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Clann na Poblachta: its origin and growth

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Part II*

Clann na Poblachta's success in the 1947 bye-election astonished everyone – including the new party itself. The three results represented a substantial shift in public opinion against Fianna Fail – 14.75% in Dublin, 17.24% in Tipperary (in both of which constituencies Clann were victorious) and 14.5% in Waterford, where it lost.

De Valera responded immediately. He was determined to outflank Clann at national level and thereby (hopefully for him) to nip the fledgling party in the bud. So on 31 October 1947 he announced that there would be a general election in the new year.

1948 Election Campaign

Accordingly, from early November 1947 all political parties plunged into the work of drumming up electoral support. For Clann in particular that month was one of massive internal reform and mushroom development. For example, by the time Clann's first ard-fheis was held on 30 November, the party had acquired some prestigious new recruits. These included Dr. Patrick McCartan, the recent presidential candidate, Mrs. Tom Clarke of Dublin (widow of the 1916 leader), and Dr. Joseph Brennan of Dun Laoghaire, the well-known coroner, who had supported the Franco cause in the Spanish Civil War.

In addition Aodh de Blacam, the popular *Irish Press* columnist "Roddy the Rover", a Scotsman by birth, joined. He said he despaired of F.F. ever again returning to its 1932 ideals. Amongst new members elected to Clann's executive at the ard-fheis were The O'Rahilly, son of another 1916 leader, Maura Laverty the well-known writer, Ruairí Brugha, son of Cathal Brugha, and Austin Stack junior, son of the famous Kerry republican and GAA figure.

Moreover, at grass-roots level in several constituencies Clann tried to attract the interest of promising young candidates. In Cork city, for instance, it unsuccessfully approached Jack Lynch, the future F.F. TD and Taoiseach. Also, with Noel Hartnett (the Dublin barrister and radio personality) acting as intermediary, Dr. Noel Browne, then working in a Wicklow sanatorium, became a member of Clann.

Clann's electoral ploy was to put up two candidates in 3- and 4-seat constituencies, and three in the 5-seaters. In Mayo North (3 seats) they ran three; in four 4-seaters in Clare, Limerick, Mayo and Tipperary (south) they ran three apiece. Throughout Cork generally the party was weak, for different reasons. At the same time Clann bowed to conventional political wisdom in other respects, by trying to leave its best candidates to fight in their home bases.

Campaign Ups and Downs

Con Lehane was at ease in Dublin South Central, where he had been an IRA officer up to recently. In Cavan James Tully was known for having taken part in the 1939 British mainland

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Sean MacBride

bombing campaign, while Sean McCool in Donegal had a similar claim to fame.¹ Ruairí Brugha's parents had been Sinn Féin TDs in Waterford during the War of Independence.²

In mid-November F.F. began a series of big press advertisements, aimed at winning back support in the election.³ Following the same didactic style of Clann's earlier notices, they were pitched at the educated, discriminating middle classes, who had been at the heart of the recent swing to Clann. Also, the topics covered – jobbery, prices, emigration, social services and the cost of government – were all at the heart of Clann's policy.

Two events in November helped F.F.'s flagging support. A new Housing Bill introduced by MacEntee promised new and bigger housing grants, for new dwellings, reconstruction and even repairs. Then in 13 November de Valera himself came back from talks in London with new benefits for Irish agriculture that would help the farming lobby at the polling booths. It took a month before Clann hit back; but they did so then in an imaginative way.

On 14 December the first issue of a four-page bulletin entitled *Clann* appeared. Edited by Maura Laverty, a skilled propagandist, the first lead-story was by Sean MacBride himself, and bore the title "Towards a Christian Ireland". It called for clean open politics. Both Dr. Robert Collis (not a Clann member at all) and Dr. Noel Browne dealt in emotive tones with the twin ills of poor housing and T.B.; other pieces covered youth in politics and economic policy.

