

PARTY NATION

Ireland's General Elections
The Strokes, Jokes, Spinners and Winners

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MERLIN
PUBLISHING

First published in 2007 by
Merlin Publishing
Newmarket Hall, Cork Street,
Dublin 8, Ireland
Tel: +353 1 4535866
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Text © 2007 Damian Corless
Editing, Design and Layout © 2007 Merlin Publishing

10-Digit ISBN 1-903582-71-7
13-Digit ISBN 978-1-903582-71-8

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the
British Library.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Typeset by Artwerk Design
Cover Design by Artwerk Design
Printed and bound by Creative Print and Design, Britain
Cover photographs courtesy of Artwerk Limited and
McCarthy Photography

1982 Act Two

CAR CRASH GOVERNMENT

The Incumbents: Fianna Fáil led by Charles Haughey.

Slogan: It's the economy, stupid, not all the other stuff.

Promise: You name it, we'll do it.

The Challengers: Fine Gael led by Garret Fitzgerald.

Promise: To be decent, honest and trustworthy.

Slogan: To restore sane government.

The Mood of the Country: Dazed and Confused.

Prediction: Win for the FG/Labour Coalition.

Result: A Coalition win.

Entertainment value: 9/10.

A Campaign Of National Sabotage

At the start of 1982 Charles Haughey had won his first general election as the leader of Fianna Fáil by a slender margin. Before the year was out his minority government was wobbling and his own position at the head of the party was under open attack from within. Just weeks before the administration collapsed, there were ructions within Fianna Fáil when a little known TD from Kildare, Charlie McCreevy, launched a heave against The Boss. In McCreevy's memorable words, it was time for the anti-Haughey faction to "shit or get off the pot".

The McCreevy-led 'Club of 22' lost the parliamentary party vote to ditch Haughey. After the conclave broke up, the conspirators were roughed up by Haughey supporters in the corridors of Leinster House as they left the building. One

anti-Haughey deputy, Jim Gibbons, was struck on the head in the Dáil car park while another, Mary Harney, was jostled and subjected to a torrent of verbal abuse. Gardaí urged McCreevy to leave by a side exit, but he insisted on walking tall. He left under heavy protection, with howls of “Judas!” and “Blueshirt!” ringing in his ears.

As the second general election campaign of 1982 began weeks later, Dublin Corporation pointed out that some posters from the contest of the previous February had still not been taken down. In Fianna Fáil’s few months in power the jobless figures had shot up by 30,000 to 171,000, but what really had the public’s attention was a spectacular Grand Prix of car-crash government which had already been characterised as GUBU (Grotesque, Unbelievable, Bizarre and Unprecedented).

The GUBU acronym had been coined by Labour’s Conor Cruise O’Brien after a deranged double murderer, Malcolm MacArthur, had been tracked down to the home of Haughey’s Attorney General, Patrick Connolly. Earlier, Haughey had perpetrated a political grotesquerie when he deprived one of his own tribe of a top European post, by giving it to the Fine Gael TD Dick Burke. The cunning plan was to win the subsequent by-election, trading the prized Euro perk for a badly needed extra Dáil seat. It all came horribly unstuck when Haughey’s man bombed in the by-election.

Throughout the campaign, allegations were rife that Haughey’s Justice Minister Séan Doherty had placed illegal phone taps and had generally been throwing his weight around like a latter-day Wyatt Earp, riding roughshod over the niceties of the law. Two months before the election, a garda car on protection detail with Doherty crashed in mysterious circumstances. The car, which contained a pistol and Uzi sub-machine gun, was abandoned for a time.

When Fine Gael tabled a Dáil motion of no confidence in

the government, Fianna Fáil's Chief Whip Bertie Ahern worked to cobble together a deal which would prevent the administration's fall, but the writing was on the wall. Within two hours of the government's collapse, voters in Ahern's Drumcondra constituency received a letter reminding them of how hard he'd worked for them since the election of the previous February.

In the Dáil no confidence debate, Fianna Fáil went down kicking and screaming. Taoiseach Charles Haughey accused the opposition of "undemocratic haste" in rushing to fell the government. The Minister for Industry & Commerce, Gene Fitzgerald, accused Fine Gael of waging a campaign of "personal vilification and accusations". Addressing his Fine Gael namesake Garret, he raged: "It is not going too far to accuse him and his party of a campaign of national sabotage that reflects no concern for the people we all represent or for the economy, but is directed solely to the attainment of political advantage. It is hypocritical in the extreme." He continued: "Smears, insinuations, allegations and charges have been made at each and every member of the government and our leader. To take an example, we had this great story about telephone tapping, and we all know now the true story there. We know now that that was concocted and arranged by the leader of the main opposition party and some of his colleagues prior to the election last year but it was not proceeded with then. Why? Because it did not suit their purposes at the time."

