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Local Elections in Cork City

(1929-1967)

By JOHN MORAN

The present article sets out to treat of the various Cork Borough Elections from 1929 to 1967 as well as to compare the fortunes of the political parties and other pressure groups who fought these elections.

Prior to 1929, under the Municipal Corporations (Ireland) Act of 1840, the Borough of Cork was divided into eight wards returning 16 Aldermen and 48 Councillors to the City Council, giving a grand total of 64 members. This Act (of 1840) was amended in 1852 with the number of wards with revised boundaries reduced to seven and the total number of members in the Council whittled down from 64 to 55. These revised wards together with the decreased number of elected members remained in operation until the Council was dissolved by the Cork County Borough (Dissolution) Order of 1924.

Dissolution was mainly brought about by the charges made at this excessively large and unwieldy Council by the Cork Progressive Association. Composed of members of the Chamber of Commerce and the Cork Incorporated Chamber of Commerce and Shipping, the Cork Progressive Association greatly admired and advocated the efficiency of the American City-Manager administration. Due to the efforts of the twin Chambers of Commerce a sworn inquiry was held into the general administration of the Municipal Council.

During the inquiry they substantiated charges of:

- (1) unwieldy incompetency ("a business that appointed fifty directors would be looked upon as a joke," said W. Dinan.)
- (2) patronage; certain members had appointed relatives to posts in the various offices of the Council.
- (3) High rates.
- (4) muddy unswept streets strewn with pot holes. (Cork, according to J. J. Horgan, was "in a condition of dirt which would disgrace a native village in central Africa.")

The outcome of the inquiry was the suspension of the Council under the 1923 Act which empowered the Minister for Local Government to dissolve any local authority found to be negligent, insubordinate or corrupt. A City Commissioner was appointed on a temporary basis to discharge the duties of Council. Thus during the period 1924 to 1929 no Borough Elections were held in Cork City and Mr. Seán French, the Mayor at the time of the dissolution, acted in a purely honorary capacity receiving no salary.

The Cork City Management Act of 1929 was a land mark where Irish Local Government Elections and Administration were concerned. This Act drafted by Mr. J. J. Horgan, one of the leading members of the Cork Progressive Association, may fairly be termed the first application of the American manager plan to a European city. Enshrined in the Act was the appointment of a City Manager who "would exercise and perform for and on behalf of the Corporation the powers, functions, and duties of

the Corporation in relation to the appointment and removal of officers and servants of the Corporation"; this measure did away with patronage. This managerial system was later extended to Dublin in 1930, Limerick in 1934, Waterford in 1939 and finally to all counties in 1942.

The 1929 Act put an end also to the excessively large and unwieldy Council, since henceforth the Corporation was to be composed of 21 seats whose elected members would include 6 Aldermen and 15 Councillors. The seven members longest in office retired by rotation each year and the vacancies so created were filled at an annual Borough Election held between 23 June and 1 July. The new members, of whom the first two elected became Aldermen, held office for three years. This annual rotation system ensured continuity in the Council since it made it impossible for a completely new Corporation to be voted in at a single election and it also guaranteed that there would always be a substantial number of members acquainted with the procedure of the Council to run the Corporation.

In a word the Municipal ward system of election was reformed by reducing the Council to a number that could conveniently be elected by the city as a whole. Thus with the creation of this new form of election the inherent defects of unwieldiness, patronage, and the Councillors' sole preoccupation with their own wards were eliminated.

TABLE 1 CORK BOROUGH ELECTION 1929

20th March 1929 ..		Total Electorate ..	27,307
		Valid Poll ..	13,981
		Seats ..	21
<i>Party</i>	<i>No. Candidates</i>	<i>First Preferences</i>	<i>Members Elected</i>
Fianna Fáil	9	2,393	3
Cumann na nGaedheal	11	2,297	3
Labour	21	2,329	2
Business	10	3,109	6
Independents	16	3,667	7
Town Tenants	1	186	0
Total Candidates	68		
		elected	21

On examining the above table one may wonder why the Total Electorate was so low; there were two reasons for this, firstly the franchise was still confined to householders; secondly, the Borough area was still fairly small in size. Many areas which now form an integral part of the city as we know it to-day (Blackrock, Douglas and Bishopstown) were outside the Borough.

