



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## **Fine Gael's Uncomfortable History: The Legacy of Cumann na nGaedheal**

Ciara Meehan

*Éire-Ireland*, Volume 43:3&4, Fómhar/Geimhreadh / Fall/Winter  
2008, pp. 253-266 (Article)

Published by Irish-American Cultural Institute  
*DOI: 10.1353/eir.0.0024*



➔ For additional information about this article  
<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/eir/summary/v043/43.3-4.meehan.html>

# Fine Gael's Uncomfortable History: The Legacy of Cumann na nGaedheal

IN 1931 *The Star*, a Dublin newspaper, claimed that “Cumann na nGaedheal must have a proud place in history.”<sup>1</sup> “How much are they thought about these days by Fine Gael?” Alan Dukes mused in late April 2006. “I suppose not really a lot,” was the answer of the politician who led the Fine Gael party from 1987 to 1990. “A lot of people have realised that looking back is not a profitable exploit, except for the historians.”<sup>2</sup> A round-table discussion in February 2008 considered seventy-five years of Fine Gael history.<sup>3</sup> The historian Mike Cronin spoke of what he called the “elephant in the room,” that is, the Blueshirts and their problematic legacy. Certainly, this legacy cannot be ignored. As Fearghal McGarry explains, “The Blueshirts remain the skeleton in Fine Gael’s cupboard, as is demonstrated by the frequency with which the term is hurled across the floor of the Dáil.”<sup>4</sup> But the Blueshirt movement is not the only aspect of the sometimes uncomfortable history of the party that has proved problematic; Fine Gael has also had to contend with the often difficult legacy bestowed on it by Cumann na nGaedheal. It is one that the party often chooses to overlook. In his study of Canadian party

1. *The Star*, December 1931.

2. Interview with Alan Dukes, 4 May 2006.

3. Irish Historical Society (IHS), round-table discussion, 5 February 2008. Chair: Professor Eunan O’Halpin (Trinity College Dublin); panel: Professor Mike Cronin (Boston College, Dublin), Dr. Ciara Meehan (University College Dublin) and Dr. Niamh Puirseil (University College Dublin).

4. Fearghal McGarry, *Eoin O’Duffy: A Self-Made Hero* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 269.

names John Coakley noted that “if they are unsuccessful,” parties “may abandon the old name and adopt a new one, symbolically putting failure to death.”<sup>5</sup> Has Fine Gael put that failure to death? How has the party dealt with and been affected by the memory of Cumann na nGaedheal? To what extent is Fine Gael a party of continuity? This article addresses these important questions.

Fine Gael, the United Ireland party, was officially created in September 1933 through a merger of Cumann na nGaedheal, the National Centre party, and the Army Comrades Association, more commonly known as the Blueshirts. At that critical juncture in the history of the party, it was Eoin O’Duffy and not W. T. Cosgrave, the Cumann na nGaedheal leader, who was appointed president of the new Fine Gael. His leadership was relatively short-lived, however, and he resigned on 21 September 1934. Not until March 1935 was his replacement selected, and Cosgrave returned to the helm.

Even before the reinstatement, however, Michael Tierney, the president of University College Dublin, had believed that “to all intents and purposes, it [Fine Gael] has become Cumann na nGaedheal all over again.”<sup>6</sup> His observation was not unique, nor confined to the 1930s. The opposition tended to agree. In 1934 Seán Lemass, then serving as the Fianna Fáil Minister for Industry and Commerce, remarked, “Cumann na nGaedheal is dead, but the spirit lives on in the men of today,” while in 1959 Eamon de Valera explained that “as far as I am concerned, Fine Gael and Cumann na nGaedheal are the same.”<sup>7</sup> Nor did the Fianna Fáil minister Neil Blaney differentiate between the two parties: “Despite the fact [that] the party changed its name . . . , it does not seem to have made much difference to the nature of the animal.”<sup>8</sup> Donal O’Sullivan suggested in his study of the Seanád that “new Fine Gael was but old Cumann na nGaedheal writ small.”<sup>9</sup> In contrast to these observa-

5. John Coakley, “The Significance of Names: The Evolution of Party Labels,” *Études Irlandaises* 5 (1980): 178.

6. Michael Tierney to Frank MacDermot, 27 November 1934, 1065/4/4, MacDermot papers, National Archives of Ireland (hereafter NAI).

