



NUI MAYNOOTH

Ollscoil na hÉireann Má Nuad

BRENDAN CORISH: A LIFE IN POLITICS, 1945-77

by

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SUMMARY

This thesis assesses the political life of Brendan Corish, (1918-90), who was a Labour TD for Wexford from 1945 up until his retirement in 1982. He first entered politics in the December 1945 by-election, which was held due to the death of his father, Richard Corish, (1886-1945). His father played a major role in the local Labour movement and was also TD and Mayor of Wexford. Hence, the mantle of responsibility was great. Three years after entering Leinster House, Corish was promoted as Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministers for Local Government and Defence in the first Inter-Party Government, (1948-51). The coalition government was dissolved three years later. In 1954, he became Minister for Social Welfare in the second Inter-Party Government, (1954-7). The thesis demonstrates that Corish's second experience of coalition government was negative overall and as a result, he was adamant that Labour would not enter another coalition. In 1960, Brendan Corish was elected party leader. Under his guidance, Labour was completely transformed. The party became radical, socialism was adopted, new policies were developed and new recruits were enlisted. After an improved performance by Labour in the general elections of 1961 and 1965, Corish predicted that a majority Labour Party government would be elected in 1969. However, the party actually lost four seats. In 1970, he proposed the motion, which called for the reversal of Labour's anti-coalition stance. This motion was accepted. Labour and Fine Gael made preparations for a new government. In 1973, Corish became Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Social Welfare in the National Coalition, (1973-7). While in charge, he introduced key reforms. However, the government was faced with economic and security crises. In 1977, Labour and Fine Gael were voted out. As a result, Brendan Corish stepped down as leader and he retired from politics in 1982. This thesis examines the contribution that Brendan Corish made to Irish political life over a long and varied career in politics. It looks at the transforming image of socialism in Ireland, Corish's legacy on the Irish Labour Party, the impact of religion on his politics, as well as the effect politics had on his family and personal health.

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ABBREVIATIONS

A.C.	Administrative Council
C.I.U.	Congress of Irish Unions
D.O.R.A.	Defence of the Realm Act
EEC	European Economic Community
G.A.A.	Gaelic Athletic Association
G.I.S.	Government Information Service
G.N.P.	Gross National Product
G.P.O.	General Post Office
I.C.T.U.	Irish Congress of Trade Unions
I.D.A.	Industrial Development Authority
I.F.W.U.	Irish Foundry Workers' Union
I.L.H.S.	Irish Labour History Society
I.L.P.	Irish Labour Party
I.M.A.	Irish Medical Association
I.R.A.	Irish Republican Army
I.T.G.W.U.	Irish Transport and General Workers' Union
I.T.U.C.	Irish Trade Union Congress
MEP	Member of European Parliament
MP	Member of Parliament
N.A.I.	National Archives of Ireland
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
N.I.L.P.	Northern Ireland Labour Party
N.L.I.	National Library of Ireland
O.E.C.D.	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OPEC	Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries
P.A.Y.E.	Pay As You Earn
P.L.P.	Parliamentary Labour Party
P.R.	Proportional representation
R.I.C.	Royal Irish Constabulary
R.T.É.	Radio Teilifís Éireann
R.U.C.	Royal Ulster Constabulary
S.D.L.P.	Social Democratic and Labour Party
TD	Teachta Dála

U.N.	United Nations
VAT	Value Added Tax
V.B.C.	Victory Brendan Corish
V.H.I.	Voluntary Health Insurance
V.L.	Victory Labour

To my family

INTRODUCTION

This thesis analyses the political life of Brendan Corish, Labour TD for Wexford from 1945 up until his retirement in 1982. At the age of twenty-seven, Brendan Corish filled the seat that was left vacant by the death of his father, Richard Corish, in 1945. Richard Corish represented the Wexford electorate from 1921 to 1945. He was also Mayor of Wexford and a trade union official during this same period. This thesis examines amongst other things the immeasurable influence of Richard Corish on his son's political career.

