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From Mainstream to Minor and Back: The Irish Labour Party, 1987–1992

SHAUN McDAID & KACPER REKAWEK

ABSTRACT This article charts the Irish Labour Party's (ILP) journey from a minor to mainstream political party between 1987 and 1992. This is arguably the most turbulent period in the party's electoral history, when the ILP performed significantly below its average result, before making unprecedented electoral gains. It identifies the factors which led to this fall and rise during the discussed period and reflects on the ILP's place in the Irish party system arguing that the term 'mainstream' or 'proximal mainstream' party with regard to the ILP is perhaps more appropriate than the terms 'major' or 'minor' party, especially in view of its return to its usual level of support following the gains of 1992.

Keywords: Irish Labour Party; mainstream party; Irish party system

Introduction

In 1982 Michael Gallagher argued that the Irish Labour Party (ILP) enjoyed a solid electoral base, 'distinctive policies', 'loyal supporters', trade union backing, and a long track record of survival in unfavourable circumstances. He contended that 'for these reasons it will not disappear, but there are no signs either that it will grow dramatically, or throw off its third party status' (Gallagher, 1982: 264). This view was shared by John Horgan (1986), a former ILP TD and senator, who argued that

his party goes through 'cycle[s] of decline and recovery, always on a small electoral base'. Horgan (1986: 164) stressed the difficulty of predicting 'whether it is within the power of the party to make a quantum leap, which will introduce a new kind of politics to Ireland'. This article will focus on the 1987–1992 period, one of the most turbulent in the ILP's history and will examine the reasons why the party achieved its lowest percentage share of the vote in over 50 years in 1987, and the processes by which it recovered in 1992 to achieve its highest vote since 1922. Between 1987 and 1992, the ILP managed to almost triple its total number of voters. This led to a more than threefold increase of its percentage of the vote and came

close to expanding its Dáil team by 175 per cent (12 TDs in 1987 compared to 33 in 1992). This work focuses on specific evolutionary and transformative processes leading to the ILP's return to the political mainstream in 1992. These particular areas are

internal divisions within the party, party leadership, organisational structure, and rivalry with the non-Labour left. The work also attempts to locate the ILP within the wider context of theories of minor parties, and the Irish party system in particular. The case of the ILP is complicated by the fact that it has been both a major and minor party: in our view, neither definition helps to adequately explain its peculiarities. These classifications are particularly unsatisfactory in analysing the ILP's

1987–1992 performance when the party went from minor to major status in a short period of time. Its post-1992 return to what will be labelled proximal mainstream status further illustrates the anomalous nature of the 1987–1992 period. Our analysis of the ILP's fortunes from 1987 to 1992 is based on primary source material – privileged access to Labour Party documents, election materials, contemporary articles in major Irish newspapers, transcripts of Dáil debates, and retrospective interviews with senior ILP members, including the most influential figures from 1987–1992, as well as electoral data. The information from these sources is triangulated with secondary sources already in the public domain and extant secondary literature which addresses different aspects or periods of ILP history. Unlike this paper, the extant literature usually focuses on periods prior to 1987 and rarely continues into the early 1990s. It includes work by Gallagher (1982), Puirseil (2007), and Horgan (1986). Labour was comparatively assessed by Gallagher (1985), Bew *et al.* (1989) and Collins (1993). Certain party 'insiders' published political memoirs, such as Finlay (1998), Kavanagh (2001), Desmond (2000) and Quinn (2005), referring to this period.

The ILP: A Major or Minor Party?

To begin, it is worth considering what is meant by the terms 'major', 'mainstream' and 'minor' parties. It has been noted that the terms 'minor' or 'small' in relation to a political party are 'problematic and indeed, relative' (Copus *et al.*, 2009: 6; Weeks, 2010). Minor parties offer alternative opportunities for citizen engagement where the main parties have failed to adequately represent the divergence of views and interests in modern political life (Copus *et al.*, 2009). Herzog (1987: 317) argues that minor parties make elections relevant for certain groups not represented by major parties and play an 'active and significant role' in the

political system. Sartori's (1976: 119) study of party systems emphasises these difficulties of definition, arguing that making a judgement on how many 'major parties' there are within a given political system often obscures more than it illuminates. Mair (1991: 43–44) suggests that a major party is one that normally polls at least 15 per cent of the national vote. By this criterion, the ILP has only been a major party in four electoral competitions (see Table 1). If the criterion of a minor party is that it has less than one-quarter of the midpoint number of seats of the two largest parties (O'Malley, 2010), then the ILP has also fallen into the minor category in 1981 to 1982 and from 1982 to 1987 – despite being a coalition partner in government on both occasions. Returning to Sartori, perhaps 'relevance' is helpful in defining major or minor party status. 'Relevance' is not judged by electoral strength alone, but also the potential of any party to affect the balance of power, or 'coalition potential'. An 'irrelevant' minor party would thus be one which was never needed or put to use for any feasible coalition majority (Sartori, 1976: 122). If this is the case, then the ILP has certainly been a 'relevant' party, whether major or minor. The ILP has also achieved Pedersen's (1982) four 'thresholds' in relation to party relevance (see also Coakley, 2010 for discussion on the ILP's place in the party system).