7. *Dáil Debates*, vols. 55 and 174, cols. 1366 and 1201, 21 March 1935 and 13 May 1959 (Seán Lemass and Eamon de Valera).

8. *Ibid.*, vol. 246, col. 256, 29 April 1970 (Neil Blaney).

9. Donal O’Sullivan, *The Irish Free State and Its Senate: A Study in Contemporary Politics* (London: Faber and Faber, 1940), 474.

tions, the Roscommon TD Frank MacDermot declared in 1935 that “the United Ireland party is a new party.”<sup>10</sup> This pronouncement was to be expected, however, as MacDermot had been the leader of the short-lived National Centre party, and not a member of Cumann na nGaedheal.<sup>11</sup>

When did Fine Gael actually begin—in 1923, under the guise of Cumann na nGaedheal, or in 1933 as a new party distinct from the old pro-Treaty organization? Certainly, over the decades many members of the party have expressed the view that there is a line of continuity. For example, John A. Costello, the Fine Gael leader who had headed the interparty government of 1948–51, referred to “our predecessors in Cumann na nGaedheal” in 1957, and in 1964 the Cork city TD Anthony Barry made reference to Cumann na nGaedheal being the first name of the party.<sup>12</sup> The County Waterford TD Edward Collins, in his speech opposing the nomination of new members to Jack Lynch’s first Fianna Fáil government, also suggested continuity, while Frank Taylor, who represented Clare, used the term “predecessors” to refer to Cumann na nGaedheal.<sup>13</sup> Paddy Harte of Donegal (though somewhat confused, as he spoke of Fine Gael in the context of 1931) referred to his party as “the former Cumann na nGaedheal party.”<sup>14</sup> In 2003 Jimmy Deenihan, who sat for North Kerry, noted that his party originated “some eighty years ago,” while in October 2004 the Corkman Jim O’Keefe of Fine Gael referred to “its predecessor, Cumann na nGaedheal.”<sup>15</sup> Alan Dukes is very clear on the date that he considers Fine Gael to have been founded. As he succinctly put it, “1923 is the starting point.” For him Fine Gael is undoubtedly a party of continuity

10. *Dáil Debates*, vol. 56, col. 1774, 24 May 1935 (Frank MacDermot).

11. MacDermot clearly had some form of allegiance to Cumann na nGaedheal, however, as he had corresponded with O’Higgins about the possibility of standing as a candidate on the party ticket in the general election of June 1927. Kevin O’Higgins to Frank MacDermot, 18 May 1927, 1065/1/1, MacDermot papers, NAI.

12. *Dáil Debates*, vols. 163 and 210, cols. 804 and 129, 4 July 1957 and 26 May 1964 (John A. Costello and Anthony Barry).

13. *Ibid.*, vols. 246 and 293, cols. 1136 and 1535, 8 May 1970 and 11 November 1976 (Frank Taylor and Edward Collins).

14. *Ibid.*, vol. 317, col. 1437, 11 December 1979 (Paddy Harte).

15. *Ibid.*, vols. 568 and 591, cols. 1493 and 72, 18 June 2003 and 27 October 2004 (Jimmy Deenihan and Jim O’Keefe).

rather than change, and in the course of an interview on Cumann na nGaedheal's legacy, he used both names interchangeably when talking about party history.<sup>16</sup>

Yet the former Fine Gael leaders Garret FitzGerald and John Bruton, as well as James Dooge, the Minister for Foreign Affairs in FitzGerald's first government, have all pointed out that the line of continuity is muddled by the fact that the merger in 1933 naturally introduced a new element to the party.<sup>17</sup> Dooge felt that it is hard to classify what Fine Gael actually is, and he referred to the existence of differing views. "The nature of the party is extremely difficult to pinpoint," he observed, before concluding that "labeling is a very dangerous business." Like John Bruton, Dooge does not necessarily believe that Cumann na nGaedheal has left a negative legacy. In fact, he described the party's time in power as "a decade of amazing achievement." Moreover, he was attracted into Fine Gael by the speeches made in opposition by Patrick McGilligan, who had been the Cumann na nGaedheal Minister for Industry and Commerce and, from July 1927, also Minister for External Affairs.<sup>18</sup>

