

## 10. LABOUR AND THE MEDIA: THE PROMISE OF SOCIALISM, NEGATIVE CAMPAIGNING AND *THE IRISH TIMES*

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On 28 May 1969 – six days into that year’s general election campaign – Sir Frederick Sayers from Camlagh, Greystones in County Wicklow, wrote to *The Irish Times*. The correspondence, printed on the ‘Letters to the Editor’ page, was headed ‘Irish Labour’s Intellectuals’.<sup>1</sup> Sir Frederick was concerned about the newspaper’s recent editorial direction and what he saw as a trend in favour of ‘any form of Government which is not F.F.’ The Wicklow voter wanted in particular to warn ‘the plain people of Ireland’ about the Labour Party’s ‘extreme socialism’ and ‘utopian doctrines’. Sir Frederick’s letter continued: ‘I regard those extreme socialists as people who want a job themselves in parliament in order that they may spend other people’s money, extracted from all grades in society, on people who, for the most part, do not want such help, but now find that they are better off sitting idle and, probably spending national assistance in the locals.’<sup>2</sup>

The 1969 contest was predicted as Labour’s breakthrough election. The party was not only running more candidates than it had done previously but it had also succeeded in recruiting several high-profile individuals including Conor Cruise O’Brien, David Thornley and Justin Keating. Many were well-known television figures, although the main political parties were still adapting to the new medium: the 1969 contest was only the second Dáil election since the arrival of a national television service. Newspapers remained the most influential news medium – possibly, however, the last time they held this position. In the latter regard, Sir Frederick’s ‘Letter to the Editor’ raised an interesting issue – was *The Irish Times* soft on the opposition parties, and Labour in particular, with a partisan editorial agenda that

discriminated against Fianna Fáil? This chapter focuses on Labour's embrace of socialism in the late 1960s and examines to what extent did *The Irish Times* rally to the party's cause in the 1969 general election. The discussion illustrates how Fianna Fáil measured its message to respond to the Labour threat – and how a ruthless, negative campaign successfully dominated news coverage and overpowered the Labour agenda.

In very many ways the 1969 contest was a transition election. Across Irish society there was evidence of a nascent modernisation agenda while in the realm of political campaigning a new professionalisation was evident. Campaign techniques – recently seen in the United States and United Kingdom – were being adopted, in varying degrees of sophistication, by the three main Irish parties. Jack Lynch's 'meet-the-people tour' was a central part of a highly personalised Fianna Fáil campaign. Lynch's party was well resourced – budgets even paid for the hire of a helicopter for the leader's tour. Fine Gael still lagged behind its larger rival but there were signs of a new attitude from a party whose senior members were described only a few years previously as part-time politicians more devoted to other professional activities than to politics.<sup>3</sup>

Labour also displayed a more professional approach in its quest to break the stranglehold of its two main rivals. The party had an election budget of £25,000 while the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) provided another £17,000 for promotional spending.<sup>4</sup> Labour also proudly revealed that it had commissioned 'a professional psephological survey of Ireland' – which showed that its support was strong in working class areas and that the bulk of its support base was aged between twenty-one and forty.<sup>5</sup> Some elements of 'modern' political campaigns elsewhere were, however, still resisted particularly by Fianna Fáil, which opted not to publish an election manifesto. Those interested in its policy agenda were directed to the outgoing governmental programme, the most recent budget speech and Lynch's script delivered at the start of the election campaign. 'Manifestos have a Marxist ring about them,' Charles Haughey, the Minister for Finance, declared as he dismissed Fianna Fáil's opponents: 'Fine Gael is dead and many people are afraid of the extreme socialist policies of the Labour Party.'<sup>6</sup>

Irish politics had for the previous half century been defined in non-ideological terms with the partitionist hangover from the independence era still influencing the shape of the party system. Labour remained the third party, and had struggled to match the electoral dominance of Fianna Fáil. When government did beckon – in 1948 and in 1954 – it was as a minority partner in a Fine Gael-led administration. The latter years of the 1960s,

however, saw the commencement of a brave, but ultimately unsuccessful, departure to promote a distinctive socialist programme.

