

# Democracy and the Irish Elections

*The outcome of the struggle between De Valera and Cosgrave may clear the way for real progressivism*

By Brian O'Neill

**D**UBLIN.—A changed Irish people will go to the polls in the Free State general election on July 1. The basic contending forces remain the same as in 1932; the circumstances are totally different.

In 1932 the Irish people drove the Cosgrave government from office and swept Eamon de Valera and his Fianna Fáil party (the "Army of Destiny") to power. Cosgrave was smashed by a wave of popular anger against his subservience to British imperialism, against his terror methods, against his reactionary social policy. The masses sought to end their poverty-stricken conditions, to open the jail gates and free Republican prisoners, to restore democratic rights, to strike a blow at imperialism.

The Left was united. Fianna Fáil and the Labor Party combined. Even the Irish Republican Army, with reservations, threw its weight behind De Valera.

De Valera came to power in a Free State as full of illusions as America after Roosevelt's first victory. The new government released the prisoners, and they were welcomed by bonfires and cheering crowds. Madame Maud Gonne MacBride, veteran Republican, even suggested that certain bastilles be closed; they would be needed no more. De Valera topped paying land annuities and other tribute to Britain, the imperial government retaliated by placing penal tariff duties on imports of Irish livestock, and the Anglo-Irish dispute flared up again. De Valera drafted a plan for the industrialization of the country, and announced his readiness to "go outside the system" if unemployment and poverty cannot be

the world has changed since 1932. Ireland has not been able to remain aloof from the economic crisis and recovery, the rise of fascism, and the drive to war. The economic crisis, frightened by Britain's punitive measures, reduced Irish agriculture to the sorest straits in the first two years of De Valera. Recovery has raised farm prices and enabled the Free State to burst many of the barriers set up against its export trade; exports are steadily rising in quantity and value. It is this change that has enabled De Valera—to the consternation of Britain and its allies here, who forecast complete collapse—to fight an economic war and at the same time develop the industrialization of the country.

A *March of Time* number has given Americans one picture of this industrialization. How far and in what direction has it proceeded? Remember that before 1932, the Free State was among the most backward of European



Eamon de Valera

countries. Almost all manufactured consumption goods were imported: clothing, shoes, flour, sugar, etc. De Valera boasts he has built 800 new factories, employing 80,000 new workers, with an additional yearly output of \$56,000,000. New capital invested in industry in 1931, the last year of Cosgrave's regime, amounted to only \$3,350,000. Last year it was \$33,633,000. There is some slight growth of heavy industry, basic industries are still absent, but many of the light consumption industries are almost producing the full demand. And it should be noted that at least 70 percent of the capital is foreign: British, Belgian, even French and Czechoslovak. Many of the biggest new firms are mere branches of English trusts with "dummy" Irish directors.

Parallel with this development, De Valera has established monopolies in all fields. A score of bus companies competed against the Dublin United Tramways Co. in the capital; De Valera wiped them out and gave the Tramways Co. the sole right to run services in the Dublin area. Long-distance buses competed against the Great Southern Railway (which had already eliminated its railroad competitors under Cosgrave); De Valera took them over, and the G.S.R. now controls all road and rail traffic in the Free State. Railroad and street-car companies are linked up in the same Murphy trust which publishes the anti-government newspaper chain, headed by the *Irish Independent*, so De Valera has given this handful of his enemies complete control over all transport services in the country.

Petty improvements have been made in social services—new houses, jobless assistance, widows' pensions, etc.—but there are still 100,000 unemployed (an enormous number in a country with such a small industrial population); 50,000 young men and girls have fled the country in the last two years, finding in English armament factories the jobs they are denied at home; and wages and working conditions are still at low levels—in the new factories they are particularly bad. Social discontent with De Valera has risen to new heights; in Dublin as I write there are 20,000 workers on strike, and other strikes taking place all over the country.

WHILE DE VALERA'S social policy has disillusioned thousands of workers who had placed faith in his "Christian social policy"—those fair-seeming phrases seem to have fallen into disuse of late—the Republican movement has been alienated by his external policy and blows against the Irish Republican Army (I. R. A.). He has abolished the governor-generalship and the oath of allegiance to King George, but, though still contending that Fianna Fáil is republican, steadily refuses to break with the British empire. It is clear that his ultimate goal is the abolition of imperial symbols internally and an agreed form of "external association" with the empire.

This policy inevitably has brought him into conflict with republicanism. Proclaiming that, with the abolition of the oath of allegiance, there is no longer any need for extra-legal activity or armed bodies apart from the state forces, he has banned the I.R.A. and jailed thirty leading members. The week of June 14, detectives shot down a young I. R. A. man who, they said, was attempting to rescue a prisoner. De Valera thus goes into the July 1 election with the Left Republicans bitterly hostile to him and threatening to abstain from the polls.

