

Pre-publication draft

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'There now follows . . .' The role of the party political broadcast and the 2007 'Peace broadcast'.

The 2007 general election in Ireland was notable for the intervention of Tony Blair and Bill Clinton – and former US senator George Mitchell – and their appearance in a political broadcast endorsing incumbent Taoiseach Bertie Ahern. This involvement went beyond what might be described as 'celebrity endorsement' but rather was an attempt to influence Irish voters by strengthening sentiment toward Ahern eight days before the 24 May 2007 poll. The trio of international political figures endorsed Ahern with a focus on his role in the Northern Ireland peace process although they also referenced his leadership in creating the Irish 'Celtic Tiger' economy.

The *New York Times* (Quinn, 2007) described the intervention as an unusual gesture of support'. Nevertheless, the decision to call 'in international support' – as the Reuters News Agency (Hoskins, 2007) put it – was part of a carefully planned campaign strategy devised by Ahern's Fianna Fáil party. Seeking a third successive term, after ten years as leader of the major party in coalition governments, Ahern faced an uphill battle to remain in office amid allegations of political corruption and a resurgent opposition. Positive endorsement from these international figures was an attempt to stress Ahern's 'statesman-like leadership standing' against his more inexperienced challengers. The so-called 'peace broadcast' was a significant departure from the traditional approach to broadcast political advertising in Ireland not just with the external political endorsement but also the overwhelming presidential focus in a parliamentary system.

The legislative regime in Ireland prohibits the broadcast of advertisements 'directed towards a political end' (Oireachtas, 2009). The ban on paid political

advertising, similar to that in the United Kingdom, applies to not just political parties and election candidates but also organizations promoting issues considered to be of a political nature. The regulatory arrangements do, however, allow registered political parties access to a system of free but controlled advertisements during election and referendums campaigns although vested interest groups such as charities and trade unions have no such access.

This system of free political advertising during election and referendum campaigns is known as party election broadcasts in the United Kingdom but the term party political broadcast is more commonly used in Ireland. In a restricted advertising regime these broadcasts remain the main way in which political parties 'communicate in an unmediated fashion with voters' (Negrine, 2011, 390). The broadcasts are widely watched by the electorate, and as a specific form of political communication they have become an important role of the ritual of Irish elections' (Collins and Butler, 2008, 43). According to Irish polling data they are considered to be potentially influential in determining voter choice. Research in 2009 showed that sixty per cent (60%) of Irish voters agreed with the statement that 'party political broadcasts can influence how people decide to vote' while 21% disagreed (Rafter, 2009, 27).

This chapter places the political advertising regime in Ireland in a wider international context while considering specific local regulations that shape the Irish attitude to political advertising. The development of broadcast political advertising in Ireland is examined by way of providing a backdrop to understanding the stand-out nature of the 'peace broadcast' that aired in 2007. Section one discusses the regulatory rules applied to broadcast political advertising. The development of the system of party political broadcasts is examined in section two. The 'peace broadcast' is the focus of section three which discusses in detail the content, production values and electoral context in which it was aired in 2007. The impact of the 'peace broadcast' is assessed in the final section that considers the future of party political broadcasts in Ireland.

The regulation of political advertising

Political campaigns in the United States are very much media campaigns and political advertising is at the heart of these campaigns (Kaid, 2004). In this environment political advertising is equated with liberal expenditure limits and protected political speech, and as such any attempt to curtail political advertising would be considered a violation of the first amendment of the US constitution. However, the American system is very much ‘an exceptional case’ underpinned by limited regulation (Kaid and Holtz-Bacha, 2006, 10). More common in international experience are countries with a regulated advertising regime alongside countries that prohibit all advertising of a political nature. Countries that allow paid political advertising in a controlled environment frame their regulatory systems to include restrictions on scheduling, regulations of the duration and limits on the costs that broadcasters can charge parties and candidates. Other countries including Ireland and the United Kingdom have dealt with the issue of paid political advertising by imposing an outright ban while operating a limited and regulated system of free advertising specifically for political parties during electoral contests.

