

Affairs, Partner-Swapping, and Spring Tides: The Irish General Election of November 1992

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The coalition government of Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats (PDs) which had ruled the Republic of Ireland since summer 1989 collapsed in early November 1992. The PDs' ministers resigned after comments made by Irish Prime Minister and leader of Fianna Fáil, Albert Reynolds, who had won the contest to succeed Charles Haughey as party leader and Taoiseach eight months previously. Reynolds had appeared before a legal tribunal investigating Ireland's beef industry and its allegedly corrupt interactions with government and political parties. He declared that evidence given to the same tribunal in July had been 'reckless, irresponsible and dishonest'. The evidence at issue had been presented by Desmond O'Malley, his colleague in government, the Minister for Industry and Commerce, and leader of the Progressive Democrats. O'Malley had told the tribunal that decisions made by Reynolds when he was Minister for Industry and Commerce in 1987 were 'grossly unwise, reckless and foolish'.

Although O'Malley and his party considered unwisdom, recklessness and folly legitimate nouns for public descriptions of governmental colleagues in Fianna Fáil, they took umbrage at accusations of dishonesty on the part of their own party leader. The 'partners in government' blamed each other for making the continuation of coalition impossible. Each accused the other of political blackmail and of containing people within their ranks unfit to be ministers. After the PDs' departure the minority Fianna Fáil government lost the ensuing vote of confidence in Dáil Éireann. A general election was called for 26 November and the government decided to hold its planned referendums on abortion on the same day.¹ Thus ended the first coalition government in the state's history between Fianna Fáil and another political party. Whether Reynolds had unintentionally caused the collapse of the government, or deliberately engineered the break-up of the coalition to precipitate an election he thought he could win (or to avoid further embarrassments stemming from the beef tribunal), remained subjects of speculation throughout the campaign.

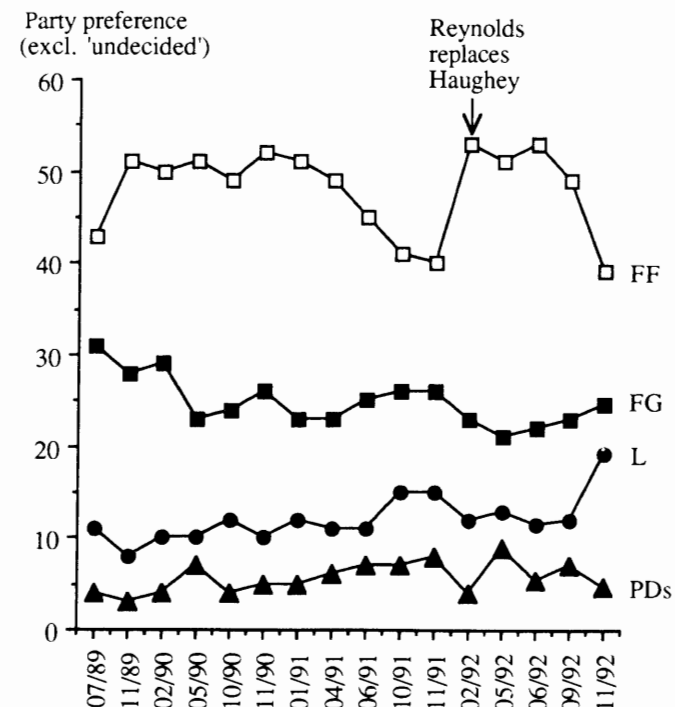
PARTY PERFORMANCES

Fianna Fáil. To the surprise of some the first opinion polls of the campaign showed that support for Fianna Fáil had rapidly slipped below the 50 per cent level the party had enjoyed since it replaced Haughey with Reynolds in February 1992 (see Figure 1). The polling organisations, especially MRBI, accurately predicted levels of first-preference support for the major parties, and confirmed what is now a standard pattern in Irish election campaigns: Fianna Fáil enjoys much greater popular support *in government* than it does when it is appealing to become *the* government. On election day Fianna Fáil recorded its worst share of the first-preference vote since 1927 (39.1 per cent), a bitterly disappointing result for the Republic's hitherto predominant party. Its slippage in support, and its loss of 9 seats in the 166 seat parliament, underline that it is now highly 'pregnable' (see Tables 1 and 2). Moreover, this result, under a new leader who had had only a brief honeymoon, makes plain that Fianna Fáil's failure to win an overall parliamentary majority since 1977 has deeper roots than Haughey's or Reynolds' leadership.