Of the Political parties, the newly formed Fianna Fáil did slightly better than Cumann na nGaedheal. However the number of seats gained by Cumann na nGaedheal is misleading, since four members of the party were elected on the Business Party ticket. At this juncture there were two schools of thought within Cumann na nGaedheal on the issue of elections; some held the view that a political party should take no part in local elections while others went forward under the party label. Fianna Fáil on the other hand were not divided on this issue and this was later claimed to be one of the keys of their success as an organization,

The Labour party showed gross political immaturity on this occasion by putting forward twenty one candidates, one candidate for each seat. This proved to be a fatal mistake since only two were elected. Generally it may be said that a party fighting an election under proportional representation presents fewer candidates than the number of seats, even when a small number of seats is being contested. The Labour Party's decision is all the more astonishing since in this 21-seat free-for-all election, the percentage of cross voting and votes going astray was exceptionally high. The successful Independents in this contest consisted mainly of former Redmondite and O'Brienite Councillors who as yet had not thrown in their lot with the two major parties. It may be said that one third of this Corporation were men who had been opposed to Sinn Féin.

By far the most interesting party was the Business party, the political arm of the twin Chambers of Commerce which had brought about a dissolution of the former Council and drafted the 1929 Act. Their aims are best stated in the words of one of their successful candidates, Dr. J. C. Foley who said: "in accepting the invitation of the joint Chambers of Commerce to act on a panel of business men to contest the city Election, I did so entirely out of a sense of loyalty to commercial interests. All the Business party asks is that the corporate affairs of the city be entrusted to capable hands, into the hands of successful businessmen. Men holding civic office should be men of dignity and substance, men of sterling principle and character who would raise the status of Cork in the eyes of the outside world and would use their influence for the development and progress of the city without distinction of creed or class." The following names will show that Cork's leading business men of the time carried the Business party's banner in this election: F. J. Daly (Butter Merchant), B. Sutton (Coal Merchant), W. Desmond (Conway's yard), R. Cudmore (Merchant) J. C. Foley (J. Daly & Co.) and P. Crowley (of the Arch). This political outing proved highly successful for them since six of their candidates were elected. Thus an examination of the above table shows that the Corporation was not in 1929 the plaything of the major parties which it became later on.

TABLE 2 ELECTIONS 1930 to 1936 (INCLUSIVE)

28th June 1930		..	Total Electorate	..	27,359
			Valid Poll	..	8,930
			Seats	..	7
<i>Party</i>	<i>No. Candidates</i>		<i>First Preferences</i>		<i>Members Elected</i>
Fianna Fáil	4		1328		1
Cumann na nGaedheal	4		1321		0
Labour	3		1291		1
Independent Labour	1		1294		1
Business	4		1724		2
Independents	3		1727		2
Ratepayers & Citizens	1		245		0

25th June 1931 ..		Total Electorate ..	27,345
		Valid Poll ..	7,602
		Seats ..	7
<i>Party</i>	<i>No. Candidates</i>	<i>First Preferences</i>	<i>Members Elected</i>
Fianna Fáil	0	0	0
Cumann na nGaedheal	0	0	0
Official Labour	3	2,057	2
Business	2	1,386	2
Independents	7	4,159	3

29th June 1932 ..		Total Electorate ..	27,431
		Valid Poll ..	8,558
		Seats ..	7
<i>Party</i>	<i>No. Candidates</i>	<i>First Preferences</i>	<i>Members Elected</i>
Fianna Fáil	0	0	0
Cumann na nGaedheal	2	1,257	1
Official Labour	3	1,085	1
Business	3	1,553	1
Independents	10	4,663	4

27th June 1933 ..		Total Electorate ..	27,482
		Valid Poll ..	12,486
		Seats ..	7
<i>Party</i>	<i>No. Candidates</i>	<i>First Preferences</i>	<i>Members Elected</i>
Fianna Fáil	4	1,271	1
Cumann na nGaedheal	4	1,359	1
Official Labour	2	830	0
Independent Labour	1	1,709	1
Business	1	449	0
Republicans	1	1,158	1
Ind. Republicans	1	256	0
Unemployed & Able-Bodied men	2	66	0
Independents	11	5,388	3

27th June 1934 ..		Total Electorate ..	28,004
		Valid Poll ..	16,185
		Seats ..	7
<i>Party</i>	<i>No. Candidates</i>	<i>First Preferences</i>	<i>Members Elected</i>
Fianna Fáil	4	3,402	2
U.I.P.	5	2,962	2
O.L.	3	2,945	2
Ind. Labour	1	3,136	1
Business	1	461	0
Republicans	1	946	0
Independents	4	2,110	0

