil is still anti-Partition', he argued: 'To be in Fianna Fáil you must have a Republican outlook in its broadest conception. One must also have a very strong social sense, the desire to represent the broadest political spectrum of the Irish people'.

Hence, for ideological reasons, as well as for more pragmatic partisan and electoral reasons, Fianna Fáil has persistently sought to stress the need for the nation to be united—socially as well as territorially. In other words, Fianna Fáil has sought to define the political alternatives in such a way as to bias politics against the politicisation of internal social conflict in general, and of class conflict in particular, a strategy which finds many echoes in some of the more extreme populist rhetoric employed in the developing economies of Latin America, where ruling parties have, like Fianna Fáil, stressed the need to achieve economic growth with a minimum of social conflict (Malloy, 1977). Moreover, the impact of such a vision extended far beyond the limits of the Fianna Fáil constituency itself. For

it is not only true that 'the definition of the alternatives is the supreme instrument of power' (Schattschneider, 1960: 66) but also that it is the very access to power which enables one to continue to define the alternatives thereafter. Irish political culture, no less than the Irish state itself, still bears a strong Fianna Fáil imprint, an imprint which continues to bias that culture against an acceptance of the political expression of internal social conflict. We may not all be in the same boat, but all our different boats do lie alongside one another, and hence we should all wait, together, for the shared rising tide. It is for this reason also that class politics has been inhibited.

The failed Labour challenge

In seeking to challenge this widespread sense of social solidarity and in attempting to politicise internal class divisions, Labour, as the long-term proponent of social democracy in the Irish state and therefore as the only potential long-term class persuader, has undoubtedly faced an uphill struggle and a far from friendly environment. Nevertheless, even allowing for all the obstacles in its path, one might have expected the party to have achieved some greater success than has actually been the case. While it seems unrealistic to suppose that Labour could have gained the sort of support enjoyed by the Norwegian, Swedish, or even British parties, for example, it seems less implausible to suggest that it might have reached the level of, say, the Belgian or Dutch parties, where religious divisions have done much to curtail the appeal of democratic socialism.

In fact, there is evidence to suggest that Labour has got itself to blame for its own failure—at least in part. For, far from seeking to mount a sustained challenge to the social consensus, much of Labour's strategy has reflected an acquiescence in that consensus. And while there is little scope here to document this assertion adequately, there is also little need to do so, in that there is already ample published material recording the party's failure (see in particular Gallagher, 1982; Horgan, 1986; Bew *et al.*, 1989: 142–206). Two familiar points can however be briefly rehearsed. The first, and most obvious, is that Labour has never really sought to prioritise a strong class appeal or to persuade a class alignment. For much of the party's history, a socialist rhetoric has been most notable by its absence, with the emphasis on a class appeal apparent only as regards the need to voice the demands of trade-unionists. It was only really in the late 1960s, when the party was seen to move to the left, that a more social democratic rhetoric came to the fore. Even then, however, the softness of the party's position was evident. As Gallagher (1982: 69) has noted of the annual conference in 1967 which marked the first major shift to the left, 'almost

every delegate made much use of the word "socialism", but it remained an ill-defined term, not backed up by anything tangible, and used almost as a ritual word, as proof of comradeship and as a mark of a distinctive Labour identity'.

The second point which deserves highlighting concerns Labour's strategy, and is perhaps more telling. For, since first standing aside in 1918 in order to allow the new Irish electorate unhampered access to nationalist politics, Labour has virtually always drawn back from attempting to mobilise a genuine *political* alternative to mainstream Irish politics, and has instead opted for the more comfortable strategy of building *governmental* alternatives to Fianna Fáil. This was seen most crucially in 1948, when the hold of Fianna Fáil finally appeared to be weakening, and when, with the mobilisation of both Clann na Talmhan and Clann na Poblachta, it seemed that a genuine, and quite radical, realignment was possible. More recently, the same logic underlay the party's decision to coalesce with Fine Gael in 1973, at a time when it finally seemed in a position to establish an independent identity, and in a period in which it had finally begun to outpoll Fine Gael in Dublin to become the second party in the city. In both cases, the potential for long-term electoral growth was sacrificed in the interests of the short-term advantage of incumbency. More crucially, in both cases Labour entered government as part of a wide-ranging inter-party coalition which, given its overall breadth of representation and given its combined social basis, effectively mirrored the intra-party coalition of Fianna Fáil, and, as such, while providing an alternative government, proved wholly unable to persuade an alternative politics.¹³ Even when Fianna Fáil was in opposition, therefore, the logic of its alternatives did not disturb the *status quo*: government was to be in the interests of all sectors of society, no single group or class was to be privileged, and social solidarity was to remain unchallenged.

