THE REVELATION OF IRELAND
1995–2020

ALSO BY DIARMAID FERRITER

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The Transformation of Ireland 1900–2000

Between Two Hells: The Irish Civil War

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For Saorla, Ríona and Enya.
Have I not seen the loveliest women born.

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Introduction

ROARING INSIDE

I: 'Don't Patronise the Irish'

Looking back on the book I published twenty years ago, *The Transformation of Ireland 1900–2000*, the title now appears provisional. While the pace of change towards the end of the twentieth century was swift, the early twenty-first century was to bring another abundance of transformations. From the mid 1990s to 2020 the Irish economy boomed then crashed and recovered, politics became more fractured and the population expanded and diversified as Ireland became a desirable destination for migrants. Alongside these developments, the influence of the Catholic Church crumbled, the country was enveloped in exposures of egregious historic abuses, a peace process brought an end to the Troubles in Northern Ireland and Ireland had its own version of the gender, identity and culture wars that were being fought elsewhere, with much more focus being placed on individual rights. There was a profusion of confidence, creativity, defiance, denial, hubris and, in some areas, continuity.

This book is an attempt to make sense of the scale and texture of those changes and endurances through a long historical lens. It is thus a contemporary history infused with a longer perspective, seeking to document the fortunes and frailties of recent decades in both the north and south of Ireland. The book's title was prompted not only by what has been revealed about the past, but also how Ireland from the mid 1990s has revealed its potential and its limitations.

Coming to terms with public and private pasts has preoccupied many Irish writers in recent decades. Anne Enright's Booker Prize-winning novel *The Gathering* (2007) dwells on the

nine surviving children of the Hegarty family, in Dublin for the funeral of their troubled brother Liam. The narrator, Veronica, is seeking to make sense of what had tormented him:

'I would like to write down what happened in my grandmother's house the summer I was eight or nine, but I am not sure if it really did happen. I need to bear witness to an uncertain event. I feel it roaring inside me – this thing that may not have taken place. I don't even know what name to put on it. I think you might call it a crime of the flesh, but the flesh is long fallen away and I am not sure what hurt may linger in the bones.'[1]

There was a great deal of 'roaring inside' during the period this book covers, as many people attempted to make sense of deep grievances and hurt and the degree to which the Irish social contract had failed them. Some of that roaring also became external as demands for answers became louder. But there were positive roars, too; the very idea of needing to 'bear witness' was cathartic and liberating as a focus on personal testimony came to characterise debates about tradition, power networks and vested interests. Taboos were confronted and secrets revealed. The Irish economy also roared and uncovered its potential, and there was confidence about Irishness, its status, relevance and reach, and the richness of Irish culture. The attempt to square the circles created by the legacy of the 1918–23 period, and the Troubles from the late 1960s to the mid 1990s that had killed over 3,600 people, created a quieter approval, but was also accompanied by continued roars of obduracy.

The changes influenced the perception of Ireland. When playwright Arthur Riordan penned his 2005 musical comedy *Improbable Frequency*, set in Ireland during the Second World War, it included a song 'Please Don't Patronise the Irish'. As historian Roy Foster commented wryly, 'Nowadays, few would dare' as 'Irish achievement is on the front line everywhere'.[2]

The perils of contemporary history are obvious, raising questions about adequate sources, perspective, distance and objectivity. As John A. Murphy pointed out in 1975 when introducing his very short history *Ireland in the Twentieth Century*: 'in the absence of both perspective and documentation, it is

obvious that analysis and assessment can only be tentative', but also that 'no Irishman writing about his own time can honestly claim to be academically remote from it all: he must try to be fair but he cannot escape feeling involved'. There was, nonetheless, something worthwhile in 'combining contemporary observation with the analysis born of professional experience'.[3]

That same decade, historian F. S. L. Lyons posed this question: 'Can contemporary history be history?' He suggested it suffered from 'fundamental disabilities, which place it firmly and irredeemably outside the cognisance of the historical profession'. What contemporaries witnessed, he suggested, were only 'fragments', and it was difficult to recognise what was of permanent importance. But he also acknowledged that if historians abandoned contemporary history it would be left to propagandists.[4] It is true, however, in the words of poet Thomas McCarthy, that analysis of recent happenings 'will surely be interspersed with opinion and speculation … this is the nature of the fluctuating present; each Irish memory is an accusation and every scholarly insight is cornered and battered by the polemics of the moment'.[5]

I do not claim any special virtuousness in confronting those challenges but I do believe that, despite the drawbacks, there are legitimate reasons for historians to attempt to make sense of recent events, including to challenge the infuriating mantra 'We are where we are', which invites a closing-down of a much-needed historical perspective. Reflecting on recent experience also makes the historian think about the extent to which the upheavals of the early twenty-first century will fundamentally alter how the fortunes of the two Irish states over the course of their first centuries will be framed historically in the long term.