The thesis assesses the inter-party government years from 1948 to 1951 and 1954 to 1957 as they relate to Brendan Corish. He was Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministers of Local Government and Defence in the first Inter-Party Government from 1948 to 1951.¹ He was also appointed Minister of Social Welfare in the second Inter-Party Government from 1954 to 1957. This thesis shall look closely at the rise to power of Brendan Corish, in comparing for example the new style of leadership of the Labour Party to that of his predecessor, William Norton and also the methods Corish exercised in maintaining control from 1960 onwards. Brendan Corish famously prophesied that 'the seventies will be socialist' in Ireland.² He is still widely remembered for this remark today and this historic prediction shall be examined comprehensively. Corish reached the pinnacle of his career when he held the posts of Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Social welfare in the National Coalition government from 1973 to 1977. It is this episode of his life that shall form the principal section of this thesis.

Inevitably, the contemporary issues and events that dominated the time and also the positions taken by Brendan Corish on them will be discussed. Important matters such as the Northern Ireland Troubles, Ireland's entry to the EEC, disputes with trade unions, internal party conflicts, economic crises, Irish emigration and unemployment as well as Labour's decision to go it alone or form a pre-election pact will all be included. These themes were highly significant during this period. The transforming image of the Labour Party and socialism under Corish will also be discussed at length. It was under the guidance and influence of Brendan Corish that the direction of the modern Irish Labour Party, henceforth referred to as the I.L.P., was eventually mapped and his legacy

¹ The Parliamentary Labour Party appointed Brendan Corish as Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Defence in 1948 but there is little evidence in the archives relating to this promotion.

² Corish, Brendan, *The New Republic: Complete text of 'The New Republic' address by Brendan Corish* (Dublin, 1968), p. 1.

on the I.L.P. will be fully examined. This thesis will also consider whether Corish was a pragmatist or a socialist as his political career developed. His views on local themes that stood out during this era in Wexford will be incorporated into this thesis, including the infamous Fethard-on-Sea boycott of 1957 and the closure of the Fine Wool Fabrics industry in 1974. Furthermore, Brendan Corish was a very religious man and the impact of religion on his politics will be studied in depth. The effect of politics on Corish's family and on his personal health will also be discussed.

Brendan Corish is arguably the leading political figure in Wexford since Irish independence. In his hometown and county, there is a huge awareness of the contribution Corish made and this thesis will examine his legacy in Wexford. Indeed, the Wexford electorate since 1922 has in all but two elections returned a Labour candidate to represent them and in five elections successfully voted in two of its party members. This is truly an admirable feat for the party and is due undoubtedly to the tremendous involvement of both father and son on the political stage in Wexford for more than sixty-one years combined.

There have been many wonderful recent contributions made by historians on the history of the Irish Labour party. Professor Michael Gallagher of Trinity College produced an excellent book in 1982 and more recently Niamh Puirseil completed her work in 2007.³ Michael Gallagher deals primarily with the period 1957 to 1982. His tables and bibliography listings are very informative and are certainly a great aid to research on the I.L.P. However, the focus of Gallagher's work is not exclusively on Brendan Corish. Niamh Puirseil, a joint editor of the Irish Labour History Society journal, *Saothar*, wrote another history of the Irish Labour Party quite recently, which covers the period 1922 to 1973. She painstakingly analysed the events and personalities for the reader. Her book provides a good foundation. There is no detailed study devoted exclusively to the political career of Brendan Corish. He also turned down a number of offers from potential biographers during his life.⁴ This thesis fills this void in Irish history. Finally, there are numerous books on the history of Wexford, most notably Nicholas Furlong's *A history of County Wexford*.⁵ These are all quite general in their content but useful nonetheless.

³ Gallagher, Michael, *The Irish Labour Party in transition, 1957-82* (Dublin, 1982). See also Puirseil, Niamh, *The Irish Labour Party, 1922-73* (Dublin, 2007).

⁴ Philip Corish, 'Concluding remarks' in Halligan, Brendan (ed.), *The Brendan Corish Seminar Proceedings* (Dublin, 2006), pp. 41-2. Philip Corish is the second son of Brendan and Phyllis Corish.

⁵ Furlong, Nicholas, *A history of County Wexford* (Dublin, 2003).