Progressive Democrats. To Fianna Fáil's chagrin the Progressive Democrats increased their share of seats in Dáil Éireann, even though their share of the vote (4.7 per cent) was down on 1989 (see Tables 1 and 2). Although the smaller and distinctively right-wing party had been associated with greater willingness to embrace deflationary economic policies and high levels of unemployment, it fared better than Fianna Fáil in winning extra seats for two reasons: it was the beneficiary of transfers from supporters of other parties, especially Fine Gael, in Ireland's single transferable voting system; and it managed not only to avoid the image of corruption associated with Fianna Fáil, but also to claim credit for exposing it.

Fine Gael. John Bruton, the leader of Fine Gael, canvassed the electorate with the idea of a 'rainbow coalition' to remove Fianna Fáil from government. His proposed membership of the rainbow included the Progressive Democrats on the right, Labour on the left, with his christian democratic party projected as the balanced arbiter of blue and red politics. Fine Gael and the Progressive Democrats encouraged their supporters to transfer their votes to one another, which they did to a considerable extent. However, Fine Gael failed to capitalise on Fianna Fáil's difficulties and received its worst share of the first-preference vote (24.5 per cent) since 1948 (see Figure 2). It lost ten seats, was reduced to being the third party in Dublin, and ended its campaign in a poor position to bargain for a place in government, and with its leader's reputation badly dented.

FIGURE 1
PARTY SUPPORT IN PUBLIC OPINION POLLS 1989-92, AND THE 1992
ELECTION RESULT



Source: Market Research Bureau of Ireland/*Irish Times*

Labour. The most obvious victor in the election was the Labour Party. Ireland's democratic socialist party had its most successful electoral outing ever, led by its resilient and still youthful leader Dick Spring, who had been the most prominent parliamentary scourge of both Reynolds and his predecessor. Spring has deservedly established a reputation for effectiveness in debate, leadership and probity, reflected in his consistent winning of the highest satisfaction rating in polls on party leaders; and his party benefited from providing the sole plausible parliamentary opposition to the government's right wing economic policies after 1989. The dramatically high levels of unemployment, exacerbated by Ireland's commitment to the Exchange Rate Mechanism of the European Community, created a wider audience for left-wing criticisms of economic orthodoxy. Labour campaigned on a platform of social democratic economics and moral liberalism, and advised its voters to

TABLE 1

PARTIES' FIRST PREFERENCE SHARE OF VOTES, DEVIATION FROM PROPORTIONALITY, AND EFFECTIVE NUMBER OF PARTIES, NOVEMBER 1992

Party	First preference vote (%)	Seats in Dáil Éireann (%)	Deviation from proportionality
Fianna Fáil	39.1	41.0	+1.9
Fine Gael	24.5	27.1	+2.6
Labour	19.3	19.9	+0.6
Progressive Democrats	4.7	6.0	+1.3
Democratic Left	2.8	2.4	-0.4
Green Party	1.4	0.6	-0.8
Sinn Féin	1.6	0	-1.6
Workers Party	0.7	0	-0.7
Independents/others	6	3.0	-3.0

Effective Number of Parties in Votes, $N_v = 1/HH_v = 1/\sum (pv)^2 = 3.88$ (see endnote 2)

Effective Number of Parties in Seats, $N_s = 1/HH_s = 1/\sum (ps)^2 = 3.5$ (see endnote 3)

Relative reduction in effective number of parties, $r = (N_v - N_s)/N_v = .38/3.88 \times 100/1 = 9.8\%$ (see endnote 4)

Sources: *Irish Times* and author's calculations.

TABLE 2

SEATS HELD BY PARTIES IN DÁIL ÉIREANN 1987-92

Party	1987	1989	1992	Net gain (87-92)	Net gain (89-92)
Fianna Fáil	81	77	68	-13	-9
Fine Gael	51	55	45	-6	-10
Labour	12	15	33	+21	+18
Progressive Democrats	14	6	10	-4	+4
Workers' Party*	4	7	0	-4	-7
Democratic Left			4	+4	+4
Democratic Socialist Party¶	1	1		-1	-1
Green Party	0	1	1	+1	0
Independents/Others	3	4	5	+1	+1

Notes: * Six deputies left the Workers Party to form Democratic Left.

¶ The Democratic Socialist Party deputy joined Labour.