## I

It remains one of the best-known sound bites in Irish political history: ‘The seventies will be socialist.’ These were the first five words spoken by Brendan Corish in his leadership address at his party’s national conference in October 1967. The speech, which had been three months in the making, was billed as heralding ‘The New Republic’ as Labour sought to tap into a nascent national mood for change and modernisation.<sup>7</sup> The continued contemporary usage of the phrase – more often than not as a political put-down – has a great deal to do with Labour’s failure to convince the electorate ultimately of the value of its socialist programme at the 1969 general election.

Yet when Corish stood at the conference podium in late 1967 there was a real sense in Labour circles that the party was on the verge of a historic breakthrough. Corish was intent on broadening his party’s appeal, and wanted to provide a genuine alternative to Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. The speech was – according to one of its authors – ‘a statement of socialist intent’.<sup>8</sup> There had been a long-standing timidity in embracing socialism (never mind communism or Marxism), reflecting not just the non-ideological nature of Irish politics but also a genuine fear of alienating a largely conservative population by incurring the wrath of the Roman Catholic hierarchy. One Labour TD went so far as to sue a local newspaper in 1964 for printing an opponent’s claim that he was a communist.<sup>9</sup>

‘Socialist’ was a word ‘rarely uttered by the party’ and even when Corish assumed the leadership he preferred to talk about ‘Christian socialists, not rip-roaring Marxists’.<sup>10</sup> On one occasion when rejecting a Fianna Fáil attack Corish declared, ‘Our policy is based on good, sound, Christian principles and always will be.’<sup>11</sup> Garret FitzGerald recalled attending a media briefing in 1962 concerning Ireland’s application to join the then European Economic Community (EEC) at which a Dutch reporter asked the Labour leader if he was a socialist. Addressing FitzGerald and the journalists Corish replied, ‘Garret, imagine what would happen if I got up on the platform in Duncannon and announced that I was a socialist. Sure, I wouldn’t get a vote in the place!’<sup>12</sup>

The 1960s, as mentioned earlier, saw the commencement of a process of modernisation and secularisation – a process which was ‘complex, confused and very far from a linear narrative’.<sup>13</sup> In the political arena post-de Valera

Fianna Fáil embraced a more outward-looking industrial policy and deepened links with the world of business. Pressure for fresh thinking within Fine Gael divided the party along liberal and conservative lines. In this environment Corish and his supporters believed there was an opportunity for Labour. Although a Dáil deputy since 1945 Corish had shown few signs of being a political radical. The first time he actually described Labour as a socialist party was in June 1964. Interestingly, however, the word did not feature in the party's 1965 general election manifesto. An explicit endorsement eventually came at the party's national conference in October 1966 when Corish referred to a 'coherent socialist philosophy'.<sup>14</sup>

The Labour leader was heavily influenced by a group of modernisers including Michael O'Leary, a trade union research officer who had won a Dáil seat in 1965, Brendan Halligan, an economist who was appointed as a full-time party organiser in 1967, and Barry Desmond who became party chairman. O'Leary later said that with the new strategy Corish's 'every action as leader between 1965 and 1969 threw the legendary caution of the political culture from whence he hailed, to the winds'.<sup>15</sup> But Corish was not a puppet on a string manipulated by a cabal of ideologues – as Fianna Fáil would allege during the 1969 election campaign. Halligan explained: 'These were his ideas not anyone else's. Others, myself particularly, wrote down the words which he then read. But the sweep of ideas, the inner feelings and the most telling phrases were his alone'.<sup>16</sup>