James Dooge officially entered politics in 1947 and retired four decades later, having played an instrumental role in the party during the troubled 1980s. By that stage he recalls that, although the memory of Cumann na nGaedheal was not swept aside, Fine Gael was not bound by it either. On the other hand, Paddy Harte, a Fine Gael member since 1949, felt that "there was certainly great similarity between Liam T. and William T. Cosgrave."<sup>19</sup> Liam's address at the Fine Gael Ard Fheis of 1977 appeared to confirm this: "Not for the first time has this party stood between the people of this country and anarchy." He, like the men of his father's government,

16. Interview with Alan Dukes, 4 May 2006.

17. That Bruton emphasized the other traditions in Fine Gael was unsurprising. As Olivia O'Leary explains, in John Bruton's world "the Irish parliamentary party leader John Redmond and his successors John Dillon and [the] eventual Fine Gael leader James Dillon were the natural icons." Olivia O'Leary, *Party Animals* (Dublin: O'Brien Press, 2006), 61.

18. Interview with James Dooge, 13 January 2005, and with John Bruton, 4 May 2006.

19. Paddy Harte, *Young Tigers and Mongrel Foxes* (Dublin: O'Brien Press, 2005), 100.

had a strong position on law and order.<sup>20</sup> Dooge noted, however, that other key figures in the party at the time, like Michael and Tom O'Higgins, who also had familial links to Cumann na nGaedheal, did not appear to hark back to the years 1923–32.<sup>21</sup>

Although Bruton, FitzGerald, and Dooge all made the point that Cumann na nGaedheal was only one component of Fine Gael, and despite the fact that FitzGerald went so far as to state that James Dillon's accession to the leadership broke the continuity, none of them claims that Fine Gael is a completely separate entity from Cumann na nGaedheal. Of course, if Fine Gael were to deny its Cumann na nGaedheal parentage, the alternative would be to accept the controversial Eoin O'Duffy, the man indelibly linked with the Blueshirts, as the founding father of the party. Before even becoming president of Fine Gael, O'Duffy, according to Patrick Belton, was being openly called a dictator.<sup>22</sup> The Army Comrades Association was "originally a benevolent organisation set up to look after the interests of the ex-Free State army men."<sup>23</sup> Admittedly, an unsigned letter in Barry Egan's papers claims that, "of the objects of the Army Comrades Association, there is no question. They are unimpeachably constitutional."<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, this organization, more commonly known as the Blueshirts, will invariably be associated in the minds of most informed observers with the fascist movements that swept large parts of Europe at the time.

If Fine Gael recognizes itself to be a continuation of Cumann na nGaedheal, it is not something that has been keenly emphasized. In 1963, J.J. Collins told the Dáil that "the Fine Gael party would like to forget that they were the Cumann na nGaedheal party up to 1932."<sup>25</sup> Although Collins was a Fianna Fáil deputy for Limerick

20. Law and order have an important place in Fine Gael's language. At the party Ard Fheis in 2006 Enda Kenny asserted that "when the law-and-order party is back in power, the thugs will be out of business." Quoted in O'Leary, *Party Animals*, 51.

21. Interview with James Dooge, 13 January 2005.

22. Belton to O'Duffy, 5 September 1933, LA30/347, Tierney papers, UCD Archives (hereafter UCDA).

23. Brian Maye, *Fine Gael, 1923–1987: A General History with Biographical Sketches of Leading Members* (Dublin: Blackwater Press, 1993), 30.

24. Letter, unsigned [1932?], U 404/6, Egan papers, Cork City and County Archives (hereafter CA).

25. *Dáil Debates*, vol. 205, col. 1194, 7 November 1963 (J. J. Collins).

West and was simply trying to goad the opposition, there was a grain of truth to his claim. Unlike Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael is not particularly vocal about its past. Its commemorations tend to be more low-key affairs. Kevin Boland, the former Fianna Fáil minister, noted that it was not until 1983, when he began writing his book *Fine Gael: British or Irish?*, that he discovered the date of Cumann na nGaedheal's founding. As he put it, "The fact appears to be that present day Fine Gael orators haranguing the party faithful are not in the habit of referring to 'that historic day in March or April 1923 when the party that founded the state was founded.'"<sup>26</sup> How much more relevant that statement is a quarter-century later.