When I began studying history at third level in 1989, there was much attention devoted in the lectures and textbooks to the difficulties experienced by the state in its formative decades. The civil war and its legacy, economic crises, the threat from subversives and emigration featured prominently. But there was also a broad consensus that the state had notable achievements to its name. They included: the survival of democracy and institutions

of state during difficult years, at a time when other European democracies floundered; a maturation in politics that allowed a consensus to develop about foreign policy, including neutrality during the Second World War; a depoliticised civil service; and a mostly unarmed police force that, despite being born in civil war, earned the respect of the people it served.

The assessments of some historians in the 1980s and 1990s were also affected by the Troubles in Northern Ireland, not just in the sense of them wanting to critically question the role of violence in Irish history, but in seeking to emphasise that whatever the difficulties of the Republic, it was a very stable and peaceful entity compared to the North. In promoting this interpretation in 1997, at the time of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the foundation of the southern state, political scientist Tom Garvin suggested, 'Despite their mistakes and sins … the Irish revolutionaries-turned-politicians got it more right than wrong.'[6] Today, many might accept this assessment as still broadly accurate, but such has been the sustained exposure of poor governance and abuse of power through an abundance of inquiries, reports and investigations in recent decades that it is tempting to conclude that there is something too neat and contrived about such a balance sheet.

What is striking about the events of recent years, including mismanagement of the economy, scandals over policing, a refusal to take political reform seriously and the exposure of a Catholic Church that too often forgot to be Christian, is that we are constantly reminded how deep-rooted and historical these problems are. Among the conclusions of the Murphy Report in 2009 into how allegations of child sexual abuse were handled in the Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin was that there was an 'obsessive concern with secrecy and the avoidance of scandal', and 'little or no concern for the welfare of the abused'.[7] These words could just as easily sum up attitudes to a host of long-standing Irish problems.

It might be tempting to invoke the ghosts of the War of Independence generation, highlight their public service and lack of greed and compare that with a post-civil war generation far

too focused on self-promotion, or who, in the words of historian Tony Judt, 'substituted endless commerce for public purpose and expect no higher aspirations from our leaders'.[8] That, too, would be overly simplistic. While the achievements of the revolutionary generation were significant, many of the structures and attitudes that facilitated corruption, lethargy and resistance to change were championed by the architects of independence, especially the premium attached to excessive centralisation and self-protecting hierarchies. But neither should the scale of the achievement involved in sustaining stability and a strong layer of social solidarity in Ireland be underestimated, especially given the extremes and polarisation evident elsewhere in recent years. Irish politicians hardly took a deep intellectual approach to their craft, but they did display a degree of maturity, avoiding opening up fault lines that could potentially detonate constitutional crises.

Politics during these decades was notable for the slaying of the dominant beast, Fianna Fáil, in 2011, an unprecedentedly long spell in power for Fine Gael, the decimation of the Labour Party and the rise of Sinn Féin. From 1997 to 2007 Fianna Fáil managed to hone its ability to lead coalitions, but the scale of the economic crisis it presided over led to electoral meltdown and humiliation for a party that had dominated Irish governance since the 1930s. Yet for all the theatrical outrage about the failures of 'conservative parties', almost all parties were centrist. Civil war politics formally ended in 2020 with Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil agreeing coalition with the Green Party. One of the most notable features of Irish politics at this time was its resistance of the excesses of elsewhere, whether lurches to left or right. Political dialogue was also central to the ending of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, involving not just new channels of communication between the protagonists, but a considerable maturation in Anglo-Irish relations to well beyond the situation described by the British ambassador to Ireland, John Peck, in 1972 as 'brawling publicly'.[9]

When Cork historian Joe Lee's *Ireland 1912–1985: Politics and Society* was published in 1989 it caused a stir because of its

provocative probing of Irish institutions, intelligence, character and identity. According to Lee, the Irish economic performance had been 'the least impressive in western Europe'; there had been a 'long-term mediocrity'; and 'patriotism proved powerless, except in brief and specific conjectures, against the instincts of the possessing class'. This was one of his towering themes: national adherence to a 'possessor' principle rather than a 'performance' principle, with the concomitant rewarding of vested interests – property owners, public-sector employees, comfortable farmers – rather than genuine effort, with many outside of these interest groups forced to emigrate.[10] How Ireland in recent decades managed a new preoccupation with 'performance' is worth probing. Lee lacerated the 'incapacity of the Irish mind to think through the implications of independence for national development'. Whether that mind has been transformed is also worth examining.[11]

In 2007, another of Ireland's best-known historians, Roy Foster, sought to update the historical narrative and analysis after the Celtic Tiger economy had roared for a decade. Church authority had dissipated, a 'liberal agenda' was being delivered and the pace of economic globalisation was staggering. The peace process had delivered, if not complete peace in Northern Ireland, at least an end to the severity of the Troubles through the medium of 'joint authority' and the abandonment of the Republic's territorial claim to Northern Ireland, if not the dilution of partitionist mindsets that had left Northern nationalists feeling 'an odd compound of resentment, yearning and sense of abandonment'.[12] Quality of life surveys suggested the Irish were having a ball, but the pace of change, including advanced secularisation, was, as Foster saw it, 'bewildering'.