Table 1 – ILP’s results in general elections 1923-2007

	First preference votes for ILP ¹	Per cent age of the vote for ILP	Seats won by ILP ²
1923	111 939 (1 053 955)	10.6	14 (153)
1927 June	143 849 (1 146 460) ³	12.6	22 (153)
1927 September	106 184 (1 170 869)	9.0	13 (153)
1932	98 286 (1 274 026)	7.7	7 (153)
1933	79 221 (1 386 558)	5.7	8 (153)
1937	135 758 (1 324 449)	10.3	13 (153)
1938	128 945 (1 286 259)	10.0	9 (138)
1943	208 812 (1 331 079)	15.7	17 (138)
1944	106 767 (1 217 349) ⁴	8.8	8 (138)
1948	115 073 (1 318 650) ⁵	8.7	14 (147)
1951	149 293 (1 304 542)	11.4	16 (147)
1954	153 919 (1 309 976)	11.7	18 (147)
1957	111 747 (1 227 019)	9.1	11 (147)
1961	136 111 (1 168 404)	11.6	15 (144)
1965	192 740 (1 253 122)	15.4	21 (144)
1969	224 498 (1 318 953)	17.0	18 (144)
1973	185 117 (1 350 537)	13.7	19 (144)
1977	186 410 (1 603 027)	11.6	16 (148)
1981	169 990 (1 718 211)	9.9	15 (166)
1982 February	152 053 (1 665 353)	9.1	15 (166)
1982 November	158 115 (1 701 093)	9.3	16 (166)
1987	114 551 (1 777 165)	6.4	12 (166)
1989	156 989 (1 656 813)	9.5	15 (166)
1992	333 013 (1 724 853)	19.3	33 (166)
1997	186 045 (1 788 997)	10.4	17 (166)
2002	199 059 (1 860 333)	10.7	21 (166)
2007	209 185 (2 025 903)	10.3	20 (166)

One of the most salient descriptions of the ILP has been the ‘half’ in a ‘two and a half party system’ (Hazelkorn, 1989: 137). Smith (1991: 36) has defined such parties in these systems as ‘hinge parties’. In theory, these parties operate near the centre of the left–right axis and are free to pursue a strategy of switching support between both left and right parties. This is problematic in the ILP’s case, since there is scarcely a definable left–right cleavage in Irish politics. The political cleavage in Ireland tends to be the legacy of the civil war (Weeks, 2009). This is also the case in Greece and,

¹ In brackets – total number of votes cast.

² In brackets – total number of seats.

³ Bold type equals rise in either first preference votes, percentage of the votes or number of seats for the ILP in contrast to the preceding election.

⁴ Result for the Official ILP, does not include National Labour Party.

⁵ Result for the Official ILP, does not include National Labour Party.

to a certain degree, in post-Franco Spain. Again, following Smith (1991: 36), the ILP cannot be described as a detached party. Detachment refers to a party's displacement from the left-right axis, for a number of reasons, often a limited electoral appeal to particular societal groups. The ILP does not fit this model since its electoral appeal is not limited to any special interest group, as are farmers' parties in Ireland (see Varley, 2010) or pensioners' parties in post-communist European states (Hanley, 2007).

Both 'major' Irish parties have, at some stage, led single party governments in Ireland (Mair, 1987: 37). The case of Fine Gael is more complex: its predecessor, Cumann na nGaedheal, governed for 10 years from 1922 to 1932. Since the latter merged with the National Centre Party (NCP) and the Army Comrades Association (ACA) to form Fine Gael in 1933 the party has managed single party government only for a two-month period in 1987 after the ILP walked out of the coalition government. The ILP, while being in government seven times since 1948, has never led a single party government or been the major partner in coalition. However, because Fine Gael has not been able to lead a single-party government except by default in 1987, it has depended on the ILP as a coalition partner. The ILP is thus relevant in that it has mostly been needed to form a non-Fianna Fáil government, even if at times its vote share was comparatively small. If we accept that the ILP is the 'half' in the 'two and a half party system', then a minor party in the Irish context is one which falls below the status of the third biggest party.

A Mainstream Party: Electoral Support for the ILP

With reference to the ILP for most of its history, the classification of 'mainstream', rather than 'minor' party would be more appropriate. 'Mainstream' in the Irish context is the 'half' in the 'two and a half party system', or the third largest party. This is a unique case in the context of the party systems of the European Union, but consideration must be given to the post-communist states of the recently enlarged EU, notably Poland, and to a lesser degree, Estonia and Latvia. A standard explanation for the poor performance of the ILP is based on the notion that Ireland was a conservative, Roman Catholic, agrarian society (Weeks, 2009). This notion might perhaps be supported by the case of Poland, a post-industrial, Roman Catholic, conservative society in which the left has performed poorly in recent years. However, this is not due to religiously motivated anti-left bias on the part of the electorate, which elected left-wing governments in 1993 and 2001, but