The man under most pressure, Séan Doherty, bullishly accused the opposition of vandalising the office of the Minister for Justice, the reputation of the Irish State, and much more. He declared: "I have been vilified. I have been pursued by certain elements in the media, by politicians in the Fine Gael party, in this House and outside it. I do not wish to say more than that I will not allow my character, my integrity, nor indeed that of my wife or children to be

impugned and vilified in the way it has been attempted.” He continued: “It seriously damages Parliament and in many ways affects the capacity of the Minister for Justice, whether the office be held by me or by somebody else, to pursue his function in the way which is so essential at this difficult time.”

He went on to complain about the “scurrilous” media coverage of his involvement with the crashed patrol car. Then, under parliamentary privilege, he named four opposition deputies and said he thought it strange that “there has been no mention of the accidents involving” them. At this point, Fine Gael’s Enda Kenny asked the Justice Minister why he hadn’t included on his list a separate accident involving a certain Fianna Fáil TD.

And so the tit-for-tat continued. Doherty said of the previous Justice Minister Jim Mitchell: “It is a pity Deputy Mitchell is not present. I ask him to tell us if his State car was involved in an accident, if there was a passenger in it, if that passenger was a lady, if anybody was injured, and if his driver had the full visual capacity to hold that position? I invite Deputy Mitchell to come into the House and answer those questions.”

He further accused Mitchell of “direct interference with members of the Garda Síochana in the course of their duty”, and he raised the issue of a relative of Mitchell’s who he claimed had been stopped behind the wheel and found to be over the limit. Mitchell was Justice Minister at the time that the medical report, which was necessary to bringing a prosecution, had mysteriously gone missing. The Gardaí said that they’d never received the report, despite the fact it had been sent to them by registered post.

The reputation of the force was further tarnished during the campaign when the socialist deputy Jim Kemmy told reporters that there was a special cupboard in the interview room of the Bridewell Prison which was designed to allow

detectives illegally eavesdrop on private conversations between prisoners and their solicitors. Kemmy showed reporters photos of a door with 20 spy holes drilled in it, which he described as “a form of dirty tricks by Gardaí in Detective Branch”. He claimed that the photograph had been sent to him by a disenchanting officer, explaining: “Some Gardaí are afraid of what is going on in the force now.” The photo showed that the cupboard door had a second highly unusual feature apart from the spy holes. This was a bolt which allowed it to be locked from the inside. Kemmy questioned why anyone would want to lock themselves into an ordinary cupboard. The hidey-hole was positioned convenient to where a consulting solicitor would sit facing his client.

The garda Press Office issued a statement saying: “It does not exist. There is no such cubbyhole in the Bridewell.” A follow-up statement admitted that the cupboard in the photo did exist, but for the sole purpose of storing books, not spooks. A spokesman then said that a senior officer would investigate to establish the truth of the matter. And that was the end of that.

Glass Houses Throwing Stones

Garret Fitzgerald started the campaign as 1/2 favourite for the post of Taoiseach, and quickly improved to 1/3. In response, Haughey snorted: “This is not a beauty contest.” The toppling of Haughey’s government had begun with the loss of the voting power of two TDs. Deputy Bill Loughnane had died, while Jim Gibbons lay in hospital recovering from a double heart attack which had struck shortly after he’d been struck by a Fianna Fáil colleague in Leinster House. Ray Burke told a radio audience that Fine Gael, driven by “power lust”, had “walked across the new grave of Bill Loughnane” and then dashed off to Kilkenny to go “crowding through” the intensive care unit where Gibbons lay weak as a kitten.

When Labour's Barry Desmond released a statement based on a government finance memo, Haughey claimed the document was stolen property. He charged: "Both Labour and Fine Gael seem to be engaging in a tactic of stealing documents from the Department of Finance and publishing them out of context to create a false impression." Desmond revealed that Bertie Ahern had freely handed the document to Labour's Mervyn Taylor as a matter of Dáil protocol. Haughey responded that no one had a right to hand over Department of Finance documents, and muttered darkly about the consequences for anyone committing "grave breaches" of the Official Secrets Act.

Having made the conversion to Fine Gael-style fiscal rectitude, Fianna Fáil wanted to fight the election on economic policy, but the public was more interested in filling its nostrils with the unmistakable whiff of sulphur. Brian Lenihan deplored the fact that: "The sort of rumours going around in recent times, like those about the Minister for Justice, are lies, absolute lies, lies."

At times, the Minister of Justice himself was literally incoherent with rage. At one point Doherty said: "I hate to see glass houses throwing stones when the panes in those houses are smashed, and the panes in Deputy Fitzgerald's are smashed." Another time, he warned Fine Gael: "You are a can of worms and I've taken the lid off you, and you'll be used as bait by the people of Ireland when they play with you in the next three weeks."