Having spent most of its history out of power – and all of the previous decade in opposition – Labour had reason to be optimistic that its fortunes were about to change. Notwithstanding electoral defeats in 1961 and 1965, there had been tangible progress – the twenty-two seats won in 1965 had been equalled only once previously (in June 1927). There were increased numbers of party branches, more members and record attendances at national conferences. Many new younger members favoured a more radical bent to the party's policy outlook. The intention was to rebrand the Labour Party, and to recast Irish politics. Halligan later recalled the energy driving this new socialist departure: '... the party took off in the giddy excitement of believing that anything was possible'.<sup>17</sup> There was for some time, however, a vagueness in the party's new-found public attachment to socialism and also how its policy ambitions would be realised, and funded. In the words of one writer, the party was 'faced with the task of coming up with the policies to go along with its slogans'.<sup>18</sup>

Throughout 1968 a raft of policy papers were published. This new socialist agenda was eventually aggregated into a 150-page booklet and later

distilled into the party's election manifesto 'The New Republic' in May 1969. The process was described as involving 'a complete critique of Irish society' where all possibilities were open for discussion including consideration of replacing Ireland's parliamentary system of government with a presidential system.<sup>19</sup> Corish claimed that Labour's 'socialist principles' would aim at greater mobilisation of national resources to secure full employment; he said that, 'Private enterprise has failed to establish the industries needed and that public enterprises under some form of State organisation will have to play a larger part in the economy and the search for jobs'.<sup>20</sup>

A newly established State Development Corporation was to be tasked with securing full employment; a Rural Development Agency would focus on similar issues in non-urban areas while the promotion of enterprise would be facilitated by providing businesses with cheaper credit. The provision of a free national health service and decent modern housing were central components of the policy plan. A new department of housing was proposed to deliver promises including bringing building land in urban areas under state control and providing 100 per cent loans at low rates of interest. Some issues were, however, fudged – the party's exact stance on bank ownership was vague and, despite references to more state control, stopped short of proposing full nationalisation.

The programme has met with almost universal dismissal from leading historians with assessments ranging from 'intellectual window-dressing'<sup>21</sup> to 'careless socialist rhetoric'<sup>22</sup> to 'naive logic and clueless political analysis'.<sup>23</sup> More generously, Gallagher has argued that the final programme 'represented a rare infusion of idealism into the political system' although he still accepted that at the heart of the manifesto was 'a rather starry-eyed naivety' particularly when it came to the costs involved.<sup>24</sup> The long list of policy promises undoubtedly offered many hostages to fortune, and despite having a great slogan many Labour policies were not fully developed.

There were also communication problems – internal and external. The internal process had been largely leadership driven and this top-down strategy received a distinctly lukewarm response from rural members, not to mention many rural TDs. Despite the new spirit of openness and changing attitude to authority a significant section of the population still held to a conservative outlook. Labour's embrace of socialism did not find universal favour. As John Horgan noted the new policy direction 'would have been anathema, not only to a previous generation of Labour parliamentarians, but also to some of those who had survived'.<sup>25</sup>

These internal issues were evident from the start of the change process.

For example, there was, according to one reporter at the 1967 conference, ‘a frenzy of enthusiasm’ when Corish declared his opposition to entering a coalition government. But, interestingly, the same writer observed of the leader’s embrace of socialism: ‘The delegates loved it too, but curiously, during the course of the debate it seemed to have made little impact.’ Most speakers from the conference podium, journalist Donal Foley noted, ‘failed to apply socialist planning theories to the question under discussion’.<sup>26</sup>

This resistance – and failure to comprehend fully the implications of party policy – obviously persisted. One political correspondent – writing many years later – was particularly critical of the approach of some parliamentary party members: ‘unfortunately, many deputies only glanced at the proposals before being sent on radio and television to explain them to the public. It became obvious they had no great notion about what they were talking about and they were not helpful to the promotion of the ideas.’<sup>27</sup> Any weakness within Labour at communicating its own platform only further assisted the party’s opponents who were intent on pursuing a deliberate policy of negative political campaigning against Corish and his colleagues.