rather a verdict on the performances of the left in government (see <http://www.pkw.gov.pl>). If there was a link between the Catholic religion and the performance of the left, it might be expected that the left would perform well in predominantly Protestant or religiously homogenous states such as Estonia and Latvia, but this has not been the case. At the same time, there are many examples of predominantly Roman Catholic countries with a history of electing left-wing governments, such as France, Italy, Malta, Portugal and Spain. In light of this evidence, we argue that internal divisions within the ILP, its leadership, electoral strategy and organisation and intra-left rivalry are responsible for the party's relatively poor performance during the discussed period and thereafter, as will be demonstrated in the latter part of the work. As Table 1 shows, the ILP usually polls less than Mair's 15 per cent, but this alone is not enough to demote it to the status of a minor party. The ILP had usually been the third largest party until 1987, having only been beaten into fourth party status in parliament twice, in 1933 (by the National Centre Party) and 1944 (by Clann na Talmhan – CnaT). The ILP's status in that year as the fourth largest party, with no apparent coalition potential, put it into the category of 'minor party'. To help us define whether the ILP is a major or minor party, the party's election results throughout its history have been analysed (see Table 1). The 1922 general election has been excluded because it did not contest 8 out of 28 (29 per cent) constituencies. This allowed the party to poll artificially highly on a low turnout. Using Mair's 15 per cent threshold, it can be seen that the ILP has achieved major party status on only four occasions, 1943, 1965, 1969 and 1992. However, the ILP's first preference vote (FPV) increased on 15 out of 27 occasions. Its number of seats increased 14 out of 27 times. During the 1923–2007 period, the party achieved 15 increases in FPV, 12 in the percentage of overall votes and 14 increases in the number of its Dáil seats, a total of 41 increases throughout the period. This means that on 51 per cent of occasions the party saw its electoral fortunes rise in one way or another and on 49 per cent it recorded a decrease in its electoral performance. This indicates that the ILP found it extremely difficult to maintain long periods of electoral growth but also defended itself relatively well against terminal electoral decline, carving a distinctive niche for itself in the Irish party system. The striking thing in analysing the ILP's electoral fortunes is the fact that its position in the Irish party system has hardly changed for either better or worse – in 1923 it polled circa 100,000 votes from an electorate of just over 1 million and 84 years later it received slightly more than 200,000 votes from an electorate twice that size. This means that the party effectively polled around 11 per cent of the popular vote both at the beginning of its electoral engagement and in its most recent election in 2007. Moreover, its mean percentage vote in all general

elections is 11 per cent, which confirms the steadiness of the ILP's electoral performance since the early 1920s. The data above show that, while the ILP has rarely gone above Mair's 15 per cent threshold, through its participation in government in 1948–1951, 1954–1957, 1973–1977, 1981–1982, 1982–1987 and 1992–1997 (twice), it has certainly had Sartori's coalition potential, and as such was a relevant, if not necessarily numerically major party. Neither, as we have seen, did it follow Smith's (1991) definition of a 'hinge party', since it only 'swung' towards non-Fianna Fáil alternatives, with the sole exception being 1992. It might thus be classed as a relevant party, with coalition potential, and the potential to be a party of government. This suggests that the party perhaps belongs in a separate category, neither major nor minor, but 'mainstream'. A 'mainstream' party is one that is often close to major party status, is a potential party of government, and not ideologically constrained from taking part in a coalition such as far-right or far-left parties often are. This is true of parties such as the French and Italian Communist parties, which have won between a third and a quarter of electoral support but whose coalition potential was virtually zero due to their ideological heritage (Sartori, 1976: 122–123). A mainstream party thus has the potential influence of a major party and often more influence than a mass party of the far-right or far-left, without necessarily breaking the 15 per cent threshold in terms of electoral support and without becoming, in the Irish context, the second party in a 'two and half party system'. A 'proximal mainstream' party has precisely the same characteristics in terms of potential to participate in coalition government, but would usually poll slightly less than a mainstream party. To differentiate a proximal mainstream party from a relevant minor party, the proximal mainstream party would be expected to consistently poll an average of above 10 per cent in national elections. Sartori's relevant minor parties need only have participated in coalition once to guarantee their relevance, whereas an average vote of above 10 per cent, regular coalition participation, and occasional gains to major party status suggest that the ILP is more than just a relevant minor party. Mainstream, in the ILP's case, means receiving more than its overall average of 11 per cent of the vote, a feat it has achieved on six occasions, but less than Mair's 15 per cent. Although this is only 22 per cent of all elections, on six other occasions the ILP records a vote less than 1 per cent lower than its 11 point average, and on a further six occasions comes within 2 per cent of this figure. Out of the remaining nine elections, the ILP emerges as a major party on four occasions, and minor on five. This suggests that the party has a tendency to poll between 9 and 11 per cent throughout its history. Given that the ILP maintained an average of 11 per cent of votes, seats and electoral support it is clear that the 1987–1992 period represents the most turbulent shifts between

lows and highs in the ILP's history. In fact, during this period, the party went from minor, its second worst result, to major, its best in 27 elections, before returning to proximal mainstream status in the post-1992 period. This oscillation shows that the ILP has a distinctive niche in the Irish party system, which despite serious fluctuations such as in 1987–1992 tends to retain its mainstream or proximal mainstream character. The factors accounting for the most pronounced temporal fluctuations in the party's history leading to the decline and rise of the ILP in the period considered will now be set out below; an understanding of these factors is necessary to explain the ILP's post-1992 return to its regular proximal mainstream status.