In 2003 the eightieth anniversary of Cumann na nGaedheal occurred. The Mansion House played host to a celebration attended by an estimated four hundred supporters.<sup>27</sup> The event was noted in the national newspapers, but in general there was no media fanfare to mark the birth of Fine Gael's predecessor. The party did not produce a commemorative book as Fianna Fáil had done on its seventieth anniversary, when *Taking the Long View* was published, or when *Republican Days* was produced to mark the seventy-fifth anniversary.<sup>28</sup> On the occasion of its eightieth anniversary a specially created commemorative section, which carried the title "The Advance of a Nation: 80 Years of Fianna Fáil," appeared on the party website. According to the introduction, this occasion was "an opportune time to celebrate the legacy of Fianna Fáil's founding fathers."<sup>29</sup> In advance of the commemoration the then taoiseach Bertie Ahern had spoken about the party standing shoulder to shoulder with history. Fine Gael does not seem comfortable enough to do the same. In fact, when one of its leaders, Jim Higgins, commented in 2005 that "if Fianna Fáil had Collins, there would have been a statue to him in every town in the country,"<sup>30</sup> there was almost an undertone to his remark that critiqued

26. Kevin Boland, *Fine Gael: British or Irish?* (Dublin: Mercier Press, 1984), 9.

27. Figures from [www.finegaele.ie](http://www.finegaele.ie) [accessed 12 April 2006].

28. Philip Hannon and Jackie Gallagher, eds., *Taking the Long View: 70 Years of Fianna Fáil* (Dublin: Blackwater Press, 1996); Máirtín Breathnach, ed., *Republican Days: 75 Years of Fianna Fáil* (Dublin: Ashville Press, 2002).

29. Fianna Fáil website, [www.fiannafail.ie](http://www.fiannafail.ie) [accessed 11 May 2006].

30. *Irish Independent*, 17 October 2005.

such endeavors. Commemoration, one might therefore suggest, is almost anathema to the Fine Gael mindset.

Nonetheless, Michael Collins is now the one figure whom Fine Gael has displayed a willingness to remember, most notably in the form of the annual Collins commemoration. It can hardly be denied that the names of the great patriotic heroes of Ireland still resonate. This was particularly evident in April 2006 when the various political parties staked their claim to 1916. Fianna Fáil, as the *Irish Times* political editor Dick Walsh once noted, lists Theobald Wolfe Tone, Robert Emmet, and Thomas Davis among its forebears.<sup>31</sup> Labour claims James Connolly. Collins is Fine Gael's icon. Gerry O'Connell highlighted "the undeniable lineage today's Fine Gael party has to the slain patriot" during his speech at the first meeting of the Collins 22 Society.<sup>32</sup> As part of its membership drive, Young Fine Gael has used posters and printed t-shirts that carry the caption, "You've read the book, you've seen the film, now join the party," and are accompanied by the famous photograph of Commander-in-Chief Michael Collins at the funeral of Arthur Griffith in August 1922. Among their collection of photographs in *Days of Blue Loyalty: The Politics of Membership of the Fine Gael Party*, Michael Gallagher and Michael Marsh include an undated picture of James Dillon addressing a Fine Gael Ard-Fheis. To one side of the platform was a picture of Michael Collins, beneath which appeared the salute "The Greatest of Them All," and to the other side was an image of Arthur Griffith with the wrongly ascribed caption "Freedom to Achieve Freedom."<sup>33</sup>

Clearly, then, Fine Gael sees itself as being the heir of the legacy of Griffith and especially Collins. Laurence Doyle, a former chairman of the Wexford branch of Young Fine Gael, undoubtedly reflecting the attitude of many party members, boasted that "the Collins legacy is the legacy upon which our party is founded."<sup>34</sup> Often overlooked, however, is the fact that both Griffith and Collins

31. Dick Walsh, *The Party: Inside Fianna Fáil* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1986), 37.

32. "Collins Comes to Dublin," [www.yfg.ie](http://www.yfg.ie) [accessed on 10 June 2006].

33. Michael Gallagher and Michael Marsh, *Days of Blue Loyalty: The Politics of Membership of the Fine Gael Party* (Dublin: PSAI, 2002), plate g.