Around this time too a slight shift in Clann policy was evident, showing some political sophistication not previously evident. Issues such as health, housing and the Irish language got equal prominence with topics like forestry, monetary policy and unemployment. Clann, it seems, was trying to play the role of a catch-all party. F.F. now accelerated their anti-Communist witch-hunt, and Fine Gael became increasingly active. Mulcahy went so far as to name F.G. men who were suitable ministerial material – amongst them Dan Morrissey of Nenagh (industry) and Michael Hayes of Tipperary town (education).⁴ Labour stole Clann's idea of repatriating the sterling assets.

A rift now developed between some Clann leaders and Capt. Peadar Cowan. Promising to review sentences on republican prisoners, he then said Clann if in power would restructure the entire legal system, something not in any Clann manifesto. Later, when he claimed that he himself had admirable qualities for the post of Minister for Defence, MacBride replaced him by the Cork lawyer W. C. Toomey as Clann's director of finance.⁵

As the campaign really got under way in the new year, Hartnett found novel ways of attracting public attention. He commissioned a film (*Our Country*) that cinema-owners were encouraged to show.⁶ Records of speeches by Clann leaders, including Hartnett himself, were put on sale. The O'Rahilly hired a plane and pilot to fly a Clann streamer over densely-populated areas.

Needless to say, F.F. began to hint that money from such gimmicks had to come from illegal sources, and Sean McCool admitted getting money from the North.⁷ The fact was that Clann depended largely on small subscriptions, all paid on a voluntary basis. But it also got

'insurance' contributions from some well-known Irish businessmen who were also publicly paying into the F.F. coffers.⁸

Gradually coalition crept on to Clann's agenda. Dr. McCartan said that, should a coalition government be necessary after the election, "it might be a blessing in disguise . . . to end the party bickerings . . .". Then in mid-January he raised the topic of the missing Russian crown jewels, said to have been given by the Soviets to de Valera in 1920 in security for a loan.

With only ten days to go before polling, MacBride realised that all-out victory would not be his. But he did not give up the fight. He now followed F.F.'s lead with some skilful press advertisements for Clann, and claimed to have the support of the colourful Dr. Alfred O'Rahilly, president of U.C.C., for his policy.⁹ As the campaign neared its end, the bitterness between F.F. and Clann increased. At Clann's final rally the audience was said to have been noticeably unenthusiastic, as if either voters had got tired of the rhetoric or were vacillating (as indeed were the commentators) about the results. If the *Irish Times* was right, the electorate's latent conservativeness would halt the progress of Clann na Poblachta.

Election Results

For Clann na Poblachta the results of the 1948 general election were totally frustrating, even exasperating. Its first preference performance was extremely good; it got over 13% of the vote, only 6% worse than F.G., and 2% per cent better than the combined vote of the two Labour parties. Yet it failed to translate this into a comparable number of seats. In proportion to its first preference total, it should have won 19 seats, not the 10 it actually got. Of its 93 candidates, no less than 48 lost their deposits. Percentage-wise this was not too abnormal; numerically it was a debacle. Had F.F. fared likewise, they would have shed 49 seats; instead, they lost only 12.

With only four of the ten seats won by Clann coming from non-urban constituencies (and two of these from one county – Tipperary), the truth was that rural Ireland had failed Clann. In hindsight, one can see three aspects of this electoral nightmare – constituencies with a high first preference but insufficient transfers; constituencies where Clann made some stand; and constituencies that showed little or no support for the new party. Even in the 14 areas in the

TABLE 1
Parties' strengths in Dáil

	1944	1948 (Dissolution)	1948 election
FF	76	77	68
FG	30	28	31
Lab.	8	8	14
C. na P.	0	2	10
C.T.	11	11	7
Inds.	9	8	12
Nat. L.	4	4	5

Notes

1. There were 138 Dáil seats in 1944 and 1948, but 148 from the 1948 election onwards.
2. C.T. above was the now extinct Clann na Talmhan, a farmers' party.
3. Dissolution date was 12 January, 1948, and polling day 4 February, 1948.
4. The composition of the new (Inter-Party) Cabinet in 1948 was: FG 5, C. na P. 2, Labour 1 and Ind. 1. (The Independent was James Dillon, later to rejoin (and ultimately to lead) F.G.)



first (and best) group, Clann got very few transfers from F.F. In ten of the fourteen F.G. transfers went largely to their own or to Labour or the farmers. In the other four Clann failed because Independent transfers went to F.F. or simply did not transfer at all.