In a TV debate with Fine Gael's Jim Mitchell, Séan Doherty promised that if he was returned to Justice he would set up a judicial inquiry into himself to get to the bottom of allegations that he'd interfered with the Gardaí.

During the Falklands War earlier in the year, Haughey had infuriated Britain's Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher by voting against EEC sanctions on Argentina for invading the British possessions. At election time, with Fitzgerald getting

favourable coverage in the British media, Haughey delivered the message: "Britain, stay out of our election. The Irish people are perfectly capable of deciding which government they want. They can choose for themselves." He added: "We arranged their departure from our country 60 years ago and we don't want them coming back in 1982."

Haughey told the voters of Waterford that he was arranging the decentralisation of 400 Posts & Telegraphs jobs to the town, which was an employment black spot. The jobs were ready to go "full steam ahead", along with thousands of other public service posts to be decentralised all over the country. "This is not an election gimmick," he stressed.

Albert Reynolds claimed that he had tapes which "proved" Fine Gael canvassers in the previous campaign had tried to smear his party leader. However, he would neither play nor display them. He commented: "I have the tapes locked away in my own safe. I will not be giving them to anybody. They were just used for my own information during the last general election."

With the character assassins stalking Haughey, his wife, Maureen made a rare public intervention to confirm that the opposition and their media lackeys were not playing cricket. She remarked: "He is always Garret The Good. Garret has a halo and Haughey has horns." The born-again Christians of U2 admired Garret's halo, and in the run up to polling day Fitzgerald dropped in to Windmill Lane Studios for a photo opportunity with the band as they completed their breakthrough album *War*.

Just before the election was called, Labour's Michael O'Leary dramatically quit the party, saying: "I would not stay on as a scarecrow leader." Within days he had joined Fine Gael. After O'Leary jumped ship, Labour's Barry Desmond told the viewers of the current affairs show *Today Tonight*: "We have cleared the decks for an election." "Yes," replied the host Brian Farrell, "and you've a man overboard too."

Checking The Death Notices

An anonymous civil servant wrote a letter to the papers accusing his Fianna Fáil Minister of using state employees to run his constituency clinic at the taxpayers' expense. The secret correspondent further charged that another civil servant in the same Department had been given the job of scanning the death notices every day and sending telegrams of condolence to any bereaved family that lived in the Minister's constituency. The writer complained: "This corruption goes on while the rest of the Department suffers vacancies, embargos on recruitment and promotion, a clampdown on official travel and exhortation to limit the use of phones and telex machines."

The civil servants of RTE were so concerned with the waste of scant resources that their unions said they would oppose the broadcast of any party political messages during the campaign, because the expenditure on these at a time of savage cutbacks would be "unfair". Montrose management told its workers that the station would stay within budget by cutting back on-location reports in favour of cheaper studio coverage.

With the pirates and super-pirates making serious inroads into RTE's radio advertising revenue, especially in Dublin, RTE's civil servants announced that they would 'black' any politician appearing on an illegal rival. RTE's chapel of the National Union of Journalists slammed the politicians for failing to sink the pirates, and said that it would also black all coverage from any party event where pirate reporters were allowed to attend.

The RTE workers proved as good as their word and nixed coverage of a Workers Party conference because a pirate reporter, Jenny McIvor of Radio Nova, had managed to gain entry. The 'father' of the RTE newsroom chapel, Charlie Bird, said the news blackout of the event was "an unfortunate case" but "a ban is a ban and we are sticking to it".

Crisis, What Crisis?

In the aftermath of the election, with Haughey defeated, there was a widespread belief that he would be heaved overboard by his party. Bookies installed Des O'Malley as 6/4 favourite to take over, and *The Irish Press* ran a full-blown political obituary, featuring a big photo-spread of key moments in Haughey's life and career. Employing the past tense, the *Press* said that Haughey had alienated many of "the traditional acceptable politicians of his own persuasion. It was this weakness above all else that led to his political demise."

In the event, the *Bangkok Post* had its finger nearer the pulse. Albert Reynolds arrived back from Thailand on the day the *Press* obituary was published. He had a copy of the *Bangkok Post* with him. Under the headline IRISH WATERGATE, the Thai paper carried a much more positive prognosis for Haughey's future. It said: "Former Prime Minister Charles Haughey appeared determined yesterday to flush out dissidents in his Fianna Fáil Party."

The new Dáil met on the day *The Irish Press* pronounced Haughey a dead duck. One newspaper report said that as the deputies arrived at Leinster House in the morning, Haughey's room to manoeuvre was on a par with rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic. By the end of the day, with Haughey having pulled off yet another Houdini act, some TDs were wondering with awed admiration whether the Titanic would have gone down if The Boss had been on the bridge.