Thus, any attempt by Labour to mount a sustained challenge to this consensus, any attempt to mobilise a sustained class appeal, would have required it to maintain the independent stance which it had begun to develop in the late 1960s; and this, in turn, would have prevented any coalition with Fine Gael—regardless of the extent to which the latter was then promoting notions of social justice. Conversely, any commitment to coalition, and to the creation of an alternative government in the short-run, necessitated downplaying a potential class appeal, since what was

¹³ However, this is not to deny that the election programme of the 1973 coalition was striking in its relative commitment to redistribution, and, as such, did have the potential to mark a significant shift in policy emphasis. See Mair (1987: 197–202).

unique to Labour was its class identity and, in coalition, it was precisely the unique which had to take second place.

In sum, Irish party politics grew out of a culture which had emphasised solidarity, cohesion, and homogeneity. This culture was then consciously sustained by Fianna Fáil, which saw itself as a party that represented the interests of the Irish people as a whole, and that decried any attempt to turn sections of this people against others. And, finally, Labour in its own modest and cautious way, acquiesced in this same vision of politics, rarely mobilising, and never sustaining an effective alternative politics. In such a context, no major voice sought to persuade a class alignment. And hence, despite the existence of favourable class conditions, and despite evident class awareness, class itself has never really been seen as relevant to politics. It is the absence of a class persuader which, at least in part, has resulted in the absence of class politics.

Straws in the wind?

Increasing signs of change and fragmentation in the Irish party system since the mid-1980s suggest that the picture presented above may soon cease to reflect the prevailing political realities in Ireland. These signs are, as yet, mere straws in the wind, but they do nevertheless point in a reasonably consistent direction, and, above all, they point to a breakdown in the social consensus. Were this consensus finally to fracture, then the scope for internal opposition would inevitably be increased, and with it the scope for a new politicisation of internal social conflict. In such circumstances, an eventual realignment towards a modern version of 'class' politics would not be impossible.

The signs of change are many and varied but, at least at the political level, they can be easily summarised. In the first place, the emergence of the Workers' Party, with a growing though still minimal level of support, has helped to place class issues on the agenda in a way which is quite unprecedented in modern left politics in Ireland. Second, this new competitor on the left has had the effect of radicalising the Labour Party, in strategic if not pronouncedly ideological terms, and has encouraged Labour to return to a more politically independent stance. Third, and perhaps paradoxically, the legitimacy of such an independent politics on the left has also been strengthened by the emergence on the liberal right of the Progressive Democrats, and by the latter's fairly unashamed avowal of a conservative class politics. Fourth, the capacity of Fianna Fáil to continue to sustain its emphasis on social solidarity, and hence to continue to define the alternatives in a manner which is inimical to the politicisation of social conflict, has of late been undermined, not least as a result of its

abandonment of an anti-coalition stance and its consequent transformation into a run-of-the-mill political bargainer. Fifth, and perhaps most importantly, the image of homogeneity and uniformity, the 'culture of community' itself, has been badly shaken as a result of the inter-party, and inter-regional divisions concerning the role of the Catholic church, on the one hand, and the legitimacy of traditional nationalism, on the other. Finally, and perhaps only symbolically, there is now the hope for change which was instilled as a result of the success of Mary Robinson's presidential campaign, and which clearly built on the conjuncture of the new circumstances indicated above.

All of this suggests that opposition and criticism are increasingly legitimate, and that internal differences can now be aired. It suggests, in short, the long overdue waning of the politics of the national interest. Divisions, minority rights, and alternative positions are now more acceptable than ever before, and hence are also more susceptible to politicisation. And within this new world, a world which is characterised by increased social as well as political differentiation, the left, however, it will seek to define itself in future, need no longer appear apologetic. Times are changing, and so too, finally, are Ireland's last remaining political peculiarities.

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