34. "YFG Remembers Michael Collins," [www.yfg.ie](http://www.yfg.ie) [accessed 10 June 2006].



were dead almost a full eight months before Cumann na nGaedheal was officially launched in April 1923. Writing for the Young Fine Gael magazine, which, for a political party, carries the rather peculiar title *The Informer*, John Fitzpatrick (a member of the Cork branch) posed the question, “Would Michael Collins be a card carrying member of Fine Gael?” He concluded unsurprisingly, “It is with consummate ease and great pride that I say: yes, if Michael Collins was still alive . . . , he would still be a proud card carrying member.”<sup>35</sup> But while Fine Gael has shown a readiness to commemorate and claim descent from Collins,<sup>36</sup> W.T. Cosgrave and his colleagues are virtually forgotten. What makes this act of forgetting seem strange is that in Michael Gallagher and Michael Marsh’s extensive study of Fine Gael party membership, conducted in 1999, the authors found that its adherents rated Cosgrave as the second best taoiseach whom the country has ever had.<sup>37</sup>

If this is so, why are Cosgrave and his colleagues, the men who did the ordinary, mundane but vital work of building the Free State, not better remembered? The answer is to be found in the question. At a conference on “the politics of dead bodies” held in University College Dublin in March 2006, Michael Laffan presented a paper in which he emphasized that in Ireland it was useful to die a violent death, as less attention has been given to those who died in their beds.<sup>38</sup> Although father and son are the focus of Stephen Collins’s *The Cosgrave Legacy*, the work is by no means an exhaustive biography of the first president of the executive council. The first full-length biography of W.T. Cosgrave appeared only in 2006, when Anthony J. Jordan’s *W.T. Cosgrave: Founder of Modern Ireland* was published.<sup>39</sup> But this work is problematic in that it has been researched and written for a general rather than an academic audi-

35. *The Informer*, September 2005.

36. On 16 October 2005 “stalwart Fine Gaelers turned up en masse” at the Mansion House to celebrate the 115th birthday of Michael Collins. *Irish Independent*, 17 October 2005.

37. Gallagher and Marsh, *Days of Blue Loyalty*, fig. 8.2, 200.

38. Michael Laffan, “Illustrious Corpses: Nationalist Funerals in Independent Ireland,” unpublished conference paper, “The Politics of Dead Bodies Conference,” UCD, 10 March 2006.

39. Anthony J. Jordan, *W.T. Cosgrave, 1880–1965: Founder of Modern Ireland* (Dublin: Westport Books, 2006).

ence. Less than a year earlier, the historian Charles Townshend, while addressing a conference to mark the centenary of the founding of Sinn Féin and the Ulster Unionist Council, had bemoaned the neglect of scholarly research on Cosgrave.<sup>40</sup> Compare this avoidance, then, with the attraction to Michael Collins. The entry of his name into any keyword search of a library database will produce an extensive list of titles. Collins, a youthful 31 when he died, was assassinated in an ambush in his native west Cork. Cosgrave passed away quietly at 85, having succumbed to old age; his memory was not sealed by a bloody death.

Aside from the contrasting nature of their deaths, there is a more fundamental reason why the name of Michael Collins is so much better and more quickly recalled than that of William Thomas Cosgrave, and why Warner Brothers' Studios decided to make the person described by Arthur Griffith as the "man who won the war"<sup>41</sup> the subject of a major film. Collins is inextricably associated with the glory of the revolutionary period, while Cosgrave undertook the unheroic work of building up the new Free State, albeit with great vigor and commitment. It was essential, but it was not glorious. As Anne Dolan notes in her recent study of Irish Civil War commemorations, "Collins was marketable: even before his death he had been offered £10,000 from a London agent and \$20,000 from the *New York World* for his memoirs." Furthermore, "he died before he had done enough to damn himself."<sup>42</sup>

Although Alan Dukes acknowledges that Fine Gael should be more ready to remember its antecedents (a point also made by John Bruton),<sup>43</sup> he asserted that there has been a very limited market for history in the electoral arena. (The commemoration of the Easter Rising in 2006, however, suggests that this is changing.) When asked how such an observation could be reconciled with the will-

40. Charles Townshend, "Culture or Combat? Sinn Féin's First Decade," unpublished conference paper, "Ireland 1905 Conference," UCD, 12 December 2005.