The ‘blanket ban’ on political advertising in Ireland has been reaffirmed in several pieces of broadcasting legislation approved by the Irish parliament over many years and, most recently, in the Broadcasting Act, 2009. Section 41 (3) of that Act states that ‘a broadcaster shall not broadcast an advertisement which is directed towards a political end or which has any relation to an industrial dispute’ (Oireachtas, 2009). While no definition of what is understood as a ‘political advertisement’ is provided in Irish law, the scope of the ban as reaffirmed in 2009 remains wide reaching and includes all advertising that might contain political content (Rafter, 2009). In the view of the regulator, the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI), all advertisements of a political nature are to be ‘strictly prohibited’ (BAI, 2011, 4). A very narrow construct has been applied to the word ‘political’ and, in this regard, the prohibition also applies to advertisements for events as well as notices of meetings or events organized by those with an interest in an election or referendum campaign. The regime means, in effect, that in addition to advertising for political parties, any advertisements that are directed towards procuring or opposing changes in legislation, government policies or policies of

government authorities have been deemed to be directed towards a political end and have, therefore, been banned.

While none of the main political parties have ever sought to challenge the prohibition on their right to advertise on television and radio the restrictive nature of the political advertising regime has led to ongoing controversy with other groups covered by the ban. Specific difficulties have arisen with organisations including book publishers, charities and trade unions when they sought to promote issues considered to be of a political nature. Such advertisements would, if approved for broadcast, have promoted issues such as a book written by an active politician, a music concert to raise funds and increase awareness of the war in Iraq and a campaign to encourage the Irish government to fully implement an international resolution on gender equality. In one of these cases, radio advertisements for a memoir written by Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams were banned in 2003. The decision of the BAI was based on the fact that the book was written by a serving politician who was giving his views on events in which he and his party continued to be involved and which was still the subject of political debate. The book's publisher argued that 'banning a straightforward ad for the memoir is nonsense' as the book was a personal memoir of Adams's involvement in the peace process in Northern Ireland (Rafter, 2009, 15). Radio advertisements for other books written by Adams had also been banned - in 1987 and 1992 - but on those occasions under the Section 31 broadcasting prohibition that applied to members of Sinn Fein, among other groups.

In more recent times, there have been growing arguments that these types of decisions relating to political advertising by non-political parties might not withstand a legal challenge in light of judgments by the European Court of Human Rights (Jones, 2004). Nevertheless, during parliamentary consideration of the 2009 legislation there was no serious discussion about the merits, or otherwise, of amending the current regime although, in a brief reference to the longstanding prohibition, then communications minister Eamon Ryan made the case for retaining the status quo:

. . . we should not open up political advertising as it would be almost impossible for an authority to judge the political aspect of such advertisement and to make calls in terms of whether it is accurate, inaccurate, acceptable or unacceptable. It is a difficult and grey area. (Ryan, 2000)

The broadcasting system in Ireland has been dominated by a state-owned station, RTÉ, which operated a national radio service from 1926 and oversaw the introduction of a national television channel that first broadcast on New Year's Eve 1961. This monopoly system remained in place until 1989 when licenses for privately owned radio and television services were first issued. Coverage of politics on the state controlled radio service was, in its initial decades, limited, passive and reactive to events and announcements (Savage, 2011; Rafter, 2010). Until the 1950s there were no political discussion programmes, while the first unscripted political discussion programme was only broadcast in 1951; in the same year a weekly commentary on parliamentary proceedings was introduced.

The nature of political reportage underwent its first significant development with the arrival of an Irish television service in late 1961. The new domestic channel gave politics an increased sense of importance and, with their frequent television appearances, politicians were held to account by the media in a way not experienced previously. Reporting was less deferential and the perspective of journalists was increasingly called upon as analysis and comment was given greater prominence alongside news reporting of political developments. In this regard, the Irish situation was similar to the British experience with political broadcasting (Negrine, 2011, 392).

The role of RTÉ as a state-owned public broadcaster had been developed with the BBC model in mind although unlike its British counterpart, which was solely funded from the public purse, the Irish station's funding model was a mixture of public license fee and advertising. Paid political advertising was banned on British television. The Irish authorities adopted a similar approach. The legislative restrictions, which banned paid political advertising on radio and television, meant unmediated political communication between the political parties and the public was only possible through a new system of party political broadcasts.