Internal Divisions within the Party

The ILP's role in coalition with Fine Gael between 1982 and 1987 left it open to criticism from the left wing of the party, primarily Labour Left, the political tendency within the ILP opposed to coalition (Dillon, 2007: 10). This section of the party was emboldened by the ILP's poor electoral performance and the perceived weakness and unpopularity of ILP leader Dick Spring. Dublin South West TD Mervyn Taylor's victory in the contest for party chairmanship over Spring's preferred candidate Ruairi Quinn at the 1987 party conference, symbolised this (Kavanagh, 2001: 37). The Irish Times (26 September 1987) argued that this result meant that Spring's authority as leader was 'diminished' and claimed the party was 'lacking unity of purpose'. 'Left-wingers within the party', the article added, 'consolidated their power base ... and were pleased by the performance of Mr Emmet Stagg [Kildare North TD and Labour Left member] who captured the position of vice-chairman'. Labour Left also sought an amalgamation with the Worker's Party (WP) (interview with Joe Costello, TD, Dublin, 16 October 2008; interview with Emmet Stagg, TD, Dublin, 4 December 2008) and wished to abolish the central role of the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) in selecting the party leader in order to undermine the position of Dick Spring who had the support of most of Labour's TDs (Kavanagh, 2001: 37, 41). Without internal unity the ILP could not confront the 'three strong parties of the right [Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the PDs]', and create a genuine 'democratic socialist alternative' (Irish Times, 28 September 1987).

The threat from Labour Left diminished after 1987 but did not entirely abate. This was only partially achieved in the aftermath of the ILP 1989 Tralee conference when Stagg was

narrowly defeated in the contest for party chairmanship. Nonetheless the ILP continued to court Stagg and other leading Labour Left members such as Michael D. Higgins, who had the support of the local party branches. Disciplinary action or expulsions would have meant the loss of Dáil votes and seats, at a time when Labour had to regain its ‘mainstream’ status and face the challenge of the WP on the left (interview with Ruairi Quinn, TD, former ILP leader, Dublin, 17 November 2008). According to Stagg (interview, 4 December 2008), Labour Left had a revitalising effect on the party, which was led by a ‘lazy, long established leadership’ that was forced to ‘start working and talking, communicating like any political party’. This allegedly helped reshape the internal dynamics of the ILP and restore its competitiveness.

Labour Left was not the only divisive element within the ILP. The presence of the ‘mad extremists’ in the Militant Tendency, an entryist, Trotskyite group, was tackled in 1988–1989 with the expulsion of Militant branches, despite the latter’s appeals at the party conference (interview with Ruairi Quinn, 17 November 2008). This was an attempt to ‘box them off [the Militants] completely before [making] yourself acceptable ... to [the electorate]’ (interview with Ray Kavanagh, former general secretary of the ILP (1986–1999), Dublin, 23 October 2008). Moreover, the Militants were also attacked by Labour Left, incorrectly perceived by some as the former’s allies: ‘Labour Left was a slightly left-wing social democratic movement within a slightly right-wing social democratic movement ... whereas the Militants were the guys who were off the scale’. Both of these groups might have disliked Spring’s leadership but were in fact ‘plotting from different directions’ (interview with Emmet Stagg, 4 December 2008). In fact, Labour Left helped the Spring leadership purge the Militants from the party. Both effectively conceded defeat at the aforementioned Tralee conference, and henceforth supported the leadership (interview with Joe Costello, TD, Dublin, 16 October 2008).

Here, we can perhaps see the ILP taking on aspects of the ‘electoral-professional’ party as classified by Panebianco (1988: 263). Such parties are characterised by their focus on elections rather than ideological dogma. These pragmatic characteristics were evident with the Militant expulsions, and sidelining of the Labour Left. It is acknowledged, however, that the leadership’s defeat of the leftist factions was not purely a result of a desire to increase its electoral support: the ILP leadership was in any case firmly opposed to the policies of both these groups. However, the issue based approach and the ILP’s perception as a progressive

party helped turn around its electoral decline. This, however, would not have happened had it not been for a reversal in Dick Spring's fortunes as the ILP leader.

Leadership of the Party

In 1987 The Phoenix magazine referred to the ILP leader as 'Groucho' Spring (Phoenix Annual, 1988), a reference to his gruff manner and apparent haplessness. The disastrous 1987 result, combined with his uninspiring 1987–1989 parliamentary performance led many party members to question his ability to establish himself as a decisive leader: 'Did he have the balls to lead the party? ... It was touch and go ...' (interview with Joe Costello, 16 October 2008).

Unexpectedly, Spring managed to focus the ILP's attention on electoral success and oversaw a reorganisation of party structures, resulting in a centralisation of control over the different constituencies (interview with Ray Kavanagh, 23 October 2008), establishment of a communications committee (interview with Brendan Howlin, TD, Dublin, 23 October 2008), and standardisation of election literature for the whole country. This had previously been resisted by rural TDs who 'didn't like that stuff from Dublin'. Afterwards, 'the party was speaking with one voice ... and it was Dick Spring [']s' (interview with Ray Kavanagh, 23 October 2008). The ILP leader also met the challenge of holding the government to account in the Dáil, through forensic attacks on successive Fianna Fáil leaders.