41. *Dáil Debates*, vol. 3, cols. 20 and 335, 19 December 1921 and 7 January 1922 (Arthur Griffith).

42. Anne Dolan, *Commemorating the Irish Civil War: History and Memory, 1923–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 69, 75.

43. Interview with John Bruton, 4 May 2006.

ingness of his party to commemorate Michael Collins, he admitted that Collins was the more romantic figure.<sup>44</sup> Fine Gael may also prefer to recall Collins rather than Cosgrave and his colleagues because Collins was not directly associated with the first ten years of independent government or with the various criticisms, discussed below, that have been made of it. The historian Maryann Valiulis maintained that Cumann na nGaedheal never held power on its own again because the party had been “tarnished with the conservative image of the Cosgrave years.”<sup>45</sup> Seán MacEntee, the Minister for Finance under de Valera until 1939, told the Dáil in February 1936 that “the sins of the Cumann na nGaedheal are the sins of Fine Gael.”<sup>46</sup> Or as the longtime Cork politician Martin Corry put it in 1955, “The name of Cumann na nGaedheal got so dirty that they had to wipe it out and get a new one.”<sup>47</sup> In an article on governments in Eastern Europe, Stanislaw Baranczak argues that “the principle of selectiveness makes their memory a sort of automatic sieve, letting slip through whatever may diminish their collective image while retaining whatever embellishes it.”<sup>48</sup> It is something of which all political parties are guilty. Fine Gael, it would appear, suffers from a memory lapse that spans a decade, or perhaps it would be more accurate to apply the term “selective memory” to the party’s recollection of the period 1922–32.

In 2001 the Irish national broadcasting service published *RTE 100 Years: Ireland in the 20th Century*, which presented itself as an account of the major events of the previous hundred years. The final page of the book is an appendix that lists the presidents and taoisigh of Ireland.<sup>49</sup> There is one glaring omission. The office of taoiseach was created only by de Valera’s 1937 constitution; prior to that, the

44. Interview with Alan Dukes, 4 May 2006.

45. Maryann Gialanella Valiulis, “After the Revolution: The Formative Years of Cumann na nGaedheal,” in *The Uses of the Past: Essays on Irish Culture*, ed. Audrey S. Eyler and Robert F. Garratt (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1998), 132.

46. *Dáil Debates*, vol. 60, col. 557, 12 February 1936 (Seán MacEntee).

47. *Ibid.*, vol. 148, col. 316, 10 February 1955 (Martin Corry).

48. Stanislaw Baranczak, “Memory: Lost, Retrieved, Abused, Defended,” *Ideas* 1:1 (Summer 1992): 13.

49. Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, ed., *RTE 100 Years: Ireland in the 20th Century* (Dublin: TownHouse and CountryHouse Ltd., 2001), 368.

government leader was known as the president of the executive council. This position, however, is not taken into account, and thus the name of W.T. Cosgrave does not appear on the list of past government leaders.<sup>50</sup> The first name on the role of honor is Eamon de Valera's, listed alongside which are his first dates in office (9 March 1932 to 18 February 1948). An outsider not versed in Irish history could consequently be forgiven for thinking that Ireland must have gained its independence only in 1932.

Alan Dukes believes that, rather than being a deliberate attempt to airbrush Cumann na nGaedheal out of the story, the error might have occurred as a result of flawed research. The term "taoiseach" was possibly entered into an internet search engine, while "president of the executive council" was simply forgotten, he suggested.<sup>51</sup> But the timeframe provided for de Valera's term in office includes a six-year period (1932–38) when he held the title of president and not that of taoiseach. Whether or not Dukes's explanation is accurate, Fine Gael has certainly helped to maintain the wall of silence that often encircles Cumann na nGaedheal. "I think when the history of this country comes to be written in more impartial days, its contribution [Cumann na nGaedheal's] will be realised, and recognised as a very great contribution," Liam Cosgrave speculated in 1944.<sup>52</sup> But until Fine Gael comes to terms with and acknowledges its sometimes controversial parentage, it seems that the vital role of Cumann na nGaedheal in the development of the Irish state will remain the domain of historians.

