

Irish sovereignty



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

With the general election win of 1932 by Fianna Fail, de Valera had indeed begun the task of establishing Ireland as a new nation under his own terms in the newly emerging map of Europe. It was the first election held in the newly formed Irish Free State that was contested by all political parties in the country as Sinn Fein had abstained due to their refusal to take an oath of Allegiance to the British King under De Valera's leadership during the 1920's.

It was also a massive achievement by Fianna Fail to collect a working majority along with the labour party as De Valera's new party had only been in existence for 5 years after Sinn Fein split at the 1927 Ard Fheis¹. De Valera and his supporters walked out of the meeting as the vote had gone to continue the abstention from the Dail which meant that W. T. Cosgrave and his Cumman na Gaedheal cabinet would continue to rule the country without any opposition. By 1932 the Irish State was ten years ruling its own people and also 9 years after the end of the civil war.

Tensions still existed between people on both sides of the treaty divide yet De Valera had come to the conclusion that only in parliament and legislative powers could he and his followers hope to dismantle the treaty. On entering Parliament many of the newly elected FF TDs carried firearms for fear that the outgoing cabinet would not hand over power in a co-operative manner. From the outset in 1932 and even more so after returning a majority of 5 seats the following February De Valera and Fianna Fail's mandate was as follows, to successfully return Gaelige as the vernacular language of the country.

To establish a self-sufficient nation that would be able to compete internationally, to gain international recognition both politically and economically as an independent state and not as a subordinate dominion of the British Empire. To eliminate the slums of Dublin's inner-city and replace them with state housing that was affordable to those who were in need of such projects. 2 To establish and consolidate the national and social differences with Britain that made Ireland a centre of culture and gave it the name of the land of saints and Scholars.

Although De Valera was the face and controlling mind behind the party men such as Sean Lemass who was Minister for Industry and commerce in the first cabinet and Sean McEntee the minister for finance also held considerable sway over party policy and legislation. Lemass in particular in the biography by Bryce Evans³ tells of the power that came with his brief of Industry and commerce and how he used it to not only modernise Ireland for the better but to also further his own political career simultaneously⁴. The 1932 general election was the first time that both sides of the old civil war sides were represented on the ballot paper.

Although the previous administration had in relation to the civil service and Judicial system retained the British template the tenure of Cummann Na Gaedheal many changes were made to the everyday running of the country such as the establishment of county councils. Law and Order had been the brief of Kevin O'Higgins and although some policies such as internment and the death penalty were used at a time when the gun was very much in Irish politics it could be argued that by taking extreme measures he was keeping the newly formed state safe.

As such 1932 and Fianna Fail were elected to office with all the foundations laid for them. This meant that the agenda of the party based on the promises they made to the Irish public was to establish Irish Economic and political sovereignty. The most drastic of these promises was the Anglo-Irish Economic war observed after the 1933 general election and was continued until 1938 one year before Europe was plunged into war. From 1934 to 1938 Ireland and Britain employed various sanctions on various trade goods and imports and exports in a battle where the losers were simply the Irish people.

After De Valera withheld the payment of Land annuities which were the repayments of funds given to Irish farmers after the 1901 Land act in which the amount of 100 million would eventually be paid to Britain by the end of the agreement. This can be seen as a political achievement of the Fianna Fail administration but also a failure on the social aspect of their party's administration as it was the rural Irish people who suffered the most from the war.

Many of the affected large cattle farmers of south-east Leinster and Munster showed their anger by joining with the newly formed national centre party and Cummann Na Geadheal as well as the ACA to form Fine Gael. The economic war was a social failure of Fianna Fail as it was their principal supporters who suffered most from the hardship it cost. De Valera promised a return to a traditional catholic rural Ireland in contrast to what he saw as the British model which was protestant and modernised⁶.

The influence of the Catholic Church on politics and policies under De Valera's rule is substantial but it must be remembered that although today

we know that church and state should be kept separate but at the time De Valera used the Church as his base moral guide and it was also entwined in his view of Irish Nationalism. As such with a population roughly 96% Catholic at the time was seen as an achievement of the party to consolidate religious independence from Protestant Britain.

In contrast to the Fianna Fail governments social failure during the economic war two social achievements undertaken by the government that were also heavy economic burdens were the Dublin Corporation slums clear out plan and housing developments which resulted in 14000 houses per annum⁷⁸ constructed during their 16 year reign a massive financial undertaking by a government ruling a country whose exports were being taxed thus leading to decreased international trade and in-turn less revenue for the government to work with.

Yet it still took a very high priority for the Fianna Fail administration along with stabilising the increase in emigration. Emigration had been a reoccurring theme in Ireland ever since the time of the Famine but during the crippling affects of the great depression and spilling into the years of Fianna Fail it had increased mainly from rural areas such as the west coast and Donegal. The ever increasing trend of emigration was not a political or social achievement of Fianna Fail it did in fact stabilise the emerging nation's fledgling economy through money sent back by those who lived and worked abroad.