In some areas Labour, despite being split into two parties, did surprisingly well. Where it did so, it lasted to the end of a count; where it was weak, it was first to transfer. Either way its candidate was no use to the Clann vote. In the West, although not openly posing as a republican party, Clann did surprisingly well. But here F.F.'s Communist scare probably killed off transfers. It is known that some of the clergy were actively against Clann.

Dublin county and Kildare came out strongly for the new party, probably out of a sense of social radicalism. Perhaps because of the high number of farm labourers, Labour had always been strong in Kildare, and in Dublin MacBride had already succeeded on a largely bread-and-butter vote.¹⁰ Yet neither area mustered enough to give Clann a second seat.

In the second of the three types of constituencies mentioned above, the problem for Clann was the unusually wide choice facing the voters. Several ran 16 or even 17 candidates, making a clear anti-government vote hard to achieve. Also, there was no real transfer from Labour; for Clann, either votes simply did not transfer or they went to F.F. This group saw Clann only narrowly lose. In Limerick west only 236 votes separated Clann's runner-up and the last candidate in. A similar situation occurred in both Wexford and Meath.

In both Waterford and Wicklow the high number of F.F. candidates, and strong Independents competing for the last seat, were enough to defeat Clann. Even Ruairí Brugha, despite the advantage his name should have brought in Waterford, received only 2,346 votes compared to 2,758 for the Clann candidate in the 1947 by-election. By and large, the constituencies in the second of the three groups (except Wicklow) remained faithful to F.F. As had happened in Waterford in 1947, it seems that the more prosperous section of the farming community plumped for stability, to the benefit of the Government party.

In the third group of constituencies – Louth and four Co. Cork areas – Clann got less than 8% of first preferences, all nine candidates losing their deposits. In three areas Clann were the first to be eliminated from the count. Here Labour won a quota and improved its position substantially on the 1944 figure; it, rather than Clann, seemed to be regarded as the socially radical party. In two Cork areas a high proportion of Clann votes simply failed to transfer at all.

Clann's Gains and Losses

Generally, the wonder is that MacBride's new party managed to win a seat at all in Cavan, Roscommon and the two Tipperary constituencies. It seems that radical republicanism alone was not enough here; crucial to the results was a good transfer to Clann. In North Tipperary Labour's good showing ensured Kinane's second win, and got him first "past the post" too. In South Tipperary Labour gave more to F.F. than to Clann; there possibly the Fine Gael family background of John Timoney may have been an impediment. Luckily for him, the Clann na Talmhan transfers gave him more than they did to the F.F. men still in the running.

In comparison with these rural constituencies, Clann na Poblachta made a real breakthrough in urban areas, winning seats in all of them except Cork city and Dublin North Central. MacBride's total almost won the new party a second seat. Con Lehane took the second of five seats in his area, and Peadar Cowan's previous links with Labour helped him greatly in transfers. In both Dublin South-East and Dun Laoghaire the electorate obviously saw qualities in both Dr. Noel Browne and Dr. Joseph Brennan that transcended party allegiances.

Overall, Clann's electoral strategy was poor. It ran candidates in too many areas, especially



TABLE 2

Number and Percentage of Deposits Lost by each Party

C. na P.	F.F.	F.G.	Lab.	Nat. Lab.	C. na T.	Others
48	12	33	20	7	10	15
51%	10%	40%	46%	50%	41%	46%

without adequate preparation. This gave voters prepared to switch to the new movement too wide (and often too shallow) a choice. It became clear that Clann did best where one of its candidates was either a well-known figure or was regarded as politically capable.

However, to judge Clann's performance on its own terms, bound up with false expectations of a mushroom development, is to reach an unduly pessimistic conclusion. Account must also be taken of the pressure under which it had to work when de Valera called a snap election, the nature of the attacks under which it came from F.F., and above all a rural electorate that reverted to its conservativeness after the early promise of a change shown in Tipperary.

On these terms Clann's performance was not only good but much better than Clann na Talmhan's, which after five years was still almost totally confined to the West. Furthermore, Clann's position in 1948 was not F.F.'s back in 1932, when the country was still in a revolutionary period and party politics had not set in any firm mould.