Party political broadcasts

Party political broadcasts (PPB) have been a staple of Irish elections since the 1965 general election. Records indicate that the first PPB was transmitted on 8 February 1965 and featured incumbent Taoiseach Seán Lemass sitting in an armchair as he addressed watching voters. In the broadcast Lemass, the leader of Fianna Fáil, talked about recent economic progress including increased job creation and rising living standards. With cutaway images of half-demolished inner city slums followed by newly constructed housing estates, Lemass asked for a new mandate ‘to ensure that progress is maintained and that the people who know how to run the country keep the wheel in their hands’ (Irish Film Archive, 1965).

In a study of British party election broadcasts in the 1950s, Negrine concluded that by avoiding innovation and relying on ‘tired and tested formats’ the parties were displaying a degree of uncertainty not just with the television medium but also the merits of free political broadcasts at election times (Negrine, 2011, 395). The Lemass broadcast was undoubtedly influenced by the initial British experience although while parties in the UK went on to display a greater willingness to experiment, their Irish counterparts have only rarely strayed from the format of having senior party figures taking to camera combined with cutaways images of representatives of key voter groups including the elderly, families and workers. The visuals are usually combined with music and are, on occasion, complemented by graphics. There were, of course, some exceptions - two smaller parties, the Progressive Democrats and Democratic Left - made use of comedy sketches but these broadcasts were exceptional departure from the norm.

The dominant style of Irish PPBs is captured in the archive listings for one such broadcast from February 1982: ‘Campaign song over opening montage of [leader] being greeted by members of the public on the election trail. [Leader] speaks to camera . . . There are shots of children in class, a young couple, a student, factories, a farmer and some old age pensioners’ (Irish Film Archive, 1982). In one respect, however, the Irish advertisements display a discernible American

influence – personalization. So while the Irish broadcasts are allocated in national parliamentary elections to qualifying political parties they tend to be exclusively dominated by leading politicians and, particularly, party leaders. This latter fact can be taken as a sign that personalization and presidentialization comfortably co-exist with Ireland’s parliamentary system of government.

Production values in Irish PPBs have increased significantly in more recent elections so that the political parties now produce ‘slick and polished three-minute advertisements’ (Collins and Butler, 2008, 43). Similarly, UK broadcasts ‘have become increasingly sophisticated and some have entered election folklore’ (Pattie and Johnston, 2002, 334). Scammell and Langer however, observed that British election broadcasts while informative are ‘remarkably unpopular’. They concluded that ‘it might do political parties a power of good to be more entertaining, more emotionally intelligent (2006, 764). The evidence from Ireland over the past half-century suggests that there has been an even stronger conservatism at play combined with an unwillingness to approach these broadcasts as television advertisements that directly engage viewers. Respondents to a 2009 study on political advertising in Ireland were presented with a series of adjectives to describe party political broadcasts including boring, informative, misleading and biased. One quarter (25%) opted for ‘boring’ as the best way to describe party political broadcasts while 20% said these advertising spots were ‘informative’. One in ten (10%) believed that the material in the broadcasts were misleading (Rafter, 2009).

The PPB allocation criteria are determined following negotiations between the broadcasters and the political parties. Free broadcast time is allocated to all qualifying parties at national, European and presidential elections. The outcome is generally governed by reference to the results of previous elections and the number of candidates nominated by the parties in the election under consideration. So, for example, at the 1997 general election any registered party – with a ‘coherent set of policies’ and which nominated a minimum of seven candidates was guaranteed at least one slot of between one minute and one minute 45 seconds (Electoral Commission, 2001, 29). The system meant that for the two largest parties the allocation led to Fianna Fáil (which received 40% support in the

previous contest in 1992) being allocated six PPB slots totalling 20 minutes of airtime while Fine Gael (which received 25% support in 1992) had four slots totalling 12½ minutes of airtime. The costs of recording and producing the broadcasts are borne by the parties themselves. The broadcasts are transmitted in peak-time slots in the schedules of national television and radio stations. In the case of the two national television services now operating in Ireland the PPBs are generally shown following their evening news programmes.

The broadcasts are intended to encourage public participation in the voting process and also to provide voters with information to support their voting decisions. In the United Kingdom it has been argued that, ‘the principle that political parties should be able freely to publicize their platforms and policies to voters, and that voters should be able to receive such information, remains compelling’ (Electoral Commission, 2003, 5). Scammell and Langer have argued that as television is now the predominant means of political communications in regimes where paid spots are prohibited, the PPB is the ‘single most important direct address to voters’ (2006, 764). Given the ban on paid political advertising the system of free election broadcasts is the only direct access that political parties in Ireland, and the UK, have to the broadcast media. There is no external commentary; no journalist providing commentary or interviewer influencing the agenda.