The main primary sources that are used in this thesis are the public and private papers of Brendan Corish. The National Archives of Ireland contains nine sets of records relating to the political career of Brendan Corish.⁶ They cover the period 1948 to 1977 and include papers relating to his time spent as Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Local Government in the first Inter-Party Government, Minister for Social Welfare in the second Inter-Party Government and as Minister for Health and Social Welfare in the National Coalition. The national archives relating to 1977 have recently been opened for public inspection. The National Library of Ireland contains mainly the constituency correspondences of Brendan Corish.⁷ The private papers of Brendan Corish are held in the Irish Labour History Society Museum.⁸ They are divided into five parts and cover the period 1945 to 1981 and also Corish's death in 1990. They relate to his roles as Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Local Government in the first Inter-Party Government, Minister for Social Welfare in the second Inter-Party Government and also as Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Social Welfare in the National Coalition. They also contain annual reports and records of the Irish Labour Party and cover the period when Corish was in opposition. The private papers of William Norton are also held in the I.L.H.S.⁹ All sets of papers are fundamental to this thesis and give a thorough insight into the political career of Brendan Corish.

The Dáil Éireann debates and records relating to Brendan Corish are available online.¹⁰ The newspaper archives of the *Irish Times* and the *Irish Independent* are also accessible online.¹¹ Brian M. Walker has fervently compiled several volumes of the election results in Ireland, which will play an important part in this thesis.¹² A final primary source utilised will be the interviewing of Corish family members and Brendan Corish's successor as Labour representative in the Wexford constituency, Brendan

⁶ Papers of Brendan Corish, 1948-77 held in the National Archives of Ireland, henceforth abbreviated to the N.A.I. (N.A.I., GIS 1/93-1/101).

⁷ Papers of Brendan Corish former government minister and leader of Labour Party, mainly constituency correspondence held in the National Library of Ireland, henceforth abbreviated to N.L.I. (N.L.I., ACC 5208).

⁸ Brendan Corish papers, 1945-90 held in the Irish Labour History Museum, henceforth abbreviated to the I.L.H.S. (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 1-4 and Brendan Corish tapes, March 2006).

⁹ Papers of William Norton held in the I.L.H.S. (I.L.H.S., William Norton MS/10/W.N./box 6 92-103).

¹⁰ Historical Debates Website contains the full text of the Official Report of the Parliamentary Debates of the Houses of the Oireachtas (<http://historical-debates.oireachtas.ie>).

¹¹ Irish Times Archives, digital archives from 1859 onwards and text archives from 1996 onwards published on Ireland.com (<http://www.Ireland.com/search/>). See also Irish Newspapers Archives, *Irish Independent*, 1905-2003 (<http://irishnewspapersarchives.com>).

¹² Walker, Brian M., (ed.), *Parliamentary Election Results in Ireland, 1918-92* (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin and Queen's University Belfast, 1992).

Howlin.¹³ These interviews are an extremely useful aid to the research as they provide deep and personal insights into the life of Brendan Corish.

¹³ Brendan Howlin first won Brendan Corish's seat in the general election on 17 February 1987 and has represented the people of Wexford to the present day. He is also named after Brendan Corish.

CHAPTER I

EARLY INFLUENCES: BRENDAN CORISH AND THE CONTINUATION OF A POLITICAL DYNASTY

‘The cause of labour is the cause of Ireland; the cause of Ireland is the cause of labour. They cannot be dissevered. Ireland seeks freedom. Labour seeks that an Ireland free should be the sole mistress of her own destiny, supreme owner of all material things within and upon her soil.’¹

The winds of political change were blowing yet again within a month of Brendan Corish’s birth on 19 November 1918. In that hugely important general election held on 14 December 1918, Sinn Féin became the dominant nationalist political force in Ireland and replaced the old, demised Home Rule vanguard. A new chapter in the annals of history was written and the foundations of modern Irish society in which Brendan Corish later played a significant role were laid.

Brendan Corish’s chief political influence was his father, Richard Corish. As the pioneering leader of the Wexford Labour movement, Richard Corish’s continuous championing of the rights and betterment of the working class enkindled a similar passion within his young son. Aside from his father, the other main influences on Brendan Corish were James Connolly, Michael Collins, John Howlin and Pope John XXIII.² Corish had access to the teachings of James Connolly in the family home and read eagerly Connolly’s work as a young boy.³ The deep sense of nationalism and working class solidarity exhibited by James Connolly greatly impressed Brendan Corish at a tender age. Furthermore, he felt a strong connection to Connolly because of his father’s close association with him. Indeed, during James Connolly’s visits to Wexford for the period of the 1911 lockout, he resided at the Corish family home in 35 William Street. The life of Michael Collins greatly influenced Brendan Corish in his youth. Collins’s sense of duty and nationalism, his pragmatism, diligence, concern for the poor, determination to improve Irish society, his courage and willingness to make the necessary, albeit unpopular decisions were all traits, which impressed Brendan Corish. Corish’s father had close personal contact with Michael Collins too. Both men were imprisoned at the same time in Richmond Barracks and Stafford Detention Barracks following the Easter Rising of 1916 and they were also members of the second Dáil.