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26th June 1935 ..		Total Electorate ..	48,000 (Adult Franchise)
		Valid Poll ..	21,472
		Seats ..	7
<i>Party</i>	<i>No. Candidates</i>	<i>First Preferences</i>	<i>Members Elected</i>
Fianna Fáil	4	3,066	1
Fine Gael	3	3,583	2
O. Labour	2	2,420	1
Ind. Labour	1	641	0
Business	1	3,286	1
Republican	2	1,462	0
Unemployed	1	1,477	1
Independents	4	5,164	1
<hr/>			
26th June 1936 ..		Total Electorate ..	48,175
		Total Valid Poll ..	21,607
		Seats ..	7
<i>Party</i>	<i>No. Candidates</i>	<i>First Preferences</i>	<i>Members Elected</i>
Fianna Fáil	3	2,716	1
Fine Gael	5	4,701	2
Official Labour	2	3,218	1
Ind. Labour	1	2,963	1
Unemployed	1	689	0
Republican	2	1,678	1
Traders	1	789	0
Independents	4	4,631	1
<hr/>			

Subsequent to the 1929 Election and up to 1936, annual elections were contested whereby the seven longest serving members retired by rotation and those successful at the polls held office for a further three years. These yearly jousts do not warrant individual comment; it is sufficient to lump them together and treat in broad outline the extent of the voting and the fortunes of the different contending parties. As is evident from the table, the poll slumped to a dismally low level in 1930, 1931, and 1932, the 1931 election recording an all time low of 28% of the total electorate. The sole interesting facet of these first three elections is that neither Cumann na nGaedheal nor Fianna Fáil put forward official candidates, but members of both parties featured among the Independents. Cumann na nGaedheal's lack of official candidates was a matter of policy whilst Fianna Fáil's abstention was due to a rift in their local organisation.

The remaining four years 1933 to 1936 showed a revival of interest in local elections especially in 1935 when the franchise was extended to all adults for the first time. During the mid-thirties Fianna Fáil remained relatively static and did not show itself to be the dominant force it later was to become in the Council. In September 1933 Cumann na nGaedheal was disbanded and regrouped under the United Irish Party or Fine Gael; thus we find candidates using the U.I.P. label in 1934 and Fine Gael in all subsequent elections. All through the 1930s the Labour party fought Cork Borough Elections with a divided front; Official Labour on the one hand, and Independent Labour represented by the two great vote-catching aldermen: James Allen and Richard Anthony on the other.

From 1934 on, we find a proliferation of smaller parties: the most important of these

were the Republicans and the Unemployed, both one-man bands. Seán McSwiney, a brother of Terence, represented Republicans while Daniel Gabriel Buckley crusaded on behalf of the Unemployed. 1936 marked the eclipse of the Business party, due in the main to a lack of organisation and the introduction of adult franchise in 1935. William Harrington, one of their leading members was quoted as saying: "He would not undertake a personal canvass of the electors. The old tradition of canvassing votes personally and of making multifarious and spurious promises in the hope of securing a vote, had a glamour that made an appeal to people who loved the spectacular and have not been taught to think deeply or to realize the value of serious work."

The Cork City Management (Amendment) Act of 1941 put an end to these annual elections. All subsequent Cork Borough Elections, up to 1967, were full-scale twenty-one seat contests.

TABLE 3 (1942 ELECTION)

	June 1942	.. Total Electorate ..	48,000
		Total Valid Poll ..	22,638
		Seats ..	21
<i>Party</i>	<i>No. Candidates</i>	<i>First Preferences</i>	<i>Members Elected</i>
Fianna Fáil	8	2614	3
Fine Gael	8	3692	5
Labour	9	4359	4
Unemployed	1	778	1
Republicans	4	628	0
I.R.A.	6	7442	0
Independents	11	8704	8

The 1942 Election might be termed Labour's election since it demonstrated the working class hostility to the Wages Standstill Order of 1941. This provocative legislation prohibited any increase in wages and prevented trade unions from striking for higher wages. Not only did Labour gain 4 seats but the two Independent Labour Candidates polled over 5,500 first preference votes. As regards the larger parties Fine Gael outstripped Fianna Fáil by 1,000 votes and two extra seats. The Independents with 8 seats remained the largest group within the Chamber. On a lighter note 1942 heralded the entry of well-known Cork characters into the political arena; Jeremiah Healy (Cork's Pillar of Sincerity), better known as 'Klondyke,' gained a seat thanks to the efforts of the U.C.C. students, while John McCarthy (the Rancher) chalked up 72 votes.