The public’s response in Ireland is different to that presented in the UK where their arrival on television screens is ‘commonly greeted by mass channel-hopping’ (Scammell and Langer, 2006, 765). It has been noted that a minority of the electorate watch the British broadcasts (Pattie and Johnston, 2002, 354). While there is mixed evidence about effectiveness, sizable audiences in Ireland watch these broadcasts – the 16 television broadcasts during the 2007 general election had an average viewership of 500,000 people. In a 2009 study respondents were asked if they could recall any party political broadcasts from the 2007 election campaign (Rafter, 2009 and 2011). Almost six in 10 of all adults (58%) could recall party political broadcasts from 2007 while 39% had no recall. People over 35 years were more likely to recall the party political broadcasts – 70% in the 35-

44 age category; 75% in the 45-54 age category and 68% in the 65+ age category – against 40% of those aged between 18 and 24 years.

Despite the wide variation in opinions on the value of party political broadcasts the survey evidence pointed to strong public support for the current system. Respondents were asked for their view on the statement, ‘regardless of whether I watch or hear them myself, I think it is important that party political broadcasts are shown’. Almost six in ten (57%) agreed that it was important that party political broadcasts were shown, regardless of whether or not they personally watched the broadcasts. Some 41% strongly agreed with this viewpoint while 16% agreed. Only 24% of respondents were in disagreement with this position. Two-thirds of those in the 45+ age category agreed that it was important that party political broadcasts were transmitted, regardless of whether or not they saw or heard them.

The ‘peace broadcast’

Voters in Ireland went to the polls on 24 May 2007 following an electoral contest to decide if outgoing Taoiseach Bertie Ahern would win a third successive term. Ahern had already enjoyed a decade in office having led his centre-right Fianna Fáil party in the two previous contents in 1997 and 2002. Following each of those elections he had formed coalition administrations involving the smaller Progressive Democrats party and a handful of like-minded independent TDs. The pillars of Ahern’s tenure in power were the peace process in Northern Ireland and the strength of the Irish economy. During most of the 1997 to 2007 period the Irish economy grew significantly, and the term ‘Celtic Tiger’ entered public discourse to describe the transformation in the wellbeing of a nation defined for much of the twentieth century by economic underperformance.

Ahern was centrally involved in the attempts to secure a peace agreement in Northern Ireland. In a sense his ‘place in history’ was secured following the cessation of the Provisional Irish Republican Army’s campaign of violence and the establishment of a power-sharing deal between the different factions in the conflict region. But Ahern’s longevity in office combined with questions about his personal finances, and a more spirited and united opposition than five years

previously, created ‘a fierce head-to-head confrontation between two opposing teams which looked for most of the campaign to be evenly matched’ (Gallagher and Marsh, 2008, xi).

The campaign strategy devised by Ahern’s Fianna Fáil election advisors revolved around a number of set-piece non-election events that were to highlight his role in the Northern Ireland peace process and to stress his leadership seniority over his less experienced opposition challengers. Two events in particular dominated news media coverage during the election campaign. First, the restoration of the devolved power-sharing government in Northern Ireland on 8 May 2007 pushed general election coverage from the main pages of the newspapers and the main headlines on broadcast stations. Nevertheless, as the incumbent head of the government, Ahern’s response to the development was widely covered by the media. Second, Ahern addressed both houses of the British parliament on 15 May 2007. The British government, led by Ahern’s fellow peace process participant, Tony Blair, had issued the invitation to address the joint parliamentary gathering. The timing of the event again cleared the news schedules of election coverage although Ahern remained central to the news agenda of the day in question. The two events received saturation media coverage and it has been argued that the positive imagery presented Ahern with ‘a platform to exploit his role in the peace process’ (Brandenburg and Zalinski, 2008, 176).