¹ James Connolly, ‘The Irish Flag’ in Ellis, P. Berresford (ed.), *James Connolly: Selected Writings* (Middlesex, 1973), p. 145.

² Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Desmond Corish, Wexford, 17 Sept. 2009. See also interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Brendan Howlin TD, Wexford, 14 Sept. 2009. Desmond Corish, (1925-), is the youngest brother of Brendan Corish. He was elected Mayor of Wexford in 1973.

³ Ibid.

Brendan Corish's father was a pacifist who supported the 1921 treaty and referred to Collins as 'one of the best men Ireland ever produced.'⁴ Brendan Corish inherited his father's non-violent approach and later showed great concern for northern nationalists in his many attempts to make peace during the Northern Ireland Troubles. Most certainly, the courageous pacifism displayed by both Brendan Corish and his father was interconnected with a certain sense of pragmatism too and an adherence to the principles of democracy. Richard Corish was a highly capable and efficient administrator similar to Michael Collins and Brendan Corish inherited this trait too. During the latter's stewardship as Tanáiste from 1973 to 1977 and in his various ministries, Corish carried out each of his tasks with characteristic zeal.

Brendan Corish's close confidante, John Howlin, was another highly influential figure in his political life.⁵ Howlin was greatly respected by Corish and the latter always called on him when he sought 'balanced advice.'⁶ John Howlin's son and political successor to Corish, Brendan Howlin, remembers 'the evenings in our kitchen in William Street when the affairs of the nation were debated. Brendan having the national perspective, my father anchoring his inputs in the common sense of a Wexford viewpoint.'⁷ Not only was John Howlin a fellow member of the St John's Volunteers G.A.A. Club, a close friend as well as mentor to Brendan Corish but he also worked on the latter's first by-election campaign and followed on from that as Corish's Director of Elections.⁸ Both men were often seen working side by side in Corish Memorial Hall on the Main Street in Wexford town on a Saturday night with Corish at his weekly clinic and Howlin collecting dues.⁹

In examining the influences of Brendan Corish's father, it is also possible to see who inspired his son indirectly. Richard Corish's political influences did not stem from either of his parents, Peter and Mary Corish. Instead, the leadership of Michael Davitt, James Larkin, James Connolly and Michael Collins were a source of guidance to

⁴ *The People*, 12 Apr. 1922. On 9 April 1922, Michael Collins as a leading advocate of the treaty spoke to a crowd gathered in St Peter's Square, Wexford. Brendan Corish's father also joined him on stage. While in Wexford, Richard Corish accompanied Collins to eleven o'clock mass in the Franciscan Friary. They also paid a visit to Pierces Foundry together where the iconic photograph of Michael Collins beside a Pierces bicycle was taken.

⁵ Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Brendan Howlin TD, Wexford, 14 Sept. 2009.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Brendan Howlin in Halligan, Brendan (ed.), *The Brendan Corish Seminar Proceedings* (Dublin, 2006), p. 17.

⁸ Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Brendan Howlin TD, Wexford, 14 Sept. 2009.

⁹ Ibid. Corish Memorial Hall was named in honour of Brendan Corish's father, Richard Corish.

Richard Corish and thus to Brendan Corish too.¹⁰ Davitt, a land reformer and Irish nationalist was a significant influence on Corish's father. As a young boy, Richard Corish read widely on the subject of history, most notably the writings of Michael Davitt and he instilled a similar love of Irish history in his son.¹¹ Corish's father identified with the rights of the tenant farmers and the entitlements of workers. Furthermore, he agreed with the belief 'that violence was self-defeating.'¹² During the Wexford lockout of 1911, Brendan Corish's father drew immense strength from Davitt's successful organised protests. They proved highly effective and productive in the long term to the elder Corish. This was one important lesson in Irish history, which Richard Corish passed on to his son. Michael Davitt was also a very strong advocate of non-sectarianism, a belief mirrored by Brendan Corish throughout his life. Brendan Corish learned an extremely valuable lesson in Michael Davitt who symbolised and believed in 'upholding human freedom, educational advancement, prison reform, the rights of women, social commitment and political idealism.'¹³