In his favor, however, is the state of the reactionary Cosgrave-led United Ireland Party, the largest opposition group. Cosgrave had maintained power up to 1932 by open terror coupled with hypocritical professions that democracy was being defended. Cosgrave's party rested on the monopolies, the ranchers who depend on cattle exports, and the pro-British groups. Cosgrave's old party, Cumann na nGaedheal, performed a quick-change act after its election defeat. It merged with the Centre Party and an ex-officers' league to form Fine Gael (United Ireland Party); Cosgrave himself gave place to General Eoin O'Duffy, his former police chief,

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as leader; a uniformed "youth" section was formed, the Blueshirts; and the program of the fascist "corporative state" was taken over wholesale. It was the year of Hitler's triumph. The former defenders of democracy proclaimed (I quote their leading articles):

The present parliamentary system is un-Irish and detrimental to the people's interest. The Blueshirts think that all parliaments gabble too much, and they are not at all sure that the national will can be ascertained merely by counting heads. This Blueshirt organization is not a pacifist organization. It is not, therefore, pledged to confine itself to verbal methods.

"We must make life intolerable for those who will not yield to our demands," belated O'Duffy. "We are going to meet these people and knock hell out of them from this day forward."

But the march on Dublin failed. Blueshirts tore up roads and railroad lines, felled trees, terrorized towns; then the masses swung into action. Finally even armored cars and troops with bayonets—as at a demonstration in Dundalk—could not save the fascists who were going to "make life intolerable" for their opponents.

Reaction reconsidered the position. It seemed that things did not work out everywhere according to the Mussolini-Hitler formula. So O'Duffy was fired, the blue shirts were put in the wardrobe, the "corporative state" pamphlets were burned, and Cosgrave reemerged as the "constitutional" leader of a "constitutional party."

But if Reaction had burned its fingers, it had far from repented. Cosgrave's foreign policy is that of international fascism. He supported Mussolini's war on Ethiopia, he supports Franco in Spain, his press organs denounce the Franco-Soviet pact in the best Goebbels fashion. The Cosgrave party took a leading part in launching the new fascist venture, the "Irish Christian Front," formed to aid Franco and to crush communism in Ireland. (Among the organizations listed as "communistic" are the Labor Party and the I.R.A.) Cosgrave's press supported O'Duffy's recruiting for Franco's forces, and, now that these dispirited volunteers have returned in mysterious circumstances, hopes to use them as an election force. In relation to

Britain, Cosgrave remains openly pro-empire (though he is willing on occasion to experiment with "anti-British" phrases). If Cosgrave wins the July 1 election, it will be a victory for Britain's war preparations, another vital link closed in the empire defense chain.

THE NEW CONSTITUTION plays a part in the election only because Fianna Fáil are hoping it will clinch the issue for them. The document has aroused no enthusiasm, almost no comment. The masses sense that it marks little advance in the national position, they regard the religiosity of the phrasing (dictated by Maynooth) as sugar-coating, and the Left groups are at fault in failing to rouse a sufficiently strong opposition. Reactionary in its very tone, the new constitution is pregnant with grave dangers to democratic progress. Private property is proclaimed sacred, the regulations of one church, the Roman Catholic, on such questions as divorce become state laws, and there are provisions enabling future governments to restrict or abolish every recognized democratic right.

The changed position makes it difficult at this writing to foresee the election results. De Valera's industrial policy has gained support from new circles of manufacturers and from districts chosen as centers for new factories. There is likely to be a swing towards him in such constituencies. In Dublin, Cork, and

other big centers, on the other hand, the illusion of the masses, who are paying with an inflated cost of living for the industrial protection policy, may find expression in an anti-Fianna Fáil vote.

The Left forces are not strong and united enough to wrench away the thousands of electors who would turn from De Valera if they saw any alternative." (Everywhere this is the stock phrase.) The Labor Party is expected to gain a few seats, though only a weak-kneed policy since 1932 prevents it from making a considerable advance. Republicans are contesting only a few areas. One candidate, Bill Scott—a Dublin bricklayer recently invalidated home from Spain, where his record was outstanding—will carry the Communist standard in South Dublin.

The campaign policy of the Irish Communist Party has been to drive for a crushing defeat for Cosgrave (plus the rejection of the constitution) to end the situation where the pro-British, semi-fascist party is the main opposition. If this can be won, and the position of the Left strengthened in the Dáil, De Valera will lose his alibi and the Labor Party will be freed from its parliamentary subservience to the government. The ensuing enthusiasm will release the Republican and Labor masses into independent activity. The first steps will have been taken towards the emergence of a real alternative to De Valera.



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