TABLE 4 (1945)

	18 June 194	..	Total Electorate	..	46,000
			Total Valid Poll	..	28,262
			Seats	..	21
<i>Party</i>	<i>No. Candidates</i>		<i>First Preferences</i>		<i>Members Elected</i>
Fianna Fáil	11		7,907		7
Fine Gael	6		2,817		3
Labour (Irish)	6		1,506		1
Labour (Nat.)	5		1,060		1
Civic	9		3,895		5
Aiseirí	4		936		1
Independents	16		7,503		3
Tenants	3		590		0
Socialist	1		474		0

The 1945 election with a poll of 60% marked the greatest number of votes yet recorded at a Borough election. The reason for this unprecedented interest in a local election was that polling day coincided with the Presidential election. This contest was decisive for Fianna Fáil since, with the help of their party machine working at full stretch to elect Seán T. O'Kelly, they emerged for the first time as the largest party in the Corporation. For the first time also, well-known Republican figures (Walter Furlong, Pa Mc Grath and Seán McCarthy) with the asset of a national record and the backing of their organisation the Sean-Óglaigh, threw in their lot with Fianna Fáil. This Fianna Fáil dominance in the City Council has persisted up to the present day.

Fine Gael lost almost 800 first preferences and two seats since their previous outing. They still suffered from a divided policy on the issue of local elections. In this instance three well known members of the party stood for the new Civic Party and two of these were elected.

The Labour Party, now a three pronged organisation, slumped to its lowest depths ever. Since 1943 the Official Labour party had been rent in two by the Larkin-O'Brien split: thus two Labour parties, National Labour and Irish Labour, fought this election alongside an Independent Labour Alderman. The split reduced the number of Labour representatives to two, each faction gaining a single seat.

1945 saw the entrance of several new parties and pressure groups into the local political arena: the Civic Party, Aiséirí, Corporation Tenants and a Socialist. The Civic party, the virtual successor of the former Business party, was composed of civic minded members of the business and professional fraternities. Having campaigned strongly to reduce rates, they captured 5 seats on their first outing. Aiséirí (Ailtirí na hAiséirí), backed in the main by Irish language workers, aimed at a national and cultural renaissance; while it got considerable support on this occasion, its life was shortlived. The Corporation Tenants failed to gain a seat but later became a strong pressure group in the Council. A Socialist Candidate in a Cork Borough election was a rara avis; the candidate, the well-known Communist Michael O'Riordan, did not appear again in local elections but took part in a bye-election (1946) securing some 3,500 votes.

TABLE 5—ELECTIONS 1950-1955-1960

21st September 1950 ..				Total Electorate ..	45,000
				Valid Poll ..	24,309
				Seats ..	21
<i>Party</i>	<i>No. Candidates</i>	<i>First Preferences</i>	<i>Members Elected</i>		
Fianna Fáil	15	9,990	9		
Fine Gael	13	3,800	3		
Labour	6	2,937	3		
Civic Party	11	2,719	3		
Independents	12	2,304	2		
Clann na Poblachta	5	910	0		
I.T.W.	1	789	1		
Sinn Féin	2	451	0		
30th June 1955 ..				Total Electorate ..	47,000
				Total Poll ..	24,637
				Seats ..	21
<i>Party</i>	<i>No. Candidates</i>	<i>First Preferences</i>	<i>Members Elected</i>		
Fianna Fáil	14	9,457	8		
Fine Gael	13	4,867	3		
Labour	10	4,190	4		
Civic Party	7	1,697	2		
Sinn Féin	2	1,484	2		
Independents	10	3,058	2		
29th June 1960 ..				Total Electorate ..	45,775
				Total Poll ..	22,024
				Seats ..	21
<i>Party</i>	<i>No. Candidates</i>	<i>First Preferences</i>	<i>Members Elected</i>		
Fianna Fáil	16	6,730	7		
Fine Gael	9	3,595	3		
Labour	9	3,495	3		
Rates	7	1,734	2		
Corporation Tenants	6	1,810	2		
T.E.A.M.	8	1,278	1		
Civic Party	8	1,259	1		
Poblacht Chríostúil	3	209	0		
Independents	6	1,892	2		

The 1950 election recorded an even higher watermark of Fianna Fáil dominance in the Corporation since they secured 9 out of the 21 seats. In the following elections of 1955 and 1960 they dropped one seat successively.

Fine Gael gained 1,000 votes in 1950 and a further 1,000 in 1955 yet they failed to translate their increased poll into an increase in seats. In 1955 they obtained over 4 quotas yet the transfers were limited to a few candidates instead of being tactically distributed. This election underlines the difficulty in a 21 seater contest under P.R.

of ensuring that the transfers are passed on to the maximum advantage of a party. Fine Gael during this ten-year span remained static with 3 seats in the Council.