The Wexford lockout of 1911 was a cataclysmic event in the life of Brendan Corish's father and he often heard stories from that period of his father's life. It was the foundation stone from which many of the decisions and directions Richard Corish chose later in life originated. His large support base and hence partly that of Brendan Corish's following too was derived and secured from that event and they called upon it in the various elections they contested. It undoubtedly propelled the political career of Richard Corish. It also brought him into contact with two very influential men - James Larkin and James Connolly. In Wexford, conditions for workers were dire to say the very least in 1911 and there was somewhat of a foreboding sense that a form of industrial unrest would manifest itself soon in Wexford. Brendan Corish's brother, Des Corish, explained the circumstances when he said: 'those who were engaged in the lockout in 1911 were created....the bubble had to burst. The situation had to bring these people up and my father seemed to have that genius of leadership and organisation and that's how he came up.'¹⁴ Corish's father, compelled by his convictions remained a steadfast figure throughout the duration of the lockout. He was a towering beacon of support for his

¹⁰ Roche, Kieran S., 'Richard Corish (1886-1945): "The political rise of a workers' champion"' (Unpublished M.A thesis, St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, 1996), p. 11.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 6.

¹² *Irish Independent*, 27 May 2006. Mr John Cooney writing on the 100th anniversary of Michael Davitt's death.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Recorded interview on 'County Radio Wexford' by Mr Dominic Kiernan with Mr Desmond Corish, 14 Apr. 1987, courtesy of Mr Desmond Corish.

fellow workers as he encouraged and mustered their loyal efforts. Richard Corish witnessed the advertising of his old job and those of his former fellow workers in the newspaper. Following on from that, he saw those positions filled by imported 'blacklegs' and 'scabs.' In explaining those dreadful circumstances, Richard Corish told his son that those men too were unfortunate by-products of the time. However, faced with a hopeless future, Brendan Corish's father and his fellow trade union leaders felt it was morally and psychologically incumbent on them to sacrifice immediately the security of their jobs and livelihoods in order to save the honour of the Irish working class. History demanded it of them and they accepted.

Larkin also stayed at the Corish family home on his visits to Wexford town during the lockout. Big Jim Larkin's reputation and fame had by 1911 transcended the Irish trade union movement, including Richard Corish. Brendan Corish's father was also a very fine, accomplished orator similar to Larkin. It was through Richard Corish's powerful ability to speak so eloquently in public that Brendan Corish learned from example. Furthermore, Richard Corish received his first major public endorsement on a stage he shared with Jim Larkin. Des Corish recalled the scene, when he said: 'Larkin pointed over to my father, who was about twenty-four, twenty-five and he said "this man, he'll be mayor of this town one day."' ¹⁵ This story involving Larkin and Richard Corish was often narrated to Brendan Corish while he grew up. Naturally, Jim Larkin's appraisal of his father impressed favourably upon Corish's young mind. Richard Corish never forgot Larkin's personal tribute and said: 'I have never denied that I am an apostle of Larkin and as long as God gives me health I will preach Larkinism in the town.' ¹⁶

The lockout dragged on mercilessly for six months and all throughout, Corish's father remained the most prominent and active local figure on the scene. However, just as the development of a lockout in Wexford in 1911 was inevitable, so too was a compromise. A much-anticipated formula was eventually agreed on in February 1912, where workers were allowed to form their own affiliated trade union - the I.F.W.U. - instead of joining the I.T.G.W.U. and both union and non-union men were employed without discrimination. Critically, Richard Corish was not admitted back into the workforce of the Star Iron Works. He proved too great a thorn in the side of his employers. This episode later served as a lesson for a young Brendan Corish on how the

¹⁵ Recorded interview on 'County Radio Wexford' by Mr Dominic Kiernan with Mr Desmond Corish, 14 Apr. 1987, courtesy of Mr Desmond Corish.

¹⁶ *The People*, as cited in Roche, Kieran S., 'Richard Corish (1886-1945): "The political rise of a workers' champion"' (Unpublished M.A thesis, St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, 1996), p. 6.

life of a public figure was negatively impacted on because of his or her actions. Nevertheless, his father's hard toil throughout the lockout did not go unnoticed and in recognition Richard Corish was duly honoured as the first secretary of the I.F.W.U.