The eighteenth Dáil was dissolved on 22 May 1969 with polling day set for 18 June 1969. Fianna Fáil was fighting its fourth election in a decade under a third leader – de Valera in 1959; Lemass in 1961 and 1965; and now Lynch in 1969. Fine Gael’s Liam Cosgrave was also a new party leader, having come to the position after the 1965 election. Corish was the veteran – he had led Labour in the two previous contests.

Lynch succeeded Lemass in 1966 but the leadership transition had not been easy for Fianna Fáil. Several of Lynch’s cabinet colleagues retained aspirations to lead the party and, at best, an uneasy internal truce existed. Lynch actually consolidated his position with by-election successes – seven in all – between December 1966 and May 1968. But, ‘after such a good electoral run, Lynch made a bad decision’ when calling a referendum in October 1968 seeking to change the electoral system.<sup>28</sup> The proposal to switch to a straight vote system was rejected; the voters had also said no in 1959. Lynch’s government responded by redrawing Dáil constituency boundaries in its favour. The legislation passed into law in early spring – following the introduction of a positive budget – and a general election was called immediately to take full advantage.

In total, 373 candidates contested the election – the highest number since 1948. Fine Gael had 125 candidates; Fianna Fáil 121 while Labour had 99 (compared with 43 in 1965). The election was framed as a contest

of equals. One newspaper report observed that, ‘The picture now emerges – for the first time in Irish politics – of three parties fully equipped with policies, candidates and calibre fully competent to form a Government’.<sup>29</sup> Corish said his party had been ‘almost overwhelmed’ by the number of people seeking to be Dáil candidates. There was for the first time in a Dáil election at least one Labour candidate in every constituency although some outgoing TDs had resisted party policy of having a running mate. Labour’s election message was consistent with that articulated over the previous eighteen months – implementation of a socialist policy platform and adherence to an anti-coalition agenda. Corish said Labour was offering a real alternative based on the ‘fundamental principles and policies’ agreed at its recent conference.<sup>30</sup>

The decision to rule out a pre-election pact was a source of annoyance in Fine Gael, which believed the real beneficiary would ultimately be Fianna Fáil. It was said that ‘relations between the two opposition parties were at their lowest ebb since 1948’.<sup>31</sup> The strains were evident even before the election was called. Dublin South candidate John Kelly warned that the Labour leadership needed to ‘temper its ideals with realism’.<sup>32</sup> Former Taoiseach John A. Costello even rowed into the debate: ‘I believe the Labour leadership, caught in a mesh of socialist theorising, will be forced to abandon an untenable position, particularly when they reflect on the election results’.<sup>33</sup> It was a prophetic assessment but as the country headed to the polls on 18 June 1969 the overwhelming view in Labour circles was that a socialist era was about to commence.

## II

The Irish media sector in the late 1960s was small in size and ‘very homogeneous’ in its content.<sup>34</sup> There were four main newspaper groups and a state-owned broadcast service – all devoted considerable editorial space to political news and also to coverage of electoral contests. But according to one writer, in this period ‘certainly in the area of political communication, the morning papers play[ed] the primary role’.<sup>35</sup> Newspaper analysis and comment pieces were far less prominent in 1969 than they would become in subsequent elections.<sup>36</sup> There was only a small number of journalists covering politics while specialist correspondents were still only emerging. There was a distinct passivity in reporting politics – in the words of one correspondent, a ‘quieter pace’ – and this situation only strengthened the ability of the main parties to influence the news agenda.<sup>37</sup>

## *Making the Difference?*

During the 1969 contest the newspapers provided significant space to candidate scripts issued by the main parties. As part of the professionalism of campaigning in the 1960s the parties set up ‘speech factories’ where supporters with expertise in particular policy areas wrote speeches for candidates in the hope of securing ‘some press coverage’. This was – according to Farrell – ‘an attempt to manufacture news’ as it was unclear if many of the scripts were ever delivered. By the 1969 general election *The Irish Times* – while still providing extensive space for these scripts – introduced many news stories with the phrase ‘according to a supplied script’. A more robust and personalised approach to the coverage of politics emerged in later years. Indeed, by the 1977 general election, newspaper coverage of supplied scripts (measured in column inches) had declined significantly – for example, down 32 per cent in *The Irish Times* and down 41 per cent in *The Irish Press*.