Foster was spiky about nostalgia, or those who blended 'post-modern Celticism' with 'an anti-modernist imagined Ireland of the 1950s'.[13] Ireland's identification with the 'pre-modern' yielded stubborn 'and indeed extravagant visions of national destiny' before economic modernisation became the updated *raison d'être*. But Foster also highlighted that new opportunities created new divides, such as those between urban

and rural Ireland. The big changes that had evolved from the 1970s were 'perhaps decisively and forever … a question of attitude'.[14] Ireland was also now dealing with and host to the layers of history that immigrants were carrying and the scale of what they had to offer to their new home: by 2016, people from 180 countries were living in Ireland and an island that was long accustomed to haemorrhaging population became a host society.

Given the outcome of the peace process, historian Alvin Jackson wondered if by 1998 Ireland was approaching the end of Irish history as it was understood up to then, with the previously entrenched 'political attitudes and institutions of Ireland in flux'.[15] Historians, too, were finding new ways of posing questions, conscious of 'plurality, variousness and ambiguity' while avoiding 'imprisoning historical perspectives'.[16]

Paul Bew, in his sweeping overview *Ireland: The Politics of Enmity 1789–2006* (2007), wondered if, given the backdrop of erstwhile foes Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) agreeing to share power in Northern Ireland, and as 'ethnic rage gives way to ethnic vanity', it was 'really possible that the enmities of Irish history were losing their power to hurt and destroy'.[17] The answer to that was no. As far back as 1965, A. J. P. Taylor deluded himself that David Lloyd George in 1921 had 'conjured the Irish question out of existence'.[18] He had done no such thing. His successors in the twenty-first century were not able to find a magic box of tricks either, but they did, at least, prise open a new space for a different type of dialogue and a balancing act between principle and pragmatism which required the art of 'dealing with ambiguity'.[19]

II: 'They were Wrong about Everything'

Inherited traditions were challenged and the past became aggressively traduced, owing to revelations of historic abuses, especially against women and children. What was sometimes lost was the need to appreciate nuance in relation to societal change and personal and moral dilemmas. As James Smith

remarked in the introduction to his book *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries* (2007), one of his challenges was how to separate academic detachment from personal indignation: 'Moral outrage and academic detachment do not sit easily on the same page.'[20] Detachment did not require lack of empathy; rather it necessitated full appreciation of context. State apologies which came in the wake of revelations of abuse were sometimes moving and powerfully symbolic and meant a lot to those still alive who had been victimised, the relatives of those maligned, and those who campaigned for change, but the apologies could also oversimplify. In denouncing the sins of the forefathers, contemporary values were too easily applied to historic laws and attitudes. The depiction of heroes and villains could generate reductionism, creating an imbalance that amounted to 'the history of a disappointment'.[21]Joe Lee's warning that an excessive, but often superficial, focus on the Church would occlude too much else was prescient: 'If the nature of Irish Catholicism cannot be ignored in discussing any major question of significance in modern Ireland it is by no means the only factor requiring scrutiny.'[22]

In John Boyne's novel *The Heart's Invisible Furies* (2017) the main character, Cyril Avery, experiences the full extent of a homophobic Ireland at various points of the twentieth century, and from the outset of the novel the Church is placed firmly in the dock for its perceived rank hypocrisy, cruel strangleholds and delusional depictions of supposed Irish purity, in contrast to British paganism and permissiveness. Cyril was born out of wedlock to a 16-year-old girl, Catherine Goggin, who is cast out from her rural Irish community by the parish priest '[l]ong before we discovered that he had fathered two children by two different women. Father James Monroe stood on the altar of the Church of Our Lady, Star of the Sea, in the parish of Goleen, West Cork, and denounced my mother as a whore.'[23] By the end of the novel, Cyril has survived to witness 'The New Ireland … sure everyone can get married now'. Even the now 86-year-old Catherine is getting married ('My mother and he had met on Tinder'). She remembers the terror of seventy years previously:

'He was wrong, wasn't he?

'Who?' I asked.

'Father Monroe. He said I'd never have a wedding day. He said that no man would ever want me. But here that day is. He was wrong.'

'Of course he was wrong,' I told her. 'They were all wrong. They were wrong about everything.'[24]

This gave the novel its satisfying narrative arc, but a historical narrative built on the idea that 'they were wrong about everything' is a shaky and partial one. As British historian of Ireland Charles Townshend saw it, 'casual indictments of the nation' can be too sweeping and unsubstantiated.[25]

Memory and misery framing became contested and problematic well beyond Ireland, prompting, for example, the 2019 book *Humankind: A Hopeful History* by Dutch historian Rutger Bregman, in which he sought to focus on 'humanity's innate goodness', as opposed to the sense that 'cynicism is a theory of everything'.[26] This was also addressed by the British historian Dominic Sandbrook, who suggested in 2023 that what has 'seeped into academic history is the very opposite of a love of history. There's a sense of the past that is shameful, something to be contemplated guiltily or with deep sorrow or that it's an occasion for gnashing your teeth or rending your garments.'[27] An Irish audience, however, especially when observing the fallout from the Brexit vote in 2016, was rightly sceptical of the empire nostalgia that became prominent in Britain or the contention by its then Education Secretary Michael Gove that too much history teaching in Britain was influenced by post-colonial guilt.[28] Ireland had very different kinds of post-colonial challenges when it came to thinking about the relationship between past and present, what was done with independence, what was acknowledged and what was buried.