Brendan Corish was always very proud of the important role played by his father in establishing a successful trade union within Wexford. The consensus amongst local workers at that time was also very positive towards his father. They believed that a victory was gained over their employers and Richard Corish played a significant part in their triumph. A strike was called over the right to join a union and as consequence, employers were forced to employ union workers, albeit the I.F.W.U. instead of the I.T.G.W.U. As Emmet Larkin wrote of the lockout in his biography on his father, James Larkin: 'in truth it was a significant victory, not so much for what the workers gained, but rather for what the employers were not allowed to do.'¹⁷ Long after the Wexford lockout ended, stories of Richard Corish's participation were recounted to a young enthusiastic Brendan Corish.

Inevitably, from an early age Brendan Corish was aware of the types of problems that arose within trade unions. Corish, as leader of the Irish Labour Party from 1960 onwards, recalled his father's involvement as secretary of the I.F.W.U. and his paternal influence was reflected in his dealings with them. Richard Corish experienced many teething problems in his capacity as secretary of the union. The employers were vehemently against his prominent role within the union and they inserted a clause in the settlement in order to prevent him from taking up his new position.¹⁸ Richard Corish tackled all of these problems head on in a typical manner in keeping with his hard work ethic, which he instilled in his son, Brendan Corish.

1913 marked a highly important year for Brendan Corish's family history, both politically and personally. In September of that year, his parents were married. His mother was Catherine Bergin, daughter of Daniel and Brigid Bergin, from Peter Street in Wexford town. Brendan Corish had five siblings in total - Richard, Molly, Seán, Fintan and Desmond and he was the fourth child born to the family. Also, Corish's father first ran in the municipal elections of 1913 and received the largest support overall with 437 votes.¹⁹ From 1913 onwards, Richard Corish was consecutively re-elected to Wexford Corporation in the municipal elections. Fulfilling Larkin's prophesy,

¹⁷ Larkin, Emmet, *James Larkin: Irish leader, 1876-1947* (London, 1965), p. 93.

¹⁸ Recorded interview on 'County Radio Wexford' by Mr Dominic Kiernan with Mr Desmond Corish, 14 Apr. 1987, courtesy of Mr Desmond Corish.

¹⁹ *The People*, 18 Jan. 1913.

his father reached the pinnacle of his career in local politics when he was elected Mayor of Wexford in 1920 - a position Richard Corish held for the remainder of his life.

On 17 March 1913, St Patrick's Workingmen's Club was officially opened on the quay in Wexford town. The involvement of Corish's father in this club was another source of great pride to his son. Indeed, it was a fundamental 'part of the social history of Wexford,' in which working class men congregated instead of assembling at a public house.²⁰ Within the club, workers were taught 'self respect, industry and sobriety, to study special interests to their class...and to direct them [on] how best to protect and advance the interests of the working classes.'²¹ The strength of the Wexford Labour vote was helped through the education of these workers and thus in the long term, also contributed to Brendan Corish's personal tally.

Brendan Corish grew up with a great sense of nationalism as his father was very sympathetic to the republican cause. Des Corish remembers his brother as strongly republican and anti-British in his twenties.²² Similar to his father, Brendan Corish was a fellow member of the Irish National Foresters, which was originally set up as a friendly society that supported Irish nationalism.²³ His deep sense of patriotism naturally reflected the norm of anyone of a similar background and especially as a proud Wexford man, whose county boldly rose up in revolt against the British in the rebellion of 1798. Naturally, over time he developed a more moderate perspective on nationalism and in the end, Corish completely disagreed with the tactics used by the I.R.A. As a young boy, Corish's father loved 'firing his toy pellet gun towards the kitchen door, using the King George V penny as a target.'²⁴ Undoubtedly, the republican ideals of Richard Corish were further strengthened by his unjust imprisonment after the Easter Rising, his interaction in prison among influential extreme nationalists but most notably by the brutal murder of his revered comrade, James Connolly and the fourteen other executions. Clearly, these factors hardened Richard Corish's determination and resolve for an Irish workers' republic and Brendan Corish was sensitive to this from an early age. The research for this thesis indicates that a young Brendan Corish agreed with Connolly when the latter said: 'the freedom of the Irish people (the nation) can only be achieved through a break with the British Empire (under any name), and that the only

²⁰ Recorded interview on 'County Radio Wexford' by Mr Dominic Kiernan with Mr Desmond Corish, 14 Apr. 1987, courtesy of Mr Desmond Corish.