Coalition or Not?

The biggest problem facing MacBride and his party executive now was the inescapable fact that because of Clann's poor showing no party could form a government on its own. Coalition was unavoidable; but who would be in it? To join with F.F. would be political suicide, for de Valera would merely wait for a short term and then call another election. He was even rumoured to be plotting a referendum on the P.R. voting system, now (many in his party swore) regarded as the cause of his downfall.¹¹

To enter a government with Fine Gael was equally fraught with dangers – and bound to lead to internal wrangling. Especially in the West, the new party's republican credibility would be called into doubt. Moreover, in urban areas (particularly Dublin) there would be little difference between Clann and Labour, so that it could even risk losing its new foothold there. Either way, to realists the new party seemed to be on the slippery slope out of politics.

Eventually the decision was taken to go into government with Fine Gael, perform well and then bring down the government at the earliest electoral convenience to Clann itself – presumably in the hope of improving its strength in the Dáil on its record in government. On 7 February MacBride said he was not disappointed with the results. The same day General Mulcahy, the F.G. leader, stressed the common ground between all anti-Fianna Failers.¹² Two days later MacBride announced his willingness to co-operate with any party ready to end the corruption spread by F.F.¹³

Mulcahy now stepped down as candidate for Taoiseach, leaving General MacEoin to run. Days later James Dillon (expelled from F.G. for his pro-British stance during the war) called all the Independent TDs together. From a private session of F.G. the name of the lawyer John A. Costello emerged as candidate to oppose de Valera; this brought Dillon and his group round in support of an F.G.-led administration.¹⁴

Sunday 15 February 1948 was a hectic day for Clann na Poblachta. After a six-hour session



they approved of MacBride's stance.¹⁵ Two days later the National Labour TDs, who had kept their cards close to their chests, declared themselves also against F.F.¹⁶ On Wednesday 18 February John A. Costello defeated de Valera by 75 votes to 68, with four abstentions, of whom only two attended the session itself.¹⁷

To MacBride it was crucial to his long-term strategy that his party get more than one Ministry, and after some hesitation F.G. agreed to pay this price. For its part Clann also had to water down considerably its ideological demands. A fifteen-point list of tasks that MacBride publicly announced as essential contained no reference to the sterling assets, afforestation, the need for a living wage or Northern Ireland. In return Clann got two prestigious posts – External Affairs for its leader and the Dept. of Health for Dr. Noel Browne.

However, inside the new party all was far from well. Niall O'Rahilly, brother of the party's treasurer and potential leader, The O'Rahilly, resigned in bitterness.¹⁸ In Donegal Sean McCool (who had not been elected) followed suit, associating himself with a telegram that referred to F.G. as the "war criminals of 1922".¹⁹ Many telegrams of censure on the party's decision came in from the North.

It is said that the vote for coalition was 16, with 12 against.²⁰ But this does not tally with an executive of 40, all of whom attended. None of those I interviewed could remember the exact vote. What is certain is that, of the 13 from the IRA on the original provisional executive, only Sean MacBride voted for coalition.²¹

Personal jealousies also played a part. Cowan felt he should have been made a Minister. Lehane and Fionán Breathnach were strongly opposed to Browne's nomination. Hartnett insisted on a Senate seat for his continued support.²² Over the next three years, with MacBride out of the country so much and Browne keeping his own counsel, internal party fissures developed into open cracks.

Party morale became so low that it proved difficult to drum up support for the 1950 local elections. It may be fairly claimed that as a political force in Irish politics Clann na Poblachta reached its zenith in the period from January to October 1947. From then on, especially after February 1948, it went into decline.

Summary and Conclusion

In this paper an effort has been made to relate the story of Clann na Poblachta from its shadowy beginnings in the IRA to the open paraphernalia of constitutional politics. In the late 1930s and the early 1940s many extremists, whether under duress or out of a growing sense of moderation, began to put their trust in the party system – and Clann was the result of this progression. When a republican welfarist programme was eventually hammered out, a tired post-war electorate initially welcomed a political change and the new party spread throughout the country, especially after its success in the two 1947 by-elections.