The available evidence suggests there was a fairly even balance in the amount of space devoted to reporting on the campaigns of the three main political parties. Coverage of Labour scripts was almost approximate to the party’s share of the total number of nominated candidates. Indeed, Labour received more space in two of the main morning newspapers than Fine Gael as evident in Table 1. These figures led one authority to conclude that Labour’s campaign was ‘fairly covered by the mass media’.<sup>38</sup> But while Labour could have had few complaints about the extent of newspaper coverage this raw data reveals little about the nature of the coverage and even less about how successful Labour was in getting across its socialist message.

Table 1: Coverage of Party Speeches in the 1969 General Election

	<i>The Irish Times</i>	<i>Irish Independent</i>	<i>The Irish Press</i>	<i>Cork Examiner</i>
Fianna Fáil	1,568	857	1,602	971
Fine Gael	966	628	556	395
Labour	1,114	536	569	395
Others	90	208	138	26

(Measured in column inches). Source: Carty, 1969

The morning newspapers displayed considerable similarities in their selection of news stories but they did adopt differing editorial stances in relation to the main political parties. It is difficult to dispute one assessment of newspaper coverage in the 1969 campaign which concluded, ‘As usual *The Irish Press* supported Fianna Fáil, the *Irish Independent* opposed it, while *The Irish Times*

found it increasingly difficult to discover differences between the two main parties.<sup>39</sup> While *The Irish Times* stopped short of formally endorsing Corish's party in the general election campaign, one authority has said 'the paper veered towards supporting the re-invigorated Labour Party'.<sup>40</sup>

Somewhat like the Labour Party, *The Irish Times* had embarked upon a process of renewal and reorientation to take advantage of the changes in Irish society. Douglas Gageby, who had been appointed editor in 1963, was intent – in the words of one of his successors – in moving *The Irish Times* 'from the margins to the mainstream of Irish life'.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, at the time of the 1969 election the newspaper still had the smallest circulation in the morning market although it was 'regarded as the established quality paper'.<sup>42</sup>

Gageby instilled a liberal ethos in his newspaper's editorial stance as he pursued a strategy to reflect the aspirations of 'the most influential, intelligent and enterprising elements of the population'.<sup>43</sup> Several of his contemporaries have, however, acknowledged that he had a strong regard for Charles Haughey and he was, according to one, 'under the spell of John Healy',<sup>44</sup> who, in his political columns, was sympathetic to Fianna Fáil. Yet, not even the editor's sympathetic leanings towards Haughey could lead *The Irish Times* to embrace Fianna Fáil. The newspaper's staff contained many journalists who were strongly supportive of Labour's new political positioning. Its Foreign Editor James Downey did back-room work for Labour, and was nominated as a Dáil candidate in 1969.<sup>45</sup> More significantly, and without any apparent acknowledgement of journalistic impartiality, Michael McInerney, the newspaper's political correspondent, was effectively an unofficial Labour advisor. McInerney was close to Halligan, involved with drafting the 1967 conference speech, and was instrumental in candidate recruitment. Indeed, the first meetings between Halligan and O'Brien and Keating, respectively, were instigated by McInerney and took place over lunches in the home of *The Irish Times* journalist.