Renowned novelist John Banville, writing for *The New York Times* in 2009, maintained that 'Everyone knew but no one said. Perfectly decent people can know a thing and at the same time not know it. We knew and did not know. That is our shame

today.'[29] Eminent journalist and commentator Fintan O'Toole suggested that this amounted to a 'system of feigned ignorance' where 'you have one eye open and one closed, and we hadn't yet decided whether we wanted to look at the country with both eyes open'.'[30] Or, as Claire Keegan's protagonist put it in her novel *Small Things Like These* (2021), a towering question enveloped the twenty-first-century perspective on earlier decades: 'Why were the things that were closest so often the hardest to see?'[31] Maybe it was because, as O'Toole suggested, there was a 'capacity to be in two minds' which had been 'at work in many of the most shameful aspects of Irish society'.[32]

But this was not extraordinary or unusual; it was part of a post-colonial social contract that was made explicable by the evolution of Irish history, the cementing of independence, class snobberies, religious power and 'the quest for respectability'.[33] Yet what constituted 'respectability' was ultimately reimagined as demands for tolerance multiplied. In 2015, Ireland was the first country in the world to introduce gay marriage because of a referendum, and then, in May 2018, a referendum to remove the Eighth Amendment to the Irish constitution, inserted as a result of the 1983 referendum to ensure courts and legislators could not allow legalised abortion in Ireland, was carried by the same margin (2:1) that had led to its original insertion.

There was much to be positive about during these decades. According to the UN, Ireland was, by 2016, the sixth-best country in the world to live in, tied with Germany.[34] An insightful journalistic chronicler, Justine McCarthy, documented much of the dark side but still found herself loving Ireland, noting that 'it is criticising that has brought about some of the most attractive features of modern Ireland'. For her, like so many others, attachment to Ireland was rooted in 'that instinct to make connections with others … the scathing humour to lighten the load … the richness of the spoken and written language, the all-togetherness in good times and bad' and 'by opening its mind, Ireland opened itself to opportunity'.[35] It did this especially when it listened properly to its women.

This book draws on sources generated by increased

digitisation and the general information avalanche of recent decades, alongside more traditional archival sources which are inevitably more limited for appraisal of recent decades, but are particularly abundant for the peace process.[36] Many sources for Irish history have been democratised due to digitisation, but the material also requires mediation. In tandem, the growth of social media has facilitated constant, short appraisals of controversial and emotive themes, contemporary and historical. But the social media fora can also work against perspective and nuance and facilitate simplicities, distortions and propaganda masquerading as fact, too often in a bilious and self-righteous manner. This is such an overwhelming modern impulse that it has been described as the 'tyranny of the instant and the treadmill of the unending now'.[37]

The expansion of social media has given even more force to the warning of historian Eric Hobsbawm in 1994 that 'the destruction of the past, or rather the social mechanisms that link one's contemporary experience to that of earlier generations, is one of the most characteristic and eerie phenomena of the late twentieth century. Most young men and women at the century's end grow up in a permanent present lacking any organic relation to the public past of the times in which they live in', with not enough of a shared idea of that public past.[38] Social media and misinformation has made history more, not less important. But I am also conscious of what is undocumented; indeed, one of the concerns expressed about the momentous decision by the Irish government in September 2008 to guarantee all the deposits of the state's leading banks during the great financial meltdown was not, it appears, matched with a remotely sufficient paper trail.[39]

With new scrutiny and sources, the Irish 'have become used to history meaning something more than war and the conduct of public affairs. The histories of the unwritten are crowding in … the subaltern voices.'[40] Part of this has been about coming to terms with Ireland's 'architecture of containment'.[41] But more widely, it reflects the determination to 'create a richer, more complex, variegated and inclusive tapestry of the past

than was possible when political history enjoyed unchallenged ascendancy'.[42] This includes 'emotions' in narratives and deeper probings of the private worlds that have always coexisted with the public.[43]

In some senses historians have embraced, very late, the mission statement of Seán Ó'Faoláin when establishing *The Bell* magazine in 1940: 'We have to go about nosing for bits of individual veracity, hidden in the dust-heaps of convention, imitation, timidity, traditionalism, wishful thinking.'[44] In breaking free of the straitjacket of the Anglo-Irish perspective, historians have found space to emphasise Ireland's relationship with Europe, empire, transnationalism and diaspora.