His pursuit of Charles Haughey was partly influenced by the personal animosity between the two men: '[Spring] hated Haughey from the time he famously insisted that he was brought in on a stretcher to vote [in 1982 when Spring was injured in a car crash]' (interview with Ruairi Quinn, 17 November 2008). As early as March 1987 Spring warned Haughey that the ILP would be 'putting them [the Fianna Fáil government] through the hoops' during its term of office (Dáil Debates, vol. 371, col. 76, 10 March 1987). Thus Labour adopted Fianna Fáil's 'ruthlessness' in opposition (interview with Brendan Howlin, 23 October 2008). This strengthened the public perception of Spring and the ILP as proponents of accountability in government, which was sustained by his memorable performances in the Dáil when he compared Fianna Fáil's programme for government to the tale of 'Indiana Jones and the Holy Grail' (Dáil Debates, vol. 391 col. 171, 12 July 1989), called Haughey 'the virus that has caused ... cancer that is eating away at our body politic' (Collins, 1993: 178–179), and described Albert Reynolds' government as 'heartily and thoroughly distrusted throughout the

country' (Dáil Debates, vol. 424, cols. 2315, 5 November 1992). As a result, Spring 'grew in stature, people began to see – "hey, this guy can do it"' (interview with Ruairi Quinn, 17 November 2008), and came to be regarded as de facto leader of the opposition. Additionally, Spring benefited from his association with Mary Robinson whose candidacy for the Irish presidential election helped revive the ILP's fortunes. Although technically an independent, Robinson's nomination papers were signed by Labour parliamentarians, and the ILP led her campaign. Most ILP sources agree that the decision to propose a candidate in the presidential election was a masterstroke on Spring's part (Quinn, 2005: 262–263).

Labour Left preferred Noël Browne but as the electoral campaign evolved even Spring's most vocal critics, like Emmet Stagg, moderated their opposition and supported the leader's choice Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) Minutes, 12 September 1990). Moreover, Fianna Fáil's scaremongering campaign, claiming for example that Mary Robinson would start abortion referral clinics at Áras an Uachtaráin if elected (PLP minutes, 30 October 1990),² backfired and Robinson emerged victorious (O'Reilly, 1991: 139–145). This undoubtedly helped the ILP in the 1991 local elections. In the eyes of leading members, Robinson's victory represented 'something new, modern and European' (interview with Ray Kavanagh, 23 October 2008) and 'change and all that' (interview with Joe Costello, 16 October 2008). The rival WP, which also supported Robinson, did not directly benefit from their association with her, both because they did not sign her nomination papers (interview with Joe Costello, 16 October 2008), and because 'they weren't modern; they were the old style "commies"' (interview with Ray Kavanagh, 23 October 2008).

Many Labour members elected in the 1991 local and 1992 general elections felt that they owed their success to Spring and the centralised party organisation which he had built (interview with Ruairi Quinn, 17 November 2008). The public mood was firmly with the ILP: Irish society was 'in transition', and 'the aura it [the ILP] and Spring had seemed to be attractive' (interview with ILP Councillor Eric Byrne, former Workers Party and Democratic Left TD, Dublin, 16 October, 2008). The party successfully reinvented and reorganised its structures while in opposition as was recommended by its Commission on Electoral Strategy (CES) in 1986, prior to its 1987 electoral defeat (Labour, 1986: 32).

Electoral Strategy and Organisation

On the eve of the 1987 election, it was argued that the ILP resembled a “rainbow” coalition of minority groups and interests which may be impossible to reconcile’ (Labour, 1986: 24). Far-reaching organisational changes, like taking decision making powers away from the annual conference and the disbandment of the Administrative Council (AC), were necessary. Spring described his party’s organisation in the 1980s as ‘appalling’ and ‘the world’s worst’ (Collins, 1993: 99). It was, according to some, a ‘party of warring factions and political unreliability’ (Horgan, 1986: 31) or a ‘party suffering from a] malaise that looked insuperable’ (Kavanagh, 2001: 2). These comments merely reflected the fact that the ILP was a political entity lacking a centralised, fully fledged administration (Gallagher, 1982: 253–254; Puirseil, 2007: 309), and a party which electorally functioned like ‘a federation of 15, 16 independent republics [which] varied from place to place [and] was a very light ... in terms of number of people in it’ (interview with Ruairi Quinn, 17 November 2008). While Gallagher (1982: 253–254) noted an improvement in the party’s organisation in the 1960s, this does not appear to have been sustained through the 1970s and 1980s.