With the set-pieces events already in the election diary, Fianna Fáil strategists had, in fact, one further opportunity to emphasize their leader’s experience and standing compared to his less experienced challenger for the role Taoiseach. The ‘peace broadcast’ was first aired on 16 May 2007. The four-minute video had been recorded a month previously and was produced to capitalize on Ahern’s role in the Northern Ireland peace process. Clinton, Blair and Mitchell had agreed to be interviewed for what they knew would be a promotional broadcast – a PPB – to be aired as part of Ahern’s re-election strategy. Ahern had developed good working and personal relations with all three politicians, particularly with Clinton and Blair. In his memoir Clinton refers to Ahern as his ‘partner for peace’ (Clinton, 2004, 688). Blair and Ahern had first worked together in the mid-1990s

when they were both opposition leaders, and according to Blair, ‘we got on immediately like the proverbial house on fire’ (Blair, 2010, 159).

The film opens with archive footage from April 1998 when Ahern and Blair delivered a joint-media conference at the successful conclusion of marathon negotiations that led to the signing of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement. The deal had been stuck following talks involving the Irish and British governments and representatives of the leading political parties in Northern Ireland. During the talks, the Clinton White House administration had also played a vital role in cajoling the participants to make the necessary concessions to secure a final agreement. In this footage, as Blair looks on, Ahern speaks of the day in question being about a ‘new beginning’ that promises a ‘bright future . . . when a line can be drawn under the bloody past’ (Fianna Fáil, 2007).

The 25-second soundbite that opens the broadcast is in fact the only time Ahern’s voice is heard in the full PBB. Blair is the first of the three international politicians to speak with a short clip from his recorded interview: ‘It’s right to say we would never have had the peace process in Northern Ireland without Bertie Ahern’. Following this sound clip the screen goes to black and the word ‘Peace’ appears. The remaining three minutes and 20 seconds of the broadcast is given over to clips from the interviews with Clinton, Blair and Mitchell. The three international politicians are glowingly positive about Ahern’s leadership ability, his negotiating skills, and his central role in securing the peace deal in Northern Ireland.

Mitchell: Bertie Ahern made several crucial decisions that led to the Good Friday Agreement. One of them was to come to Stormont along with Prime Minister Blair in the closing days where they took charge of the negotiations. They didn’t just supervise them – they conducted them word-by-word, sentence-by-sentence – a high wire act in which one mistake would have resulted in disaster.

Clinton: There is no question in my mind that while the lion’s share of the credit belongs to the parties themselves, who got tired of fighting and wanted a peaceful

future, that if it hadn't been for Bertie Ahern and for Tony Blair we would never have had the Good Friday Agreement.

Blair: Without his leadership and his determination and his strength, and his doggedness in just keeping the thing going and on track, we would never have come this far and certainly I could not have wished for a better partner in peace than Bertie Ahern.

The initial interview material with three political figures is heard alongside more archive footage from the 1998 peace talks in Belfast. Viewers saw the leaders from the two communities in Northern Ireland including Gerry Adams of Sinn Féin and David Trimble of the Ulster Unionist Party. Interestingly, despite the PPB's 'peace' theme Blair and Clinton proceed to offer an assessment of Ahern – and effectively an endorsement – that went beyond the Irish politician's involvement in the Northern Ireland peace process.

Blair specifically credits Ahern with Ireland's economic prosperity. In this section of the broadcast the archive footage moves away from images of Northern Ireland to show Ahern attending a summit of European Union heads of government – French President Jacques Chirac is prominent in the footage – as well as shaking hands outside the White House with President Clinton.

Blair: The fact that the Republic of Ireland is such a dynamic and enterprising place and the contribution of Bertie Ahern, both in his previous incarnation as the minister for finance, but then as the Taoiseach that is a contribution that is immeasurable.

Clinton: The sheer economic progress in the Irish Republic and in Northern Ireland alone ought to be enough to show people that the path of peace is the best path.

Viewing the 'peace broadcast' offers support for Kaid's contention about the difficulty in distinguishing between issues and images in campaign messages: 'Traditionally, issues have been viewed as statements of candidate positions on

policy issues or preferences on issues or problems of public concern, whereas images have been viewed as a concentration on candidate qualities or characteristics (Kaid, 2004, 162).

The contributions of Clinton, Blair and Mitchell offer a blending of image and issue information. This blending is clearly evident when the broadcast switched gear once more in its final twenty-five seconds to include footage of the Rev. Ian Paisley. As leader of the hard-line Democratic Unionist Party, Paisley had withdrawn from the Belfast Agreement talks and had actively campaigned against the deal. But as part of subsequent efforts to secure a power-sharing government in Northern Ireland Paisley had modified his stance.