Sources: *Irish Times*, O'Leary (1987), O'Leary and Peterson (1990).⁵

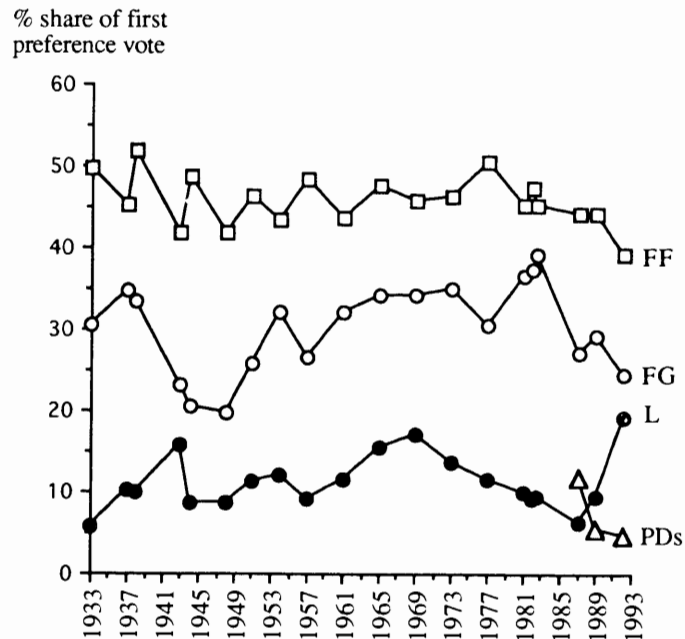
transfer to parties and candidates of the left. It refused the blandishments of Fine Gael, its on-off coalition partner between 1973 and 1987, suggesting that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael should go into coalition if no party had an overall majority. Labour was rewarded handsomely for this go-it-alone strategy, surpassing Fine Gael to become the second largest party in Dublin (where a third of the Republic's electorate live), and

winning 33 of the 166 seats in Dáil Éireann, more than doubling its representation (see Table 2). It would have won even more seats had it decided to run more candidates, but even the party's most enthusiastic supporters did not believe that they would top the poll in urban constituencies, or that one of their candidates, Dr Moosajee Bhanjee, a South Africa-born Indian, would win an unprecedented victory in rural Clare. Bhanjee's slogan, 'Keep out the cowboys: Vote for the Indian!' was the most amusing of the campaign.

The scale of Labour's breakthrough was not altogether predictable from the polls taken between July 1989 and September 1992, as Figure 1 suggests. However, Figure 1 shows that Labour's popularity had started to rise at the expense of Fianna Fáil in late 1991, before Haughey resigned, hinting that Labour could eat into Fianna Fáil's working class support if given a chance. Fianna Fáil's choice of Albert Reynolds, a millionaire with a rural background, and his errors of judgement in office, gave Labour that chance. Labour's impressive performance was additionally aided by the disintegration of the Workers' Party, in the wake of post-1989 faction-fights in Ireland's communist party, and scandalous associations with Moscow gold and the Official IRA. Labour's success also owed much to imaginative campaign management, based on the techniques successfully used in its promotion of Mary Robinson as a presidential candidate in 1990. Labour's success confirmed the reversal of its declining vote between 1969 and 1987, and marked the largest tally of first-preference votes for the third party since the Irish party system acquired its present form in 1933 (see Figure 2). *The Left and Green fringes.* The most obvious feature of the 1992 election on the left and Green fringe was the extent to which Labour captured the support of its potential voters. The Workers' Party, the only avowedly Marxist party expanding its electoral support in western Europe in the 1980s, died in the 1992 election, and Democratic Left (DL), its modernising successor, only just avoided annihilation. The scale of the swing to Labour allowed Democratic Left to benefit through transfers from the larger socialist party's voters. Democratic Left's minimal prospects of future electoral growth now depend on Labour discrediting itself with left-wing voters during the lifetime of the next government. Sinn Féin, the hard-line green, nationalist and left-wing party, which offers critical support for the Provisional IRA, failed once again to achieve any electoral breakthrough, winning no seat, and a mere 1.6 per cent of first-preference votes. The ecologically Green Party, in harder economic times, failed to maintain its momentum from the 1989 election, and stood still, losing one seat and gaining another.

FIGURE 2

FOUR MAJOR PARTIES' SHARE OF THE FIRST PREFERENCE VOTE, 1933-92



Sources: Gallagher (1985), Mair (1987), O'Leary and Peterson (1990).⁶

GOVERNMENT FORMATION: PARTNER-SWAPPING AND A COALITION BASED ON POLICY AND OFFICE

The electoral outcome meant that no party could form a majority government, and that none could form a credible minority government. Moreover, no pre-election alliance, like that informally arranged between Fine Gael and the PDs, was able to form a government. Not surprisingly the formation of a new government took over six weeks, and was not resolved until January 1993.

Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael (FG) refused to cohabit, even though Labour and DL invited them to do so. Fine Gael proposed its version of a rainbow coalition (FG + Labour + PDs). Labour countered by agreeing a negotiating posture with Democratic Left and then by seeking the agreement of Fine Gael to consider a left of centre coalition (Labour + FG + DL), possibly backed by independents. Labour merely hinted that it might consider a wider rainbow (Labour + DL + FG

+ PDs). Minimum-deputy coalition theory would have predicted the formation of either of the latter two forms of coalition government. However, Fine Gael was not prepared to join a heavily left-weighted coalition, and neither Labour nor DL were enthusiastic about cooperating in government with the PDs, a sentiment which was warmly reciprocated. Labour's terms also included the establishment of an alternating premiership, which was unacceptable to both FG and the PDs. A pure office-seeking coalition could not be formed.

Labour proceeded cautiously, knowing that its previous experiences of coalition government had ended with the party losing electoral support and suffering extensive internal conflict. Having shown his supporters and much of the wider electorate that a worthwhile government could not be formed which included the PDs, and having partially protected himself and his party from an attack from the left by DL, Spring left himself open to bids from Reynolds and Fianna Fáil. They were forthcoming on terms that could not be refused: a coalition based on major policy compromises and a generous share of offices.

A 60-page document, entitled *Fianna Fáil and Labour Programme for a Partnership Government*, resulted from negotiations between the two parties. It implies a staggering legislative programme, and is radical by Irish standards. Fianna Fáil conceded on all the issues of moral liberalism: legislation will be passed to legalise homosexuality; the two parties will support a referendum to permit civil divorce; and legislation will be passed to facilitate public information on abortion, the right to travel to obtain an abortion outside the state, and to regulate abortions made legal by the Supreme Court's decision in the world-famous 'X' case.⁷ The rights and status of women will be enhanced and protected. Fianna Fáil additionally conceded a series of changes designed to produce 'clean government': an Ethics in Government bill; compulsory registration of the interests of deputies, senators and senior civil servants; and state funding of political parties. The two parties also committed themselves to major changes in the operations of the Irish parliament and to the creation of an independent electoral commission. The structure of central government ministries has also been reorganised in deference to Labour's priorities. Five new departments have been established through reorganisations: Enterprise and Employment; Equality and Law Reform; Tourism and Trade; Transport, Energy and Communications; and Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht. Job-creation programmes and economic expansion have been agreed, subject to the provisos of the Maastricht Treaty, as have increased expenditures on hospitals, education, housing, child benefit and public transport; and

there are proposals to create a state bank and to promote an active industrial policy.

After much deliberation and internal debate Labour agreed this programme for government with Reynolds and his colleagues, making some concessions which departed from their preferred positions on economic policy. The fact that the programme was condemned as economically irresponsible by Fine Gael and PDs helped sell it to Labour's membership. Spring did not achieve his request for an alternating premiership, but as deputy prime minister won responsibility for ensuring the implementation of the agreed programme for government. He also takes responsibility for the Department of Foreign Affairs which includes the sensitive Northern Ireland portfolio, and his party has a share of cabinet seats (6 out of 15) and of junior ministries disproportionate to its number of deputies.