This loose structure of party fiefdoms organised by and centred on rural TDs, often beyond the control of the Head Office in Dublin, was the result of the ILP having ‘deep roots in ... rural areas’ (interview with Brendan Howlin, 23 October 2008). Thus the ILP was prone to factionalism and infighting. This usually surfaced publicly during annual conferences which were described as a ‘circus’, full of ‘battles’ (interview with Brendan Howlin, 23 October 2008), dominated by often tedious discussions on policy details (Magill, October 1987). The party leader or the general secretary were often forced to personally lobby delegates to assure passage of crucial motions (Kavanagh, 2001: 52), and at the same time oppose the Labour Left and the Militant tendency in their bid to ‘dump Dick Spring’ (PLP Minutes, 23 September 1987). These battles became even more difficult considering that Stagg could bring approximately 200 voting delegates from his Kildare constituency to party conferences. This was ‘real power to be reckoned with’, approximately one fifth of the total number of delegates (interview with Emmet Stagg, 4 December 2008).

The aforementioned structural disorganisation was corrected during the 1987–1989 period when the party ‘would strive to get its house in order’ (interview with Joe Costello, 16 October 2008). Expulsion of the Militants, the subject of extensive debates among the PLP members, and the successful marginalisation of the divisive and controversial Stagg (ILP AC Minutes, 28 September 1988), undoubtedly helped the party ‘clean [its] act internally’

(interview with Ray Kavanagh, 23 October 2008). By 1989 ‘the shock of the near obliteration’ (interview with Ruairi Quinn, 17 November 2008) of the previous general election subsided and the Spring leadership was firmly ‘in control’ of the party (Finlay, 1998: 61). This was achieved through the increased centralisation of party structures and operational activities to strengthen and renew the party image. The ILP enjoyed a steady rise in the opinion polls from 1988 onwards (Kavanagh, 1991), and successfully utilised the newfound popularity of its leader as an asset to convince the electorate that it was a coherent political unit, and had never been a ‘one man band’ (PLP Minutes, 7 February 1990).

Furthermore, the ILP had its ‘morale ... boosted’ by Mary Robinson’s victory in 1990 and the 1991 local election results. The party began preparing itself for the next general election almost two years in advance, while targeting 13 constituencies where the ILP might potentially gain a seat (Labour, 1993). The leadership ‘hand picked’ or ‘hand beheaded’ many candidates (Farrell, 1993: 26) and decided it ‘wouldn’t disrupt the organisation by trying to parachute another layer of candidates on the eve of elections’ (interview with Brendan Howlin, 23 October 2008).

During this period, the ILP displayed elements of Duverger’s cadre party, which relies on the grouping of notabilities for the preparation of elections, conducting campaigns, and maintaining contact with candidates (Duverger, 1954: 64). While the input from the Dublin-based ILP leadership in renewing the party’s organisation and standardising its electoral campaign platform might perhaps be seen as evidence of this, overall the ILP fails to fit the cadre party model, because of its attempts to gain large membership along mass party lines and reliance on rank-and-file membership in decision-making processes.

Rivalry on the Irish Left

A primary indication of the ILP’s descent into minor party status in 1987 was the level of threat other political entities posed to the ILP, when non-Labour left parties and candidates almost equalled the ILP’s share of the vote (Coakley & Gallagher, 2005; Electionsireland.org, 1998–2008). However, by 1992 this threat was minimised by mergers with two leftist micro-parties and a split in the ranks of Labour’s main rival on the Left – the Workers’ Party.

The latter emerged in 1982 as the political wing of the official republican movement after a long period of transformation which resulted in the WP positioning 'itself [as a] serious left wing alternative to the left of the Labour Party',³ and was 'a communist party pretending it wasn't a communist party' (interview with Ray Kavanagh, 23 October 2008). Labour's coalescing with FG between 1982 and 1987, combined with the 'very fanatical, very hardworking and very committed' (interview with Ray Kavanagh, 23 October 2008) membership of the WP, electorally 'fishing in the same pond [as Labour]' (interview with Brendan Howlin, 23 October 2008), ensured that the WP made serious electoral advances and threatened to become the major force on the Irish left, particularly in the capital (Gallagher, 1990: 68–70), where it outpolled the ILP both in the 1985 local and 1989 general elections. This forced the ILP to embark on a policy of confrontation with its WP rivals in order to regain the influence and seats lost to the latter (PLP Minutes, 19 June 1991).

Elements within both parties, however, still made 'ritual declarations about the desirability of unity on the Left' (Phoenix Annual, 1989) but remained in a state of both covert and overt political conflict. Despite calling on its voters to award the 'left' with high preferences during elections (Labour, 1989), it refused to formalise any agreement with the WP on transfers. The calls by the WP for 'political cooperation' were viewed with suspicion by the ILP and were seen as a 'trap': a poorly disguised attempt at establishing the WP as trend setters on the Irish Left (PLP Minutes, 4 March 1987). WP calls for meetings of both parties' central bodies were also unacceptable to any faction of senior ILP members (PLP Minutes, 21 October 1987).

The fact that the ILP managed to reduce the electoral threat of the WP by the early 1990s was the result of a combination of factors. The ILP's organisational renewal, the unpopularity of other main parties associated either with scandals (Fianna Fáil) or muted political opposition (Fine Gael), and Dick Spring's reasserted leadership of the party undoubtedly influenced this process. However, the most important element affecting Irish intra-left rivalry was the internal divide within the WP, between members favouring a more social democratic approach and 'another undemocratic circle, fuzzy' (interview with Eric Byrne, 16 October 2008) which controlled the administrative apparatus of the party and favoured communism.