The next section will examine how successful Labour was in setting the news agenda with its socialist programme during the election campaign but beyond the news pages there were only a handful of opinion pieces in *The Irish Times* which actually addressed the party's programme. Overall, by the standards of election coverage in subsequent decades – and in the early years of the twenty-first century – few analytical articles appeared. One rare example was an assessment of the foreign policies of the three parties. Written by the newspaper's 'diplomatic correspondent', the piece assessed the contribution of Cruise O'Brien to Labour's policy positioning. 'Many

people, including a few inside the party, regard his famous advocacy of an embassy in Havana as a major political gaffe', the writer concluded, but noted that opening an embassy in any socialist capital would be a symbolic reassertion of non-alignment and neutrality.<sup>46</sup>

The absence of writing that critiqued the different party programmes was to the disadvantage of Labour, which could have hoped for at least balanced, and possibly favourable, treatment. If anything in its analysis/comment articles *The Irish Times* did Labour few favours. Several comment articles were openly dismissive of Labour's campaign strategy – many were written by the paper's political commentator, John Healy. Moreover, the unsigned 'Inside Politics' column was used at the midpoint in the campaign to criticise Corish strongly:

the evolution of Brendan Corish must be the greatest piece of forced growth this country has ever witnessed. There he was three years ago leading a nice gaggle of second rate men who called themselves The Labour Party ... Then they became – what was it – the Socialist Labour Party. And before you could say "Up the Republic" there was another wing-ding in Liberty Hall and this time it was the Socialist Workers' Republic, and everything in sight was to be nationalised ... and the day of the working man was on hand and Dr Noël Browne was feeling comfortable for the first time.<sup>47</sup>

Alongside these comment/analysis articles the newspaper's editorials were at best lukewarm in their support for Labour. One editorial, headlined 'How?', picked up the Fianna Fáil questioning of Corish's exact intent towards the banking system and what was to be understood by 'control' if nationalisation was not being pursued. The editorial went to the core of the difficulty with the Labour Party manifesto – the uncosted promises – but must have raised a few smiles in Fianna Fáil election headquarters. When Cruise O'Brien sought to raise public interest issues over Haughey's sale of his house and adjoining land for £204,000 to a property developer, the newspaper actually spun the spotlight back on Labour, and wondered in an editorial if the reaction was based on 'the politics of envy'.<sup>48</sup> O'Brien said the transaction deserved 'critical comment' as it emerged that Haughey had failed to disclose his interest when he introduced legislative changes which appeared to benefit him financially. The intervention, however, did Labour little good and, in fact, drew censure on the letters pages – one correspondent asked would O'Brien 'confiscate or 'nationalise' the land?'<sup>49</sup>

Despite this opprobrium, O'Brien was the subject of an uncritical three-part profile just before polling day in one of the few tangible signs that Labour had friends in the newspaper's editorial offices.

### III

One means of measuring Labour's success, or otherwise, in promoting its policy agenda in the newspaper most benign towards the party – and testing the claims of bias by the letter writer mentioned at the start of this chapter – is to examine the use of the word 'socialist' during the election campaign. The word 'socialist' appeared in 129 individual articles in *The Irish Times* from the dissolution of Dáil Éireann on 22 May 1969 to polling day in the general election on 18 June 1969. Half of these 129 references appear in articles relating to the general election campaign – the others feature in foreign coverage (40 per cent) and in other articles with Irish-related content (10 per cent) not relevant to the electoral contest. A significant number of the election news articles covered Fianna Fáil attacks on Labour, and provide convincing evidence that if *The Irish Times* displayed biased coverage towards Labour the newspaper certainly did not reflect its views in its news coverage during the campaign.

From the outset of the election campaign Labour was a specific target for Fianna Fáil with evidence of a well-planned strategy to undermine any potential Labour momentum by putting doubts in the minds of voters who were thinking of backing Corish's party. There is mixed international evidence about the success of negative campaigning but in the context of the 1969 election in Ireland the Fianna Fáil approach was particularly successfully in terms of framing the media's coverage of the campaign.