Clann na Poblachta made a single foray into borough elections in 1950. In the general election of 1948 they secured 4,334 first preferences in Cork city yet in the borough elections of 1950 they obtained only 910 votes. What is equally baffling is that not one of their three general election candidates stood in the local contest.

The Civic party was in a state of gradual decline losing votes and seats at each election and finally fading from the picture in 1967. The I.T.G.W.U. with a single candidate secured a seat in its sole excursion into politics in 1950. Sinn Féin participated in the 1950 election without much success but in 1955 their two candidates were elected. Their success may be attributed to I.R.A. activity in the mid-fifties.

In 1960 a proliferation of pressure groups appeared on the scene; Ratepayers, Corporation Tenants, T.E.A.M. and Poblacht Chríostúil. The emergence of the Ratepayers and the Corporation Tenants, each gaining two seats, underlines the vital issues of rates and differential rents in local elections. T.E.A.M., which was later incorporated into the Labour party, secured a seat. Poblacht Chríostúil (a Christian Social Reform Movement) gave a dismal showing but that did not deter the organisation from contesting a bye-election in Mid-Cork, and the 1965 General Election in two constituencies, losing their deposits on each occasion. During this decade the Independents were on the wane, having dropped to two seats.

TABLE 6

	30th June 1967	..	Total Electorate	..	69,750
			Total Valid Poll	..	43,391
			Seats	..	31
<i>Party</i>	<i>No. Candidates</i>		<i>First Preferences</i>		<i>Members Elected</i>
Fianna Fáil	23		16,961		14
Fine Gael	21		11,193		9
Labour	19		7,578		6
Corporation Tenants	10		2,377		0
Ratepayers	7		1,881		0
Sinn Féin	5		1,211		0
Independents	2		1,994		2

The most recent election of 1967 marked a return to the ward system, which had been in operation up to 1924, but had been abolished by the 1929 Act. The reason for its restoration was that the city-wide free-for-all had become impossible to administer. In the 1960 election, the total process of obtaining a result had involved 63 counts and three days before the 72 candidates had produced 21 Councillors. For electoral purposes therefore the city was divided into six wards, five of them returning 5 members and one of them six members. Under the restored ward system the first person to be elected in each ward becomes an Alderman.

The poll in this election jumped by an estimated 24,000 voters who had been brought within the city confines by the 1965 extension to the borough boundary. They,

together with the 45,750-odd electors in the old borough, had a choice of 88 candidates from whom to elect a 31 member city council.

As Table 6 clearly shows the ward system greatly favoured the big parties who now control the Corporation. In 1967 they captured all but two of the seats; groups like the Corporation Tenants, Ratepayers and Sinn Féin were obliterated.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps the most salient feature to be stressed when examining these results is the low poll. It sunk to its nadir in 1931 when less than 30% of the Electorate cast their ballot; while an all-time high of 61% was recorded in 1967, the nearest percentage which Cork borough contests have approached the voting dimensions of a general election. The average poll in these elections is about 50% which is about 25% lower than a general election average.

Why are these elections symptomatic of apathy and a disregard for civic patriotism?

(1) It has been stated that the chief cause of indifference to the City Council is the power of the City Manager. He has, in fact become the major initiator of policy. The Council, on the other hand, approves the estimates and strikes the rates but it is the manager who prepares the budget for the city and one wonders if the councillors have the professional know-how to make substantial changes in the Manager's estimates. While the elected members have the final authority, they have no responsibility where the making of appointments or the entitlements to benefits are concerned. Some are of the opinion that if the powers of the Council were increased a greater interest in the workings of the Corporation would be forthcoming.

(2) Another reason for apathy has been the calibre of some of the Councillors, who instead of being representative of local opinion, tend to take their ideas submissively from party headquarters in Dublin.

(3) The lack of organisation may be deemed a further reason for the low poll. In a General Election the political parties manage to get some 75% of Cork's citizens to the ballot booth; yet 25% of these fail to register their vote in Borough elections. Local elections are not as highly organised due to the lack of concessions, such as time on radio and television and free postage, which are granted at a General Election. This lack of free postage puts an overwhelming strain on small parties, and pressure groups when competing with the big parties. The days of the mass meeting have passed and these groups find it impossible to get their policy across as they do not possess sufficient resources or members to canvass the city adequately.

In a word this brief survey indicates the gradual evolution of the Cork Corporation from an assembly in which Independents played a major role to a body in the grip of the main political parties.

SOURCES

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