²¹ *The People*, 19 Mar. 1913.

²² Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Desmond Corish, Wexford, 17 Sept. 2009.

²³ Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Brendan Howlin TD, Wexford, 14 Sept. 2009.

²⁴ Roche, Kieran S., 'Richard Corish (1886-1945): "The political rise of a workers' champion"' (Unpublished M.A thesis, St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, 1996), p. 7.

power capable of achieving and maintaining that freedom is a national movement led by the Irish working class.’²⁵ The research for this thesis also shows that Corish believed that independence from Britain was interwoven with the struggle between the oppressed and oppressor classes and only a socialist revolution would suffice. Unlike James Connolly and Michael Collins, Corish’s father did not believe in the perpetration of physical violence as a method to achieve an Irish socialist republic and hence the reason why he was not a member of the Irish Citizen Army. Of course, throughout his political career, Brendan Corish continually searched for a peaceful solution to the northern violence and his involvement in Sunningdale in December 1973 verified that.

As Brendan Corish grew older, he was very much aware of the heavy price Labour paid for its participation in the rising. Working under the old Fenian adage that England’s difficulty was Ireland’s opportunity, the involvement of James Connolly’s Citizen Army in the 1916 Rising marked ‘the first Irish rebellion in which organised Labour, as such, played a leading role.’²⁶ However, among its list of high-ranking casualties was the eminent James Connolly and sympathisers Pádraig Pearse, Joseph Plunkett and Eamon Ceannt. Connolly’s execution left a major void in the Irish Labour movement as Niamh Puirseil rightly pointed out that ‘Connolly was a Marxist-republican revolutionary and his successors were constitutional social democrats.’²⁷ Furthermore, Arthur Griffith’s resumption of a dominant role within Sinn Féin meant that ‘the place Connolly purchased for the organised Labour movement in the leadership of the independence struggle was being denied; or reneged.’²⁸ Brendan Corish was also conscious of ‘the stripping out of Connolly’s legacy by the different elements who needed to use him in different ways’ in order to further their public appeal.²⁹ As leader of the I.L.P., Corish attempted to reclaim Labour’s lost association with the Easter Rising and the meeting of the first Dáil on their fiftieth anniversaries.

The general election of December 1918 taught Brendan Corish a most important lesson. This contest was a hugely significant event in the history of Irish politics as two thirds of the electorate cast their vote for the very first time because a new British policy gave all men over twenty-one and all women over thirty permission to vote. Nationally, Labour was without a clear political manifesto because of internal squabbling. There

²⁵ Gilmore, George, *Labour and the republican movement* (Dublin, 1966), p. 11.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²⁷ Puirseil, Niamh, *The Irish Labour Party, 1922-73* (Dublin, 2007), p. 8.

²⁸ O’Donnell, Peadar, as cited in Gilmore, George, *Labour and the republican movement* (Dublin, 1966), p. 19.

²⁹ Recorded interview on ‘RTÉ Radio 1’ by Diarmaid Ferriter with Francis Devine and Caitríona Crowe, 11 Feb. 2007.

was further disagreement and much ambiguity surrounding northern trade unionists and the policy of abstention from Westminster. Originally Sinn Féin proposed a coalition in the division of several constituencies between its party and Labour. However, this offer was replaced with an appeal to Labour not to participate in the election so as not to split the nationalist vote, as Éamon de Valera stated ‘Labour must wait.’³⁰ Hence, the pursuit of nationalism took precedence over the implementation of any socialist doctrine and Labour was sidelined to the periphery. Brendan Corish realised his party’s grave mistakes of 1918 and 1921 and as head of that party he ensured Labour’s keen involvement in the general elections held during the period of his leadership. The I.L.P. felt its absence from the first Dáil, the negotiations and subsequent treaty debate most profoundly. Labour missed the opportunity for involvement in the formation of the new state. Its members learned a cruel lesson in politics and were insistent from then on, that they too would play an important role in the development of the country. As Cathal O’Shannon explained, it was only those who were elected to the Dáil who ‘would frame and put into effect a constitution on which the whole future and welfare of the people of Ireland would to a large extent depend. In addition they would have to deal with all those vital matters which affect the workers, such as employment, education, housing and health.’³¹ Given Labour’s erroneous isolation from 1918 to 1922, one might find it a little surprising to understand Brendan Corish’s vehement opposition to the notion of coalition during the 1960s. Surely any form of government partnership would have been the preferred option to the loneliness of opposition? However, as chapter five will illustrate for Brendan Corish and his Labour Party, a change in circumstances occurred and isolationism was appearing indefinite - hence the reason why pragmatism became the prevailing principle.