However, in the 1948 general election shortly afterwards Clann was stopped in its tracks by an enraged Fianna Fail, its own political immaturity and the revived traditionalism of the electorate. Nevertheless, Clann's electoral performance was still quite creditable, although in terms of its own future there was the germ of discord in the decision to join a coalition government.

Yet it is arguable that this decision, because of its effect on the broader course of Irish politics, was the party's finest hour. By the Summer of 1946 the Irish party system was in the doldrums. Ever since 1932 it had declined gradually from a lively forum, in which the Opposition, especially Cuman na nGaedheal/Fine Gael, believed in themselves and their future, to a corpus





John J. Timoney, T.D.

vile in the grip of and virtually suffocated by de Valera. This development was fully in tune with a strong conservative strain in the electorate.

Clann na Poblachta changed all that, and in doing so gave a new lease of life to Irish parliamentarianism. From the outset it sought to educate the people towards new maturer political values. It campaigned vigorously for an end to the Treaty fixation, as well as to an end of personalism as a major factor at election time. Instead, Clann tried to emphasise policies, especially the need for economic planning and the role it would play in the welfare system. It was also concerned for the youth of the country and the need to offer a future based on merit. By going into coalition, Clann guaranteed the authenticity of these ideals.

Surviving for over three years, the Inter-Party Government came to be perceived as a more talented team than Fianna Fail's. Planning, the hallmark of the regime, was the direct result of Clann's participation.²³ Dr. Browne was so forward-looking, and so concerned with an overall design,

that he neglected to corral some sacred cows standing in the way of the implementation of a democratic hospital scheme.²⁴

Even though some of the Coalition's programme was not completed during its term of office, the overall effect was most beneficial. People who had been on opposite sides in the Civil War managed to co-operate effectively in government. Not alone had de Valera been defeated while at the height of his political power, but it was clear that the country could get along quite well without him, and without the sort of whip-hand leadership that he had proposed that the country always needed. After 1948 there could be no going back to dependence on the confined and confining shibboleths of the Treaty generation.

F.G. the Winner

However, it turned out to be Fine Gael rather than Clann that reaped the benefits of coalition. They were able to commence their long haul back to being a healthy opposition party, confident of taking power on its own merits. Power-sharing also helped to keep the two Labour parties together long enough for them to realise that their differences were not, after all, irreconcilable. Being out of power in 1948 was even good for Fianna Fail; it accelerated its drift from its "pristine-agrarian character" towards a "greater diversity of interests".²⁵

Consequently, the effects of Clann's coalition decision are apparent in Irish politics today. This is nowhere more evident than in the activities of the IRA. It had been antagonistic towards Clann's entry into coalition. But, when ten years later the next generation of extremists came to the fore, they were not overshadowed by the Treaty generation and would have nothing to do with their socialistic theories.

They placed their faith in the gun alone and, being Northerners for the most part, wished to carry the fight to their own green sod, expecting (and getting) precious little help from Leinster



House. Southern politics embarked on a “nationality” of its own when in 1948 Clann na Poblachta finally converted the Civil War generation to constitutional politics.

Clann was a turning-point in Irish political history. With a colourful if dubious pedigree, dynamic in leadership quality but idiosyncratic in policy, it provoked widespread public interest. The 1948 election was the most exciting since 1932, although the euphoric Clann developed too fast. Many mediocrities came to the fore in the new movement, which did not have time to discipline itself properly.

Ultimately Clann became a victim more than a beneficiary of post-Emergency escapism. Nevertheless the party managed to capture a significant sector of the electorate, sufficient to change briefly traditional voting patterns and realign the balance of political power into the two-and-a-half party system which lasted until the formation of the P.D.s in the late 1980s. On the local plane, it may also be argued that, as an expression of the will of a substantial proportion of the electorate, as well as through the medium of its own two Clann T.D.s – Paddy Kinane of Upperchurch and John Timoney of Cappawhite – Tipperary played no small part in bringing about these changes.

FOOTNOTES

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10. On Kildare – *Census of Population*, V, II, p. 45.
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23. Joseph Carroll; *Ireland in the War Years* (New York, 1975), p. 162.
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