But old wounds have been reopened, too; Brexit halted the Anglo-Irish thaw as the question of the border in Ireland, previously dismissed or ignored, became an intractable issue. The Tories, playing with English nationalist fire, repeatedly burned and embarrassed themselves, while Ireland, though the sulks and stand-offs continued in the North, rallied its European allies calmly and purposefully, raising interesting questions about a new foreign policy focus. What was considered in 1978 by F. S. L. Lyons as 'the burden of our history' – conflict of cultures, the Troubles, Anglo-Irish crises, the myths weaved around certain events and the 'actualities of communal strife' – has not been lifted, but it has, as with so much else, been reshaped.[45]

1

THE GHOST OF PATRICK MACGILL: IRISH POLITICAL CULTURE

I: 'Tramping The Streets'

Since 1981, the hills of Donegal have played host to an annual 'think-in' for political anoraks, regarded as 'the most serious of the summer schools'.[1] It is named after local writer Patrick MacGill, a native of Glenties in south-west Donegal, who lived from 1890 until 1963. After leaving school at the age of ten, MacGill was hired out, aged twelve, at the Strabane Fair ('the slave market') to work in the Laggan area in the north-east, where he came to the realisation that for his harsh employer he was 'merely a ware purchased in the market place, something less valuable than a plough'.[2] Within a few years he was picking potatoes in Scotland, after which he journeyed as a navvy and then joined the British army.

MacGill was a great champion of the rural poor with little stake in the country and stridently vocal about the plight of emigrants; he was also 'consumed with a passionate hatred of gombeenism [corruption]'. [3] He is chiefly remembered now for his searing novel *The Children of the Dead End* (1914), in which his alter ego Dermod Flynn decries the abuse of child labour as well as the parents who brought 'me into the world and then liv[ed] on my labour – such an absurd and unjust state of things!' He also excoriates the collusion of the Church in this rapacious capitalism: 'The Church allows a criminal commercial system to continue and wastes its time trying to save the souls of the victims of that system … The Church is a betrayer of the people.'[4]

One of MacGill's poems asked, 'Will you not come back to Glenties, and your wave-washed Donegal?' but he found greater comfort in the camaraderie of the First World War trenches. He returned from the front to London, injured, and married the romantic novelist Margaret Gibbons. Afflicted by tuberculosis, he moved with his family to Switzerland and then to the US, where there was no fortune to be made, as he had hoped, on the speaking circuit, but instead the Great Depression and an impoverished existence. He died in Florida, was buried in Massachusetts and was forgotten until RTÉ current affairs editor Joe Mulholland enquired, via *The New York Times*, of his whereabouts in 1971.

One of MacGill's daughters, Christine, also a published novelist, travelled from the US to address that first summer school in 1981 and referred to family life with her father as 'dominated by much pain and poverty'. There was also a sense in the family that 'a curtain had been drawn over Ireland'.[5] The epitaph on MacGill's tombstone reads 'The Old Life Fails, But the New Life Comes'.[6] His life encapsulated many of the trials and travails of those most harshly affected by economic failures through emigration, dislocation and divided loyalties, but also creativity, defiance and an ability to cut through rhetoric. In 1963, the year of both their deaths, President John F. Kennedy visited Ireland and sought to depict a country that was steeped in the emigrant experience but thrusting forward.

Irish politicians by and large embraced the Kennedy narrative and heralded the benefits of modernisation, investment in education, an end to large-scale emigration and the attraction of foreign direct investment. The model endured, even though there were downturns and setbacks. Most of those who dominated Irish politics in the last years of the twentieth and early years of the twenty-first centuries were born in the 1950s or early 1960s, and were thus beneficiaries of these changes, before they were replaced by a younger generation who, largely, had experienced even more prosperity but faced a more truncated political landscape. But what most of them shared was a centrism and a reluctance to upend the established political ways.

By the early twenty-first century the three parties that had dominated politics since the foundation of the state, Fianna Fáil (FF), Fine Gael (FG) and the Labour Party, though they could not rely any more on blind loyalty, still commanded almost 75 per cent of the vote between them. There was little ideological warfare and the Labour Party was able to share power with both the others, in coalition with FF in 1992–4 and FG in 1994–7 and 2011–16.

Many of these politicians found their way to Donegal for a jaunt to the MacGill Summer School to address the state of the nation and generate copy during a traditionally lean month for political news. The summer school was also a forum for raking over failures, debating reform proposals and outlining a better future.[7] MacGill's's ghost was, in a sense, a reminder of what had often been identified as the problems of Irish politics: too conservative; catering for vested interests benefiting from the power networks; deficient when it comes to the social contract and overly centralised. But for all the desire of the summer school to, in political terms, create new life, it was also a reminder of continuity. Commemoration of past warriors like MacGill was no guarantee of any meaningful attempt to actually champion the causes they espoused or defeat the forces they railed against.