Moreover, the WP suffered from the result of its alleged affiliation with the theoretically moribund republican paramilitary group, the Official Irish Republican Army (OIRA). This was known to WP members as the so-called 'monkey on our back'. The OIRA 'was still

there and was exposed to us [prominent WP members] in a very serious way' (interview with Eric Byrne, 16 October 2008). This led to the split in the WP and the final termination of its prospects as a potential electorally viable rival to the ILP.

The WP was not the only left-wing rival of the ILP. The party also found itself opposed in Limerick and Sligo by the Democratic Socialist Party (DSP) and the Independent Socialist Party (ISP) respectively. However, by 1992 both of these micro-parties merged with the ILP, and Labour was rewarded with electoral gains in constituencies in which these parties operated. Formal discussions with the DSP started in 1989 and included high profile delegations from the ILP which tried to encourage Jim Kemmy, the DSP leader (Magill, May 1990), and his followers to opt for a 'merger' with the ILP, rather than a takeover (interview with Ray Kavanagh, 23 October 2008). This was successfully concluded on May Day 1990 (Labour, 1991). A similar pattern was repeated with Declan Bree's ISP which met with high profile Labour members⁴ from December 1990 onwards. This resulted in another May Day merger announcement in 1992 (Labour, 1993).

The split in the WP and the aforementioned mergers assured the ILP's dominance of the Irish left. The social democratic grouping within the WP established a new party, firstly named New Agenda, later Democratic Left (DL), which also merged with Labour in 1999 (Irish Examiner, 25 January 1999). It was not until the late 1990s that Sinn Féin (SF) and the Green Party (GP) seriously challenged the ILP from the left. It was also during this period that the ILP returned to its proximal mainstream status.

The Perpetuation of the ILP's Cycle?

In 1987 external factors like the state of the Irish economy and the unpopularity of decisions ILP ministers were forced to make in government contributed to the ILP's poor performance.⁵ Five years later, the ILP was in a much better position to revive its national standing because several factors worked against its opponents. The main opposition party, Fine Gael, embarked on the risky 'Tallaght strategy' (Magill, October 1988) – support for the government's spending cuts – and the governing Fianna Fáil–Progressive Democrats (PD) coalition was plagued by numerous corruption scandals (Collins, 2000: 219–220). The latter overtook the ILP as the third largest party in 1987 (Collins, 2005). The change of Taoiseach, nine months before the general election, also did little to improve the governing coalition's fortunes, and Albert Reynolds, 'an old-fashioned country and western singing person' proved

to be unpopular with the electorate (interview with Ray Kavanagh, 23 October 2008). At the same time, the ILP, through its association with Spring and Robinson, was seen as untainted by corruption, and this is reflected in the success of 1992.

In contrast to Fine Gael support for Haughey's government, 'you had the white knight, Dick Spring, riding to charge every time in parliament, and he did it forensically, great speeches, great delivery and it worked a treat' (interview with Joe Costello, 16 October 2008). This gave the ILP its best result in relation to the second largest party in its history. The ILP won not only the status of the 'kingmaker' but also had the capacity to seriously influence any future coalition it decided to participate in. However, [W]e [ILP] didn't succeed at all ... We did the opposite of what people wanted us to do. People wanted us to deal with Fianna Fail and get rid of them, put them in their place, and ... we join them! And when you join those people, the people who have given you that vote were aghast. (Interview with Joe Costello, 16 October 2008). In fact, the party decided to swing and formed an unprecedented coalition with Albert Reynolds' Fianna Fáil. Two years later, encouraged by high standing in the polls, the ILP swung again and opted for the Rainbow Coalition with Fine Gael and the DL (Girvin, 1999: 16–18). At this stage, it seemed as if the ILP leadership was following the example of the German Free Democrats (FDP) which participated in most of the post-1949 German governments as either partners of the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) or Social Democrats (SPD). There were also similarities to the behaviour of the Polish People's Party (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe, PSL), a potential coalition partner of any political entity in Poland, from the 1920s. These parties were able to exert an exceptionally high influence on the political systems of their countries through participation in different governing coalitions as 'kingmakers' and access to patronage which augmented their structures and standing amongst the electorate.

If we were to agree with Ruairi Quinn's assertion that there will not be a left-right realignment of Irish politics in which the ILP might establish itself as a major force occupying either first or second position in the party system (interview, 17 November 2008), then perhaps the ILP should seriously consider the usefulness of the 'hinge party' option. This would mean aligning with either Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael and aiming to maximise ILP influence through prolonged participation in government.

Interestingly, the ILP chose to forsake this option on the eve of the 1997 election and effectively became 'the swing party [that] decided not to swing' (Mitchell, 1999: 248). It

chose to campaign as a coalition member and through Dick Spring announced its unwillingness to coalesce with Fianna Fáil (Murphy, 1998: 127). This reduced its political options to reliance on Fine Gael and disabled its potential ambition to take over the electorate and some of the personnel of DL. As a result, the ILP, campaigning as a member of a successful but only relatively popular governing coalition, lost almost all of its 1992 gains and returned to its circa 11 per cent share of the vote and only 17 TDs – a loss of over 50 per cent in its number of votes and parliamentarians.