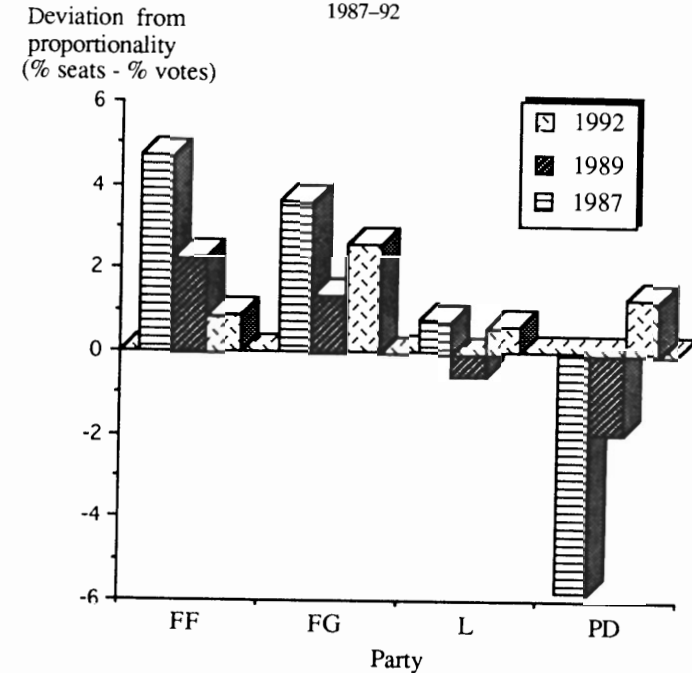
In the second week of January 1993 the new government was elected and sworn in with the largest legislative majority in the modern history of the state. Indeed, given the two parties combined share of popular support, their present legislative majority and the sheer scale of their agreed commitments, it is both conceivable and feasible that this coalition government could last at least two legislative terms. Now that Fianna Fáil has ceded change on issues of moral liberalism the two parties should find governmental cohabitation relatively easy, scandal and other unforeseen disasters permitting. Both parties are, historically at least, popular parties of the left: one is strong in rural and urban Ireland, the other in urban Ireland; and neither have ever fully embraced economic liberalism. Moreover, they are instinctually closer on attitudes and policy towards Northern Ireland than Fianna Fáil is with either Fine Gael or the Progressive Democrats.

A FOUR OR THREE-AND-A-HALF PARTY SYSTEM?

The 1992 election results suggest that the Republic now has either a four or a three-and-a-half party system. Using Taagepera and Shugart's indices the effective number of parties in votes is 3.8, or almost a four-party system, while the effective number of parties in parliamentary seats is 3.5, exactly a three-and-a-half party system (see calculations in Table 1). The three key parties are Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Labour, the fourth potential player is the Progressive Democrats. All four parties were sufficiently well supported and organised in 1992 to ensure that the percentage of seats they won exceeded their share of the first-preference vote. This suggests that they are now all entrenched participants in the party system (see Table 1 and Figure 3). Predictions of the

death of Labour, heard in the 1980s, and of the demise of the PDs, heard in the early 1990s, have to be revised: both are here to stay.

FIGURE 3
THE FOUR MAJOR PARTIES' DEVIATION FROM PROPORTIONALITY,
1987-92



Sources: O'Leary (1987), O'Leary and Peterson (1990).⁸

What is most distinctive about the emergent new party system, foreshadowed in the 1987 and 1989 elections, is the existence of an *explicit* left-right cleavage.⁹ Labour represents the social democratic left, the Progressive Democrats the neo-liberal right. What is driving the new system is that both Labour and the PDs can now exercise a gravitational pull on the two centrist parties, and weaken their capacity to compete as 'catch-all' parties. Fine Gael must guard its flank against the PDs, which weakens its ability to project itself as a social democratic party, as it did under Garret FitzGerald, and to a lesser extent under Alan Dukes; while Fianna Fáil must guard itself against the threat that Labour will steal its hitherto solid working-class support, which weakens its ability to project itself as party of fiscal rectitude for the middle classes.

The new system is also marked by other novel features:

- First, the historically most significant parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, appear to have been decisively weakened. The combined Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael share of the first-preference vote has fallen almost 20 percentage points since 1982 (from 84.4 per cent in 1982 to 63.6 per cent in 1992, and see Figure 2). The two parties may, of course, reverse their recent declines, but to do so they will have to alter the nature of their appeals, that is, steal Labour or Progressive Democrat clothing.
- Second, coalition government has become the norm in the Republic. This trait follows logically from the decline of Fianna Fáil as the natural party of government. Of the two largest parties hitherto only Fine Gael had to form coalitions to win governmental office. However, since 1989 Fianna Fáil has had to accept that it too must bargain for office like other ordinary parties; it is no longer 'the embodiment of the nation', a change which has affected the psychology of political elites and voters; and that makes policy-based rather than office-seeking coalitions more likely.
- Third, there are now three explicit lines of cleavage in Irish electoral politics.¹⁰ There is first the cleavage identified above between economic social democrats (who favour corporatism, solidaristic wages and incomes' policies, welfarism, and an active governmental industrial policy) and economic neo-liberals (who favour low taxation, privatisation of enterprise, a safety-net approach to welfare and free marketeering). On this cleavage Labour is on the left and the Progressive Democrats on the right; while Fianna Fáil is more to the left, and Fine Gael is more to the right. Then there is a second explicit cleavage between fundamentalist Catholics on the one hand, and liberal Catholics, Protestants and secular citizens on the other. On this cleavage Labour and the Progressive Democrats are almost entirely in the liberal and secular camp; Fianna Fáil (especially its supporters) is far more fundamentalist than liberal, while Fine Gael is somewhat more liberal than fundamentalist. However, Fianna Fáil's deal with Labour means it has signalled its willingness to go with the tide of secular modernisation. Finally, there is a third and less explicit cleavage, and which so far is less electorally important. It is between those who favour the unification of Ireland and/or intervention in Northern Ireland (as of right *or* by consent), and those who are indifferent to (or against) Irish unification and an active nationalist policy. On this cleavage Fianna Fáil is the most nationalist party, and the Progressive Democrats the least nationalist. Labour is more nationalist, albeit in a civic rather than ethno-religious manner, than it is indifferent towards Northern Ireland, while Fine Gael under