Talk of political reform – giving more power to the Dáil (the lower house of the Irish parliament) or the Seanad (Senate; the upper house), greater transparency in decision-making, or reconstituting the proportional representation single transferable system of voting – was an annual occurrence because political reform was so slow to materialise. But it was also rarely urgent, because there was no significant groundswell of opposition to traditional ways of doing things until what was described as Ireland's 'earthquake election' in 2011 ('in comparative terms … one of the most dramatic ever witnessed in Europe's established democracies'), when FF lost over half of its vote and almost three-quarters of its seats, regarded by some as a 'revolution at the ballot box'.[8]

Even though it was maintained in the context of that election that 'the failures of the political system over the past

decade were a key contributor to the financial crisis', Ireland's deep-rooted tradition of excessively centralised governance continued. Although the idea of citizens' assemblies was ultimately allowed to breathe, reforms were, as political scientists would put it, 'distractive' rather than 'constructive'.[9]

The domination of the main parties came with little discussion of ideology until the rise of Sinn Féin (SF) was spectacularly reflected in the 2020 general election, when it won 24.5 per cent of first preference votes, winning 37 seats in a reduced size Dáil of 160, while FF secured 22.18 per cent and Fine Gael 20.86 per cent. SF's success was fuelled by dissatisfaction, but as the prize of government loomed, and FF and FG shared power (with the Green Party) to snatch government away from the assumptive power brokers, SF moved more towards centrist acceptability while holding on to fragments of its deep relationship with the IRA.

During the Celtic Tiger period, rather than debating ideology, successful Irish political leaders instead placed a premium on getting out and about among the electorate. FF's Bertie Ahern, having won three general elections in a row from 1997 to 2007, enabling him to govern with much smaller entities, electorally was the most successful leader since Éamon de Valera in the 1930s and 1940s. His ploy was to keep on the move, criss-crossing the country, but to say very little. He saw no reason to apologise for that: 'I love tramping the streets,' he said simply. In November 2003 *Irish Times* journalist Róisín Ingle wrote amusingly 'of her shock at discovering the Taoiseach on her doorstep when she answered the doorbell one Saturday morning. We must surely live in one of the only modern democracies where the prime minister makes unsolicited house calls at the weekend.'[10]

Ahern was 'in permanent campaign mode'.[11] It paid dividends for him and his party. His predecessor as Taoiseach, FG's John Bruton, complained that Ahern 'sees politics as some sort of handshaking marathon, not a serious matter that affects the real lives of real people', in a criticism that was aired throughout Ahern's career.[12] Bruton, Taoiseach from 1994 to 1997, was, by

contrast, 'definitely an ideas man', which was seen by his allies 'as a disadvantage because it stops him seeing the wood from the trees' – hardly a ringing endorsement of a robust Irish political culture.[13] Bruton was effective and patient in keeping his three-party coalition together – his own FG joined by Labour and the smaller Democratic Left – but he also generated distrust because of his dispassionateness towards the revolutionary decade 1913–23 from which his own party and FF had evolved. In consistently sticking to his insistence that the Irish Home Rule campaigners of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries would have delivered independence for Ireland without bloodshed, Bruton displayed a naïve denial of the realities of imperialism and subjection during that era, but also an independence of mind unusual in Irish politics.

Ahern was extraordinarily successful but remained, for most of his time in power, an enigma. For him, the oldest rule in politics was that 'the other lot are the opposition but you actually find your enemies on your own side … from the moment I won [his Dáil seat] in 1977 the only plotting I was doing was about how to hold on to the seat at the next election.'[14] He had a legendary constituency machine, with eight full-time workers and ward bosses, indicating that he was, first and foremost, a local politician.[15]

The difference between Ahern and his predecessors was that he was the only one who led long-term coalition governments, where the ability to achieve consensus became very important, and he did it with considerable aplomb. This ability also served him well in negotiations on Northern Ireland, one of his lasting and most important achievements, as well as the other positive things Ahern will be remembered for: the Social Partnership (national pay ageements initiated in 1987 in response to a flat-lining economy and industrial unrest) ; labour relations; and the skill with which he handled EC negotiations and meetings.

Ahern also had an exceptional ability to divert attention from the issue at hand if it was troublesome for him and FF. In 2004, in the midst of accusations that his government had become uncaring and too right wing, he declared himself one of the

few remaining socialist politicians in Dáil Eireann.[16] At the same time, he still managed to argue that FF was an ideologically neutral party. He was often ridiculed for his rhetorical mangling and meanderings ('Bertie-speak', which earned its own Wikipedia page) but he excelled at ignoring ideology and staying in power. Regarding coalition options, he maintained 'any party is acceptable' because FF 'looks out for the small ranking guy, the middle ranking guy and assists the big guy'.[17] He kept coalitions steady, changed course if he felt the wind changing, and denied the invidious Irish class system. Veteran political observer Dick Walsh suggested FF occupied a 'world of ambiguity and evasion, when nothing is faced if it can possibly be avoided, nothing said if speaking out is inconvenient and nothing changed until change has become the only hope of survival'.[18]