This result was far worse than expected by the ILP, which hoped to defend more than 20 of its seats with up to 13 per cent of the popular vote (Holmes, 1999: 33). In Ray Kavanagh's view the absence of 'extraordinary political circumstances' which existed in 1992 precipitated his party's return to the 'half' in a 'two and a half party system' (interview, 23 October 2008). In order to recuperate the 1997 losses, the ILP chose 'to unite the left' (interview with Brendan Howlin, 23 October 2008) and merge with DL. This process was eventually negotiated in 1998 'on the basis of not absorption but to actually respect people and to get structures in place that would give them all roles' (interview with Brendan Howlin, 23 October 2008). Thus the ILP decided to unite with a political entity with patchy presence in the constituencies and only four TDs whose members were at best ambivalent about the merger with the ILP (Dunphy, 1998: 69). According to Kavanagh (interview, 23 October 2008), the merger was done 'in a hurry ... and we ended up getting their TDs and their councillors but we did not get their voters'. In theory, this move was designed to terminate the rivalry on the Irish left and augment ILP's third position in the Irish party system. In practice, however, it paved the way for a reverse takeover where during the next decade DL provided the 'new' ILP with two leaders, one deputy leader, its party president and sole MEP. Some prominent ILP insiders might have seen the unchecked advance of former DL members as simply 'a bit overly generous' (interview with Brendan Howlin, 23 October 2008) but others have a different view of the situation:

Where would the Labour Party be without merging with Democratic Left? I would argue that the Labour Party needed Democratic Left just as much as Democratic Left needed the Labour Party ... The question that should be researched is, after the merger, was the Labour Party so desperate for leadership qualities that they had to elect the former leadership of Democratic Left? If the answer is yes, then what does

that say about the Labour Party desire to merge with DL? (Interview with Eric Byrne, 16 October, 2008)

This importation of leadership failed to win the ILP many new votes during either the 2002 or 2007 elections. Some would even suggest that the disaffected former DL voters, and also some of the pre-merger ILP ones, transferred their allegiance to either the GP or SF, which surged in the 2002 elections (interview with Ray Kavanagh, 23 October 2008). Thus the Irish party system saw the rejuvenation of rivalry on the left and that forced Labour to concentrate not on challenging Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael who gained 15 out of the ILP's 16 lost seats in the 1997 election but rather to defend its mainstream status (Gallagher, 1999: 132).

A return to potential 'hinge party' status was a strategy endorsed by the Quinn–Howlin leadership from 1997 to 2002 when they both refused to rule out coalescing with Fianna Fáil. However, when this failed to win the ILP any new votes they were replaced by former DL members Pat Rabbitte and Liz McManus who seemed to have assured their victories as a result of their anti-Fianna Fáil rhetoric (Rafter, 2003). Under Rabbitte's watch the party continued to 'swing' and this time opted for Fine Gael but then formalised its dependence on the latter with the Mullingar Accord of 2004: 'It doomed Labour because a vote for Labour meant a vote for Enda Kenny as Taoiseach, yet it was evident that the majority of voters preferred Bertie Ahern' (The Irish News, 30 August 2007).

Conclusion

Throughout its history, the ILP has been a constant feature of Irish politics. As we have shown, it has achieved an average 11 per cent share of, and carved a distinctive niche in, the party system. Because of its longevity and consistency, categorising the ILP as a minor party is unsatisfactory. Its coalition potential and participation in government with the two major parties promotes the party to mainstream or proximal mainstream, rather than minor party status. The importance of the 1987–1992 period is demonstrated by the pronounced nature of its electoral fluctuations to almost unprecedented lows and highs in a very short period of time for the reasons outlined above, namely internal divisions within the party, its leadership, electoral strategy and organisation and successful retention of the dominance of the Irish left.

What is also interesting in the aftermath of the 1992 period is the ILP's swift return to its usual circa 11 per cent share of the Irish party system: this strengthens the claim that the

1987–1992 period was a significant temporal anomaly in the ILP’s history. The party’s decisions to ‘swing’ in 1992 and 1994 joining coalitions firstly with Fianna Fáil then with Fine Gael resulted in serious electoral losses and a return to proximal mainstream status where the party could no longer aspire to become the second largest party and instead had to defend itself from threats from minor parties.

The party’s controversial merger with DL and its outcome suggest that issues of leadership, internal coherence, and the ILP’s organisation and electoral strategy returned albeit on a smaller scale than during the late 1980s. In this context, it is not surprising that SF and the GP advanced electorally during the 2002 elections. Presently, there are signs that the ILP is gaining ground in terms of popularity. The party might again attempt to act as the ‘hinge’ party or ‘kingmaker’. Adverse economic circumstances, a decline of support for Fianna Fáil, and the failure of Fine Gael to attract sufficient support to lead a single-party government all point to the high coalition potential of the ILP. Clearly the decision on which way to ‘swing’, if at all, is fraught with difficulty given that the party has tended to fare badly no matter which other party it coalesced with. It remains to be seen whether, under the popular leadership of Éamon Gilmore, the party can successfully achieve and sustain major party status, and remain above Mair’s 15 per cent threshold for a prolonged period.

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