This returning money was pivotal in funding the projects and schemes carried out by Lemass in opening up the country's industrial sector such as

the Irish sugar company and several other semi-state bodies, so that in the future emigration would not be a necessity to gain paid work for the native Irish. Along with the establishment of several semi-state bodies and an attempt to modernise the nation as a whole, under the Fianna Fail administration was the electrification of the Island.

Although the Shannon scheme had been originally under taken by the previous administration, and the contract given to the German owned company Siemens it was Fianna Fail who benefitted with bringing electricity to most of the Island which in itself was a big step forward in terms of modernisation it also increased the ability of Sean Lemass and his department to introduce new measures to improve industry throughout the country as with an electrified nation factory work could be run more efficiently and productively.

The electrification of Ireland coupled with the increase in home industries was a political and social achievement as electricity made the everyday life of the Irish citizen easier and more manageable and also increased the number of jobs available to the public in such areas as the Shannon scheme etc. It was also a political achievement because it reinforced the party's support in the countryside as many of the new industries that were started were established outside the capital in places such as Carlow, Mallow, Galway and Athlone which were areas that had been badly affected by the plight of emigration.

International matter and how Ireland was perceived outside the country by the influential powers of the time was a major concern of the Fianna Fail

party. De Valera himself took on the position of Minister for External Affairs to implement what he felt was the ideal Irish international agenda this can be seen in his engagement in dismantling the treaty of 1922.

Whereas Cosgrave and his government had concerned itself with maintaining law and order at home De Valera began to look at foreign policy and other nations to gauge what amendments he could introduce to dismantle the treaty, 1936 Edward VIII abdicated the throne of Britain to marry a divorcee Wallis Simpson. This gave the Catholic morally influenced and nationalist De Valera the chance to address one of the major points of conflict in the original treaty.

The Oath of Allegiance to the King had kept both Sinn Fein and Fianna Fail from sitting in Dail Eireann in its early years and as partition was not likely to be relinquished during those years removing this was like gaining the return of the treaty ports a concession that was very important to the cabinet and its followers. This was a political achievement of the Fianna Fail party and in particular De Valera as he could look beyond his protectionist ideals and inward thinking on self sufficient Ireland and Ireland as a totally independent nation to the changes abroad and how they would help him achieve his aims for Ireland.

Another achievement that was both of social and political value was the decision to remain neutral during the second World War, although this was a somewhat friendly neutrality shown by sending fire-trucks to the north during the Blitz on Belfast and the "escape" of allied soldiers over the border

unlike the internment of German pilots meant that Ireland was clearly more friendly to the Allies.

Neutrality came at a cost; Leamss was given a new and even more difficult brief as head of the department of rationing and was responsible for keeping the Island functioning through the war as best his department could.

Rationing on staple foods such as butter milk and tea as well as fuel were widespread and the defence policy was limited to blurring road signs and withholding weather reports that could be used by either side in the war to plan attacks over Irish airspace.

The spread of European fascism never took hold in Ireland as such but during the Fianna Fail administration it did cause a major concern to Law and Order when former Garda Commissioner Eoin O'Duffy became the leader of the ACA or "Blueshirts" and based his new group's political and economic ideals on that of Mussolini's Fascist party. De Valera and Fianna Fail who suppressed this new group with help from the IRA showed his resolve to take a stand against any form of insubordination that could have lead to a target being placed on the Irish government by either Britain or the Axis powers.

This was in accordance with his plan to keep Ireland neutral which he maintained by staying out of the Spanish Civil War while acting as Chairman of the League of Nations and also when declaring our neutrality during WWII. As has been observed neutrality was the only logical course of action at the time due to the fact with such a weak economy concessions such as cutting the army, rationing of fuel and only a newly electrified country meant had we

joined the war on either side would have meant total annihilation of the Ireland as a nation.

With no strong fortifications a planned invasion of the country would have been swiftly completed by either the allies or the axis powers and it is in response to a speech by Churchill on how if Britain's necessity had called for it he would have had no hesitation in doing so. De Valera responded to this address in a dignified manner expressing how both Britain and Ireland shared the resolve to fight a foreign power and keep them at bay yet Ireland had been doing it for 700 years.

This was a huge political achievement as it showed that De Valera and Fianna Fail had clearly changed their radical view on Irish nationalism and while maintain that both nations were different similarities could be drawn between the two. In conclusion the Fianna Fail administration began as one that had achieved to this day the only overall majority in the Dail and when they left office they were only but a few steps away from the Republic the Party had craved for so long.

The electrification of the country, setting up of home industries, economic stability and housing projects all helped to improve the quality of life of Irish citizens, while leading the league of nations, standing their ground on neutrality, suppressing both fascist and nationalist organisations that risked the safety of the country along with the publishing of our own constitution in 1937 were the stand out political achievements of the party's first terms in office.

Yes, De Valera achieved his vision of a better Ireland, but he did not do so alone. As part of Fianna Fail, Sean Lemass and Sean McEntee also held considerable sway over party policy and legislation and assisted in the rebuilding of Ireland into a more independent country.