Cumann na nGaedheal achieved much during its decade in power. Succinctly expressed in the words of the historian Kevin B. Nowlan, its accomplishments are beyond doubt: "Under the unobtrusive but firm leadership of W.T. Cosgrave, the state's administration and financial system were rebuilt out of the chaos left by the war of independence and the civil war, order was restored, and the international status of the Irish Free State had been firmly

50. This is in contrast with the list provided by John Coakley and Michael Gallagher in *Politics in the Republic of Ireland* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 474.

51. Interview with Alan Dukes, 4 May 2006.

52. *Dáil Debates*, vol. 92, col. 2365, 15 March 1944 (Liam Cosgrave).

established.”<sup>53</sup> The achievement of democratic stability, the formation of the Garda Síochána, and the launching of the great Shannon electrification scheme can also be added to the government’s credentials. But for Fine Gael, to look back to this period is not a profitable activity; it will not bring extra votes to the party. It is also undeniable that the sometimes uncomfortable history of Cumann na nGaedheal has been used as a stick with which to beat Fine Gael. Though there were no particular qualifications for membership in Cumann na nGaedheal, which sought to represent no particular class or creed,<sup>54</sup> it was seen as the party of the middle classes, large farmers, and big business—an impression that the party did little to dispel, and one that has since dogged Fine Gael. It was a belief in doing what was right rather than electoral considerations that almost invariably guided the government’s choices. Through its failure or refusal to court popularity, the party alienated various sections of society, often causing a groundswell of opposition that resulted in a devastating electoral reverse, most notably in June 1927. Furthermore, many of its decisions in the years 1923–32 would later come back to haunt Fine Gael.

There have been 1,121 references to Cumann na nGaedheal in the Dáil and Seanád combined since the party went out of existence, and although not all have been negative, the party has generally been used as an unflattering point of reference.<sup>55</sup> In his biography of Jack Lynch, T. Ryle Dwyer noted that “talk of pensions tended to be a touchy subject [with Fine Gael], since the Cumann na nGaedheal government had cut a shilling off the old-age pensions in 1924 [when Ernest Blythe was Minister for Finance].”<sup>56</sup> The subject has been raised on numerous occasions. In 1953 the revolutionary hero

53. Kevin B. Nowlan, “President Cosgrave’s Last Administration,” in *The Years of the Great Test, 1926–1939*, ed. Francis MacManus (Cork: Mercier Press, 1967), 17.

54. Party pamphlet, 1927, P24/618, Blythe papers, UCDA.

55. The following criteria were entered into the Oireachtas search engine of both Houses: a starting date of 8 September 1933 (chosen because it was on that date that Fine Gael was officially launched) and an ending date of 31 December 2007. Between 1973 and 2005 there were few references (in certain years, none at all) to the founders of the state. The years 1970–72 registered much higher returns, however.

56. T. Ryle Dwyer, *Nice Fellow: A Biography of Jack Lynch* (Dublin: Mercier Press, 2001), 34.

and former Fine Gael presidential candidate Seán MacEoin commented, “The fact remains that from that day to this we have never been let forget it.”<sup>57</sup> Seán Ryan, a former Labour party spokesperson on older people’s issues, was well aware of the deed and remarked that “if [Fianna Fáil] want to goad Fine Gael, they’d say, ‘Remember Ernest Blythe.’”<sup>58</sup> In 2004 Enda Kenny, for the second time that year, reminded the Dáil that his party was “pilloried for 50 years about a decision made by the late Ernest Blythe in regard to old age pensions.”<sup>59</sup>

Besides the notorious pension cut, over the past seventy-five years references have been made to Cumann na nGaedheal’s reduction of teachers’ salaries,<sup>60</sup> alleged patronage,<sup>61</sup> and responsibility for partition,<sup>62</sup> unemployment,<sup>63</sup> and neglect of social services,<sup>64</sup> among other political sins. In 1951 Colm Gallagher of Dublin North-Central asked, “Did we not inherit a legacy of bad housing from the Cumann na nGaedheal government?”<sup>65</sup> “The regime of the Cumann na nGaedheal government was,” according to Michael Davern of South Tipperary, “the worst since the days of the famine.”<sup>66</sup> Dr. James Ryan, the long-serving Wexford TD, remarked that “nothing was done for health, and no attempt was made to build hospitals, dispensaries, or anything else, or to make any improvement in the health services.”<sup>67</sup> In 1980 the Kildare TD Patrick Power’s response to a speech made by Paddy Harte in the Dáil gave a succinct overview of Cumann na nGaedheal’s sins: “I must remind Deputy Harte that the party he represents are the

57. *Dáil Debates*, vol. 130, col. 782, 27 March 1952 (Seán MacEoin).