On 8 May 2007 Paisley had been elected first minister of Northern Ireland in a devolved administration involving other parties including Sinn Féin. The footage used in the broadcast was from earlier in 2007 with Paisley arriving at Farmleigh House in Dublin. He is seen getting out of his car and being met by Ahern. The broadcast then switches back briefly to the Clinton interview, and the former US president says:

He [Ahern] never lost his energy, he never lost his determination, he never lost his vision. He never lost his sense of humour. He just kept going until this last agreement here which may well bring an end to everything.

As Clinton speaks his final words – ‘may well bring an end of everything’ – the broadcast returned to the footage of Ahern and Paisley. As Clinton finishes speaking the footage is deliberately slowed to emphasize the handshake between Paisley and Ahern. The footage, and the editing tools used, were clearly about stressing for the watching voters not just the success of the peace process in Northern Ireland, and not just Ahern’s role in that achievement, but also his status as a peace-maker and as a conciliator.

Conclusion

Voter feedback in Ireland shows strong attachment to PPBs as a means of communicating party positions and seeking electoral support despite a lack of satisfaction with the broadcasts themselves. With possible legal, and nascent

technological, challenges to the practicality of the longstanding broadcast ban there may well be room for regulatory initiative to modernize this method of political communication. In this context, a more relaxed regulatory regime may prompt greater party innovation. In this chapter we have examined one recent innovative broadcast, produced within the confines of the current rules, that was a clear departure from all previous election broadcasts over the last half century. Indeed, the four-minute PPB has been described as ‘an unusual film’ (Collins and Butler, 2008, 43) while Ahern himself judged it ‘a powerful broadcast’ (RTÉ, 2007).

Ahern’s election advisors in his Fianna Fáil party recognized the uniqueness of the broadcast – they considered it a news story in itself capable of generating coverage outside the specific confines of its own transmission. As part of creating a ‘buzz’ around the PPB, the film was screened for political journalists after the party’s daily morning election press conference (RTÉ, 2007). The strategy where the advert is a legitimate news story in its own right had long been in place elsewhere (Scammell, 1995, 228) but given the lack of excitement with PPBs in Ireland they generally received little, if any, news coverage. Screening the ‘peace broadcast’ for journalists was successful as it placed the broadcast into the day’s election news cycle for radio and television news programmes.

Irish PPBs have traditionally been leader-centred, but, given Ireland’s parliamentary political system, even when dominated by the party leader these broadcasts frequently include visuals and interview clips with other senior party personnel. The ‘peace broadcast’ is, however, exclusively candidate dominated with no mention of Ahern’s party, his role as party leader or even his party colleagues. A stranger with no local knowledge watching the broadcast would most likely speculate that Ireland was ruled by a presidential system of government. In this regard, there is little doubt that the creators of this PPB were moving into the territory of ‘intense personalization’ evident in more recent election broadcasts in the United Kingdom (Hodess et al, 2000, 64).

The broadcast firmly fits into the acclaim category of adverts identified by Benoit (1999) with the three international politicians making positive claims about the

election candidate. Viewers are treated to a potent combination of issue information and image content (Kaid, 2004, 162). While issue based in terms of stressing Ahern's record, the broadcast is devoid of any statement on Ahern's position on policy issues. No direct reference is made to the election campaign – the compliment to Ahern for his involvement in Ireland's economic success is the only reference to an election issue. The interview material from the three political figures concentrates on delivering positive assessments of the qualities and characteristics of the candidate. The accompanying images are selected to deliver focus on those same qualities and characteristics.

The broadcast is undoubtedly issue based with strong emotional appeal particularly by reminding voters of the goodwill, and relief, generated by the Belfast Agreement. The generation of emotional responses in political advertisements has been identified as important in several American studies (Kaid, 2004, 166). By reminding voters about Ahern's association with the Northern Ireland peace process the broadcast obviously sets out to capitalize on the positive emotional sentiment towards the peace process and to enhance public evaluation of Ahern in the election campaign. Political advertisements for incumbents tend to be defined by images that stress their experience and achievements in office. This is clearly the case with the 'peace broadcast'.