Ahern benefited hugely from this, unencumbered by any ideology that might detract him from the prize on offer. He also profited from the knowledge – reinforced in the early twenty-first century by focus groups, advisers and spin doctors – that the public like positive messages to be conveyed by their politicians rather than carping and cantankerous debate. Ahern, as the great consensus man, projected that positivism with regularity. But it was also built on short-termism, accompanied by 'an almost manic desire to cultivate … a myriad of constituencies', while 'for all the economic and political successes of the government, it never articulated a vision of what it was all for … Showtime politics was ruled by the electoral cycle … everything – policy, economics, government personnel and coalition choices – was subjected to the overwhelming importance of maintaining power.'[19]

Ahern was also lucky: he inherited an improving economy and came to power after the ceasefire in Northern Ireland. But luck alone does not sustain a prime minister in office for eleven years; luck needs to be combined with skill, ruthlessness and empathy. Ahern demonstrated all these in his political life – no mean feat – and he brought stability, to his party and to the country, after a period of corrosive instability. But if Ahern is to be credited with all these things, he also deserves criticism

for the many problems that were not solved during a time of vast wealth growth, and there are claims he made during his career that do not withstand historical analysis. There were two Bertie Aherns in public life. The first was the Dublin Central, down-to-earth local boy made good, unaffected by the trappings of power. The second was the Taoiseach who cropped up in tribunal reports (see below), appeared alongside wealthy property developers, appointed his friends to state boards, presided over a country where many of the super-rich paid little tax, and vigorously defended his own enormous salary (€310,000 in 2008).[20]

Despite Ahern's success, FF's position was clearly not impregnable: in 2004 its share of the vote fell to 32 per cent in the European and local elections, the lowest since 1927. There was a justifiable scepticism in 2009 that the result of that year's local elections, when FF again polled poorly, could be labelled revolutionary, as the continuing battle between two large conservative parties dating from the civil war era took a new, albeit dramatic, turn. But the result did raise questions of what FF stood for at that juncture and whether it was in danger of losing its self-proclaimed status as a national movement rather than just a political party.

In contrast to Bertie Ahern and his predecessors, Brian Cowen, who took over the position of FF leader and Taoiseach in 2008, inspired no cult of leadership, meaning the party had a serious dilemma on its hands. Cowen, often credited for his intellectual heft, could not translate that heft into commanding politics, and as the economic crisis worsened he floundered. While he had initially been seen as a leader who had the potential to 'rejuvenate Fianna Fáil', he demonstrated that he was 'incapable of breaking free from the shackles of civil service jargon', opening up a wide gulf between 'what he produced and what he is known to be capable of'. He had also, repeatedly, 'waved away warning messages' about economic overheating when he was Minister for Finance, from 2004 to 2008.[21]

Presiding over loss of sovereignty and economic Armageddon from 2008 created all sorts of identity crises for a party that

historically had been so sure-footed in insisting on its competence and historic mission. In 1996, Martin Mansergh, a key party strategist and adviser, observed that 'for as long as I have worked for Fianna Fáil, which is now 15 years, great importance has been attached by its leadership and upper echelons to its description as the Republican Party … for many of us, Republicanism is not just a political philosophy, but a social philosophy'.[22] That identity lay in tatters after 2008 and, in the face of soaring unemployment, emigration and the expectations generated by a ten-year boom, FF's historical approach to winning and keeping power, encapsulated by historian Joe Lee as a pragmatism that enabled them to 'square the economic and social circles', counted for little.[23]

The growing crisis was such that FF could no longer think of itself as the only alternative to 'the rest'.[24] In a phrase that underlined its electoral ferociousness, members were once asked by one of the party's handlers, P. J. Mara, to 'go out and kill for Fianna Fáil'.[25] Now, it was being hunted. The fracturing of Irish politics saw FF swimming in a busier sea, struggling to keep SF at bay and to make itself relevant to a younger generation. What came under increasing pressure was FF's longstanding ability to project itself as the champion and protector of social solidarity and consensus, and hence its credibility in denying the existence of political divisions born of social and class tensions.

II: 'They're All Fucking Schoolteachers'

But just what was modern Irish republicanism? In relation to one of republicanism's central tenets, the separation of Church and state, Martin Mansergh qualified this to the point of meaningless: 'It is another question as to how far that principle should or need be carried.'[26] Such qualifications were common. The Irish Republic, it was argued, fell between the two stools of a classic republic (a strong state but with divisions of government and with citizens respecting the state while contesting unaccountable power) and Rousseau's notion of a single, sovereign general will decided by a popular assembly and then obeyed and

accepted without contestation: 'The Irish Republic has strong elements of both but has never functioned as a coherent expression of either.' The notion of 'general will' became replaced by the idea of 'national interest' and the duty of citizens to be 'resilient', with a parliament that passed already decided legislation rather than initiating it, and with little transparency for citizens.[27]

