

REVIEW: FIANNA FÁIL AND IRISH LABOUR

Michael Hopkinson

Kieran Allen (1997), **Fianna Fáil and Irish Labour: 1926 to the Present**,
London: Pluto Press, pb, £12.99, ISBN 074530866X, 222pp.

The availability of new source material, notably in the National Archives, and the increase of scholarly interest in the character of the independent Irish Free State/Republic has in the last decade brought about a substantial rise in the number and range of publications on the subject. It is not surprising that attention has turned to study of the state's dominant political institution, the Fianna Fáil Party, and particularly at a time when its control appears to be faltering.

Kieran Allen's book rejects the commonly held belief that Fianna Fáil's strength derived 'from a mystical communal past rather than from representing the interests of particular groups and classes.' (p.3). Allen argues that the importance of machine, clientalist techniques, helping to unite materialist values in rural and urban Ireland, has been overrated. Fianna Fáil is usually depicted as representing the triumph of nationalist philosophy over class identity as demonstrated by the priority on party platforms given to the campaign against partition and in favour of developing the Irish language and culture. De Valera and his long-term dominance of politics is seen as personifying rural, self sufficient non materialistic values - his charismatic appeal cutting across class barriers. Allen argues, however, that there are limits to the effectiveness of nationalist and populist slogans and that there must be an economic base for any successful political appeal. He stresses that the potential of the Labour Party in independent Ireland has long been underplayed: the party's failure Allen puts down not only to the ability of Fianna Fáil to fashion its policies to appeal to all elements of the Irish population but also to the Labour Party's own fundamental conservatism,

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which prevented it from making any effective challenge to the nationalist hegemony, and to the Party's internal divisions. While Fianna Fáil rhetoric emphasised Faith, united Ireland and Gaelicisation, Allen sees the party's main concern as fostering the interests of native businessmen and small farmers. Up to the Second World War, Fianna Fáil successfully related protectionist economic policies to its nationalist appeal contrasting with the pro-treaty pursuance of policies favouring large farming interests and Anglo-Irish trade. When Fianna Fáil could no longer claim economic success in the 1950s, and was frequently out of office, it shifted to adoption of free trade and corporatist agreements with employers and unions. Against the background of the 1970s international recession, Fianna Fáil resorted to the old populist nationalist slogans which have become increasingly irrelevant to contemporary Ireland. The insincerity of Charles Haughey's embrace of conservative Catholicism and hard line anti-partitionist rhetoric summed up the bankruptcy of his party's philosophy.

Allen writes from a committed left wing perspective and that is both the book's main strength and its main weakness. On page nine he writes: 'What follows is an attempt to analyse the relationship between Fianna Fáil and organised workers from a Marxist perspective'. Allen has worked extensively on primary sources, but much less so on secondary material. The intention of the research is to buttress the basic economic interpretation. A good example of Allen's tunnel vision lies in his treatment of the Northern question. On page eight he sweepingly generalises: 'Fianna Fáil did little about the Border because it did not want to upset the stability of capitalist social relations on the island. It often rhetorically attacked British influence, but once it established that the South was a sovereign, independent state, it was more than willing to work with the British ruling class.' There is much reason to be cynical about Free State/Republic attitudes to the North, but matters were much more complex than Allen's crude analysis would suggest - de Valera, for instance, was no doubt sincere in desiring unity but could see no practical means of bringing it about in the short term. Concern about developments in the North, particularly in border counties, goes far beyond simple economic interest. Furthermore, in eliminating the importance of personality and leadership, Allen goes too far. De Valera was a poor speaker and his aloof, ascetic character had less observable populist appeal than a Peron; nonetheless he did maintain a peculiar hold over large elements of the Irish population. Neither should Haughey's intimidatory control over a considerable proportion of his party be ignored.

Allen has much that is worth saying on specific issues. He has, therefore, good reason to question the prevailing orthodoxy that there was no coherent

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Fascist philosophy behind the Blueshirt movement. He argues effectively that the PAYE revolt of 1979 contributed much to the divisions within the party which brought about Haughey's ascent to the leadership. Allen's sceptical approach to Sean Lemass is something of a relief after what has amounted to Lemass' virtual canonisation in recent historiography. In questioning long prevailing consensus attitudes, Allen's book is valuable but there is still room for the first full length history of Fianna Fáil.

It is doubtful whether Allen fully understands the conservatism of much of Irish society. It is the historian's business to explain and not to declare sympathies. In his last paragraph Allen writes:

What is needed in Ireland is a very different type of left-wing force which can oppose the conservative legacy that Fianna Fáil helped to create. ... However, today there is a new Ireland. The working class is stronger and more aware of itself than ever. ... The challenge facing Marxists is to build a force that combines the militancy of workers with the type of socialist politics which can oppose the state that was fashioned by Fianna Fáil from the partition settlement. It is a challenge that can be met.

(p.187)

This is not the conclusion of a detached historian. One fears that Allen will have to wait some considerable time for the achievement of the Irish Socialist millenium.

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