The broadcast was unprecedented not just in the departure from the tried and tested PPB formats produced by most Irish political parties over many elections. The intervention of three recognizable international political figures in an Irish national election, and their willingness to endorse one of the participants, was highly unusual. There was no ambiguity about the involvement of the three politicians. A spokeswoman for Ahern stated that 'They were all asked to participate. They knew they were participating in a party political broadcast'. The interviews with the three politicians had in fact been recorded a month previously in April 2007 and they had been shown the final version of the four-minute broadcast: 'They cleared it before it went ahead. All three approved them, and they saw the version. They were all cleared personally' (de Bréadún, 2007).

The main opposition parties were placed in a difficult position. The peace process in Northern Ireland had been a tremendous success. It was difficult to attack the PPB without being criticized for undermining the peace process. Moreover, all three international politicians did not just have high recognizability with the Irish public but they were also widely admired and liked. Blair and Clinton had enjoyed positive receptions on their visits to the Irish Republic. There was considerable respect for the investment made by Mitchell while he was chairman of the talks process that culminated in the Belfast Agreement. Against this background – and having had to publicly congratulate Ahern for his Westminster speech the previous day at which the main opposition leader Enda Kenny of Fine Gael was an invited guest – the opposition parties offered limited public criticism of the intervention of the three external figures.

If anything Fine Gael and the Labour Party sought to play down the intervention of the three politicians. The Labour Party leader couched his reaction in terms of ‘the end of an era’ with Clinton, retired and Blair about to depart office. ‘I don’t think they [voters] are going to be greatly influenced by valedictory comments of other political leaders who have left office or are going out of office’, Labour’s Eamon Gilmore observed. The underlying hope in the reaction was obviously that Ahern might also shortly be joining Clinton and Blair in retirement. Ahern’s main challenger for the role as Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, expressed similar sentiments: ‘They’re all gone or they’re on the way out’ while adding that Fianna Fáil was entitled to use any figureheads or personalities it wanted in its broadcasts (de Bréadún, 2007).

Given its position as a small nation, and the strong historical relationship with its two English-speaking neighbours, the UK on one side and the US on the other, it is not surprising that Irish politicians would look to these countries for inspiration. Imitation and adoption of successful campaign techniques has been a feature of the professionalization of electoral campaigning in Ireland. Establishing an association with popular American and British leaders is a long established tactic. In the first PPB back in 1965 with another Fianna Fáil Taoiseach – Seán Lemass – those involved saw fit to include static photographs of John F. Kennedy and Harold Wilson. Moreover, the visits of US presidents, for example Kennedy,

Reagan and Clinton, seeking to stress their Irish roots to enhance their Irish-American vote back home have also been used by their local political hosts to generate positive domestic sentiment.

Irish leaders have also sought to capitalize on their political links with European figures, and in this regard prior to the 2007 general election a ‘goodwill’ letter from German Chancellor Angela Merkel was read out at the Fine Gael national conference. Merkel’s CDU party and Fine Gael are both members of the European People’s Party alliance. With a touch of irony one of Ahern’s Fianna Fáil colleagues attacked the letter noting that ‘The Irish people have a very deep-rooted sense of not being told what to do by foreign powers’. He also claimed that the main opposition party had demonstrated ‘a massive inferiority complex’ by seeking and receiving endorsements from people in other countries (de Bréadún, 2007). (REF) But exploiting established cross-national political links in a party political setting is very different from the direct electoral intervention and explicit candidate endorsement offered by Clinton, Blair and Mitchell. In a similar vein, the 1965 attempt to create ‘positivity by association’ by using photographic images was very different from the direct public endorsement offered by Kennedy and Wilson’s successors.

In summary, this analysis of the ‘peace broadcast’ in the 2007 Irish general election shows a willingness to make party political broadcasts part of the campaign and to innovate with a long established format. This specific broadcast advertisement shows personalization has become central to election strategies in Ireland. Moreover, the role of ‘celebrity’ political endorsements, even in what was a strongly issue focused broadcast, may be worthy of further research to determine wider relevance and to identify possible trends over time in other countries. From a regulatory viewpoint, the ‘peace broadcast’ may point to the type of innovation in political information provision that could become increasingly a feature of election campaigns with considered and imaginative relaxation of the current restrictive regulatory regime for broadcast political advertising in Ireland.

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