The scripts supplied by Fianna Fáil to the media primarily focused on the dangers of Labour's socialist programme, the hidden plans of Corish's party and the gap between the socialist stance of the Labour hierarchy and the party's 'ordinary' membership. Like the other national newspapers, *The Irish Times* gave daily coverage to these Fianna Fáil claims – and not just those uttered by senior party figures but also backbench TDs and first-time candidates. The Fianna Fáil attacks were consistent throughout the campaign and received generous coverage as illustrated by the following headlines from *The Irish Times*:

- Browne denies alien influence in Labour – 26 May 1969
- MacEntee asks what would Connolly think – 29 May 1969

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- Labour accused of policy cover-up: Challenge from Haughey – 4 June 1969
- Socialist ideas discarded, says Lenihan – 9 June 1969
- Socialist take-over of land feared – 11 June 1969
- Blaney warns against collectivisation – 12 June 1969
- Warning of danger to savings and property: MacEntee fears Marxist influence – 14 June 1969
- Choice is reality or Cuban myth – Lynch – 17 June 1969
- Marxist infiltration warning by Blaney – 17 June 1969

Fianna Fáil pursued a negative and highly personalised campaign as it sought to secure a fourth consecutive electoral victory. According to one of Lynch's biographers, the tone of the campaign was set by Haughey and Blaney but most likely with 'the tacit approval of Lynch'.<sup>50</sup> At the outset of the campaign Lynch spoke about 'the capture of the Labour Party by the extremist Left'.<sup>51</sup> Fianna Fáil sought to drive a wedge between Labour and its support base. 'There are Labour followers, of course, who had never read the Labour policy outline and their hair would stand on end if they did,' Erskine Childers claimed.<sup>52</sup> The theme that Labour was hiding its true policy intention was also one to which senior Fianna Fáil figures returned repeatedly throughout the campaign. Haughey claimed Labour was hiding its 'extreme form of socialism' with 'a very watered-down version because they know that their real policies were unacceptable to the vast majority of the people'. He said socialism created 'a joyless, soul-destroying, materialistic concept of life'.<sup>53</sup>

Some of the most abusive language – and the most extreme allegations – came from Agriculture Minister Neil Blaney who warned farmers that Labour's 'sinister' policies were based 'along Soviet lines in collectivisation'.<sup>54</sup> Fianna Fáil clearly felt it had Labour under pressure or, to use Blaney's phrase, 'Mr. Corish was beginning to squeal'.<sup>55</sup> Blaney had had a difficult relationship with farmers' leader Rickard Deasy, who was a Labour candidate in Tipperary North: 'The advent of Mr. Rickard Deasy as a socialist in flaming pink is the spectacle of the year. He boasts he sat in the gutter outside the Department of Agriculture. If he did, it was all mod con, with his meals sent round from the Shelbourne Hotel'.<sup>56</sup>

But even Blaney's language was mild in comparison to the invective from retiring Fianna Fáil minister Seán MacEntee, who had no difficulty in

revisiting his ‘Red baiting’ from an earlier era. MacEntee claimed ‘a red rash had broken out all over Dublin and presumably elsewhere’ and warned that ‘above all Red stands for danger to everyone’s savings, to everyone’s land, to everyone’s property, large and small...’<sup>57</sup> The Fianna Fáil attacks were also highly personalised. There were repeated references to intellectuals and graduates of Trinity College Dublin. Noël Browne said such attacks set ‘one particularly ugly pattern of debate ... [with] a particularly sinister bigoted and sectarian overtone’.<sup>58</sup>

At the end of the first week of the campaign John Healy observed that the two main opposition parties were ahead in the publicity stakes with Fianna Fáil being slow to get into the election mode. But on the pages of his own newspaper, the well-planned Fianna Fáil attack strategy – based on consistency of message – was dominating news reports. It was classic attack-based negative campaigning – criticism directed at political rivals regardless of the kind of criticism or accuracy.<sup>59</sup> The absence of opinion polling meant it was impossible to really know how the various campaigns were actually connecting with the electorate. The Fianna Fáil attacks continued until the eve of polling day. At the party’s final rally Lynch predicted that voters would show that they ‘prefer the reality of progress and prosperity to the Cuban myth’.<sup>60</sup> While Lynch was attacking in Dublin Blaney had a last tirade in County Donegal. ‘The red sunset is about to go down,’ he forecast.<sup>61</sup>