Bruton's leadership is shifting towards indifference and what is known in Ireland as 'revisionism'.

CONCLUSION

The foregoing analysis suggests that a new four-party Irish system has emerged from the processes of modernisation and Europeanisation previously identified in this journal,¹¹ and that a Fianna Fáil-Labour centre-left coalition is consistent with the preferences, support bases and interests of both parties, and may endure for more than one parliament (given the parties' existing support bases, and assuming scandals implicating Fianna Fáil do not implode the coalition). It also implies that a Fine Gael-Progressive Democrat centre-right alliance will articulate opposition to this coalition government. However, politics is as scientific as meteorology, and Irish politics has not yet become a predictable weather system. What no one knows is what will happen if and when Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael suffer further losses of electoral support.

NOTES

1. The abortion referendums are not discussed at length here because they did not play a significant role in determining people's choices between parties. The electorate were asked to vote on (a) whether people should have the right to public information on abortion, (b) the right to travel outside the state, and (c) on the 'substantive question'. Two thirds of the electorate answered 'yes' to the two questions on (a) and (b), but a majority said 'no' to the substantive question. The latter suggested a constitutional amendment permitting the termination of 'the life of an unborn' only to save the life 'as distinct from the health' of a mother (excluding the threat of suicide). It therefore gave both pro-choice and pro-life supporters different grounds for opposing it. The defeat of the substantive question means that the government must now regularise the decision of the Supreme Court in the 'X case' (for which see S. McDonagh *The Attorney General v X and Others* (Dublin: Incorporated Council of Law Reporting for Ireland, 1992)). In plain words the government will have to legalise abortion when the life of the mother is at risk, including from her own suicide.
2. The measure of the effective number of parties (in votes and seats) is given by the reciprocal of the Hirfindahl-Hirschman concentration index, defined as $1/\sum (p_i)^2$ where p is the fractional share of the i th party and Σ stands for summation over all parties. For a full discussion see R. Taagepera and M.S. Shugart *Seats and Votes* (New Haven CT: Yale UP, 1989), pp.77-91, 273.
3. See note 2 above.
4. The remarkably low level of r indicates that the result of the 1992 general election was very proportional in translating first-preference votes into seats.
5. For discussions of the previous two Irish general elections in this journal see B. O'Leary, 'Towards Europeanisation and Realignment? The Irish General Election, February 1987' *West European Politics* 10/3 (July 1987), pp.455-65, and B. O'Leary and J. Peterson, 'Further Europeanisation and Realignment. The Irish General Election, June 1989', *West European Politics* 13/1 (Jan. 1990), pp.124-36.

6. M. Gallagher, *Political Parties in the Republic of Ireland* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1985), and P. Mair, *The Changing Irish Party System* (London: Pinter, 1987).
7. See note 1 above.
8. See note 5 above.
9. Mair (note 6) establishes the extent to which an implicit left-right contest has frequently operated in Irish electoral politics.
10. Mair (note 6) p. 221 identified a triangular cleavage system in Irish politics, differentiating three axes of opposition: (i) pro-welfarism/trade-unionism v. anti-welfarism/anti-trade-unionism, (ii) secularism/ pluralism v. anti-pluralism, and (iii) pro-market/enterprise v. anti-market / enterprise. There is much historic merit in Mair's argument from which the argument in the text derives. However, in the post-1989 world two of Mair's axes of opposition, (i) and (iii), are much less distinguishable than they once were, and I believe that the parties are (and will be) more differentiated on their positions towards Northern Ireland than Mair's categorisation allows.
11. See note 5 above.