Political scientist Tom Garvin had long argued that Irish republicanism was not a political theory but a 'secular religion'. Ireland's history of colonialism had developed a 'certain secret contempt for democracy'. Such attitudes, he argued, were inherited and internalised from those who believed Ireland was unfit for government and were added to by an undemocratic Church. State founders were sceptical about representative democracy and that mindset 'lingered for a very long time', not helped by the civil war legacy and a 'phalanx of interest groups'. Over time, new veto groups emerged through an alliance between FF, trade unions and 'the building trade and public sector workers', and from 1998 to 2008 'the effect was to tip the distributive scales of government in their favour'.[28]

While Irish culture developed a sense of the 'permanence and robustness' of the nation, and Ireland was one of a very small number of countries whose democracies had endured unbroken for a century, there was a tendency to see the Republic and nation as coterminous, as opposed to seeing a republican citizenship that was conscious, active and needing to be watched over with the vigilance of civic virtue.[29] Republicanism was mostly identified in Ireland with militant separatism from Britain, but republicanism as a quest for equality and social bonding, articulated in Ireland since the eighteenth century, was 'called on as an aspiration again in the twenty-first century' and 'may represent the closest thing to an Irish public philosophy' in the context of citizen self-government, the need for 'state intervention and civic commitment' to the common good. But it appeared that an increasing emphasis on freedom and equality of citizens – seen especially in the results of referendums – was more about liberal tolerance than republicanism, given the 'continuing and new

sources of domination in Irish society' evidenced by centralisation, the influence of global corporations and the extent of the housing crisis.[30] There was also an expanded role for non-governmental organisations (NGOs), many of which worked closely with government (the National Women's Council, for instance, received over €800,000 in state funding in 2020). Benefacts, established in 2014 to provide more transparency regarding the work of civil society organisations and which came to include almost 20,000 such organisations on its database, noted in 2016 that Ireland was 'uniquely dependent on non-profit organisations for the delivery of many public services, especially in health and social care, in education, in culture, sport and recreation'.[31] There were tensions over the 'advocacy role' of some of these groups, given that the governments they lobbied provided the bulk of funding, but many were also providing services that the state could not or would not provide. The annual turnover of the non-profit sector by 2018, when it employed 158,000 people, was €12.1 billion; the sector at that point received 8 per cent of exchequer spend.[32]

Certainly, deliberative participation, through the constitutional convention (2012–14) and the 2016–17 citizens' assembly (see below), suggested a new type of engagement and a route to action swifter than through parliamentary politics.[33] But there was also a bigger fracturing, detailed in Peter Mair's *Ruling the Void* (2013), suggesting 'the age of party democracy has passed', with parties disconnected from wider society and pursuing 'a form of competition so lacking in meaning' that it damaged their standing, legitimacy and effectiveness throughout Europe. The new rhetoric of political leaders encapsulated this, he suggested, citing Tony Blair's assertion in 2000 that 'I was never really in politics … I don't feel myself a politician even now.' What was deemed necessary instead of politics was 'to help people make the most of themselves' rather than exercising the 'directive hand' of government, its authority seemingly becoming redundant.

With increased political indifference and reluctance to join political parties growing, the 'zone of engagement' was being 'evacuated'.[34] In the 1990s, average electoral turnout across

western Europe fell from 81.7 per cent to 77.6 per cent; in the UK in 2001 it plunged to just 59 per cent, while the 2001 elections in Italy and Norway and the 2002 elections in Portugal, France and Ireland were also marked by all-time low turnouts.[35]

In the context of the economic convulsions, loss of sovereignty and the demise of FF from 2008 to 2011, there was no shortage of assessments of the cumulative failures of Irish political culture, but these were not just Irish problems. Technocratic and powerful EU institutions also weakened representative democracy with elite oligarchic tendencies, as protests in Greece, Italy and Cyprus attested to; decisions, some of them clearly wrong, were being made secretly.[36]

Fintan O'Toole suggested that Ireland needed 'to lose every last vestige of hope in our governing culture' in the sense of a state that was conducted for the public interest, as opposed to a state that was a separate entity from the people.[37] The state was depicted as a failed entity and a parody of democracy, where local government did not in any meaningful sense exist (in 2014, eighty town councils were abolished by the government in one swoop, getting rid of almost 700 councillors), and where 94 per cent of decisions on public expenditure were made at national level.[38]

The aspirations of Irish politicians in a political culture dominated by short-termism were hardly visionary, but nor were they burdened with the righteousness or callousness of a dogma to be stuck to regardless of consequences. Many Irish politicians wore their lack of ideology proudly – they were, they averred, 'conviction' politicians rather than 'ideological' politicians. The main problem for FG remained its lack of experience in government and policies that were indistinguishable from those of FF, while the Labour Party was wary of radical new fiscal departures, insisting in 2005 that it would not increase either income tax or corporation tax.[39] True, in November 2007, the party's leader, Eamon Gilmore, made a declaration of his socialism, but it was deliberately cautiously defined: 'I believe that every person is equal. It is as simple as that. That's what makes me a democrat. That's why I am a socialist. And why I belong to a