58. Interview with Seán Ryan, 12 November 2004.

59. *Dáil Debates*, vol. 595, col. 577, 15 December 2004 (Enda Kenny).

60. *Ibid.*, vols. 66 and 70, cols. 228 and 961, 1 April 1937 and 24 March 1938 (Patrick Kehoe and Daniel O’Rourke).

61. *Ibid.*, vol. 298, col. 82, 22 March 1977 (James Gibbons).

62. Several references were made. For examples, see *Dáil Debates*, vols. 214 and 236, cols. 5 and 2455, 10 February 1965 and 7 November 1968 (Brian Lenihan and Neil Blaney). See also *Seanad Debates*, vol. 81, col. 351, 3 June 1975 (Jack Garrett).

63. *Dáil Debates*, vols. 60 and 233, cols. 1778 and 1602, 5 March 1936 and 27 March 1968 (Thomas Kelly and Seán MacEntee).

64. *Ibid.*, vol. 103, col. 769, 13 November 1946 (Martin Corry).

65. *Ibid.*, vol. 126, col. 338, 20 June 1951 (Colm Gallagher).

66. *Ibid.*, vol. 141, col. 390, 23 July 1953 (Michael Davern).

67. *Ibid.*, vol. 140, cols. 305–06, 1 July 1953 (James Ryan).

party who put partition there. They are the party who sold out this country and agreed on an oath of allegiance to a foreign king. They agreed on the payment of annuities; they agreed that the very ports we are talking about should be retained in the hands of other people.”<sup>68</sup> But this was overheated political rhetoric. In 1953 the chairman of the Labour party, Brendan Corish, shared his belief with the Dáil that “we should have arrived at a stage in the political life of this country at which we agree to give credit to Cumann na nGaedheal for what they did from 1922 to 1932.”<sup>69</sup>

From the ordinary TD who believes that “they showed great courage, tenacity, and great vision as well,”<sup>70</sup> to the former leader of the country who, just two months before becoming taoiseach for the first time (Bertie Ahern in April 1997), affirmed that he had “no difficulty in commending the generous contributions to the state by many of the people who worked in the Cumann na nGaedheal government,”<sup>71</sup> W.T. Cosgrave’s party has been lauded for its contributions to state-building. But for every time that praise is bestowed, as when Albert Reynolds commended Cumann na nGaedheal at an annual Liam Lynch commemoration,<sup>72</sup> there will always be significantly more occasions when scathing attacks are launched. Although party members gave their talents, and in the case of Kevin O’Higgins, his life, to creating and ensuring the stability of the new state, many party policies, some of which had been guaranteed vote-losers, have, through the decades, provided the other political parties in Dáil Éireann with ammunition to target Fine Gael. The author of an off-the-peg election speech in 1954 asserted that “much of Fine Gael’s past is part now of the stuff of history. Fine Gael is content to leave it . . . to the ultimate judgment of the historian.”<sup>73</sup> More than a half-century later, the case remains the same.

68. Ibid., vol. 322, col. 1130, 18 June 1980 (Paddy Harte).

69. Ibid., vol. 143, col. 1857, 9 December 1953 (Brendan Corish).

70. Interview with Seán Ryan, 12 November 2004.

71. *Dáil Debates*, vol. 478, col. 623, 29 April 1997 (Bertie Ahern).

72. “At this distance in time it is easier to acknowledge that credit is due to W.T. Cosgrave for quickly including the participation of the newly formed Fianna Fáil party in democratic politics in the Dáil, but also for allowing them to put their own presentation on what that involved.” Quoted in Kevin Rafter, *Martin Mansergh: A Biography* (Dublin: New Island Press, 2002), 228–29.

73. General election address, 1954, P190/558, Costello papers, UCDA.