Prior to the election being called, Corish had warned that Labour would be painted as ‘a party of bogeymen bent on destroying national sovereignty and individual freedom’.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, the nature of the Fianna Fáil attacks should not have surprised Corish and his colleagues. Fianna Fáil had actually introduced an element of ‘Red bashing’ into the 1965 campaign when Blaney had also spoken of ‘extreme socialism’.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, a canvassers’ booklet for the 1969 contest provided Labour members with specific answers to potential claims about the dangers of socialism (although distribution of the booklet to local constituencies was not ideal). The evidence suggests that with respect to promoting its socialist agenda Labour singularly failed in terms of news coverage in *The Irish Times* – the newspaper that was apparently on its side. Indeed, even when Labour representatives were explaining what they meant by ‘socialism’ they were forced to do so in a defensive manner in response to Fianna Fáil attacks.<sup>64</sup>

#### IV

Labour had genuine hopes of real electoral success right up to polling

day in the 1969 general election. From this distance there is an obvious naivety about the talk of winning a majority of Dáil seats. The context of the election must, however, be considered with a more passive media and an absence of public opinion data accounting for a lack of real information beyond the unreliability of what was being fed back from canvassers in the constituencies. At the core of Labour's difficulties, however, was the party's failure to counter Fianna Fáil's negative campaign strategy which, cynically, cast doubt on Corish's true intent and, highly effectively, exploited gaps in Labour's policy programme. The newspapers, which were the main means of communication, followed the Fianna Fáil agenda, and Labour's strategy was unable to circumvent the direction of news coverage. Even in *The Irish Times*, which was perceived by readers like Sir Frederick Sayers as closely aligned to Labour, the Fianna Fáil negative campaign undermined Corish and his socialist programme. When the ballot papers were all counted the results showed that, rather than heralding a new socialist dawn, in fact, the election had actually only 'consolidated the status quo'.<sup>65</sup>

An editorial in *The Irish Times* predicted the best ever Dáil and noted somewhat optimistically that Labour had emerged from the campaign 'as an unmistakably socialist party'.<sup>66</sup> The reality was somewhat different. Indeed, in terms of Labour's policy ambition the impact of the 1969 election outcome was dramatic and lasting. As Horgan more accurately concluded, 'The loss of confidence in the party was so great, it seems, that never again would it stick its collective neck out in quite such a dramatic fashion'.<sup>67</sup> In the end the seventies were not socialist, *The Irish Times* was not Labour's house newspaper and in subsequent contests a new professionalism swept over election campaigning as greater attention was paid to communication strategies – amid more assertive and aggressive media coverage – and a more dominant role for television coverage of politics.

## *Making the Difference?*

90. Bertie Ahern, *Bertie Ahern: The Autobiography* (London, 2009), pp. 150–1.
91. Duignan, *op. cit.*, p. 91.
92. Finlay, *op. cit.*, p. 171.
93. Ahern, *op. cit.*, p. 153.
94. Quoted in Duignan, *op. cit.*, p. 91.
95. Albert Reynolds, *Albert Reynolds: My Autobiography* (Dublin, 2010), p. 226.
96. Duignan, *op. cit.*, p. 92.
97. Finlay, *op. cit.*, p. 215.
98. *Ibid.*, p. 216.
99. Ahern, *op. cit.*, p. 154.
100. Finlay, *op. cit.*, p. 235.
101. Duignan, *op. cit.*, p. 131.
102. Finlay, *op. cit.*, p. 265.
103. Duignan, *op. cit.*, p. 133.
104. Quinn, *op. cit.*, p. 322.
105. Finlay, *op. cit.*, p. 277.
106. Quinn, *op. cit.*, p. 323.
107. *Ibid.*, pp. 362–3.
108. Finlay, *op. cit.*, p. 307.
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