Irish history also taught Brendan Corish another important lesson in party politics, namely that it was absolutely necessary for any party to maintain unity at all times to continue to progress. Disunity and strife led to nothing but regression and a loss of public support in elections. Brendan Corish’s father personally witnessed the break up of Sinn Féin over the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921. Labour wisely overcame the possibility of an internal split over the controversial treaty issue because its elected representatives were allowed the freedom to follow the wishes of their constituents to support or oppose the agreement. However, they were required to take their seat in the

³⁰ Gilmore, George, *Labour and the republican movement* (Dublin, 1966), p. 19.

³¹ *The People*, 12 Apr. 1922. Mr Cathal O’Shannon addressing a Labour delegation in Wexford on behalf of the Trade Union Council and the I.L.P., Wexford, 9 Apr. 1922, as reported in *The People*.

new assembly irrespective of their opinions of the treaty. Thus, Labour ‘played an integral part in establishing a democracy in Ireland,’ as the I.L.P. provided the main opposition to Cumann na nGaedhail.³² In the early 1940s, it appeared for a short period of time that Labour would emerge and replace Fine Gael as a real alternative or opposition to Fianna Fáil. However, an internal dispute occurred to thwart the party’s success. There was disagreement between two of the party’s founders, James Larkin and William O’Brien. This gradually worsened over time. The I.L.P. was accused of having communists within its ranks and there was also a difference of opinion over the role of British based trade unions within Ireland. In 1944, O’Brien left the party. He took the I.T.G.W.U. from the Irish Trade Union Congress and went on to form the National Labour Party. A rival Congress of Irish Unions was also formed. The damaging consequences of this split impacted greatly upon the 1944 general election result for the Labour movement. Brendan Corish witnessed this through his own father’s election results. A year earlier in 1943, three candidates were chosen to run for the I.L.P. in Wexford. Corish’s father won the first seat and his surplus vote also brought in fellow party member, John O’Leary, for the final seat. Labour’s national vote in 1943 claimed seventeen seats - almost twice its share in the 1938 general election.³³ In 1944 however, Labour’s prospects were not as bright due to the party split. In Wexford, Richard Corish remained loyal to the original I.L.P. but he faced two National Labour candidates vying for the Labour seat. John O’Leary decided to run as a National Labour candidate and Christopher Culleton joined him. Both nominees had the financial backing required to run assertive campaigns. Similar resources were not at Richard Corish’s disposal. On 30 May 1944, John O’Leary for National Labour beat Richard Corish for the third seat, with 1,746 more first preference votes or an extra 4.1 per cent.³⁴ Richard Corish won the fourth seat with 5,118 votes or 11.8 per cent but his result was down 3.4 per cent on the preceding general election.³⁵ The disharmony in Labour resulted in a fifty per cent loss in support nationwide and unmistakably brought the development of the I.L.P. to an abrupt conclusion.³⁶ In 1944, only eight TDs were elected for the I.L.P.³⁷ Labour was forced to wait another four years before its involvement in the first Inter-Party government in 1948. The party also needed a young, enthusiastic and dynamic leader to

³² Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Desmond Corish, Wexford, 1 Mar. 2008.

³³ *Irish Times*, 26 June 1943. The I.L.P. won nine seats in the 1938 general election.

³⁴ Walker, Brian M. (ed.), *Parliamentary Election Results in Ireland, 1918-92* (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin and Queen’s University Belfast, 1992), p. 166.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 161, 166.

³⁶ Puirseil, Niamh, *The Irish Labour Party, 1922-73* (Dublin, 2007), p. 109.

³⁷ *Irish Times*, 2 June 1944.

unify the Labour movement and that came in the form of Brendan Corish in 1960. As Labour leader, Corish's goal was to avoid another split over such contentious issues as the party's nationalism, ideology and coalition debate.³⁸ Brendan Corish learned the value of party loyalty from his father and he later played an important role in reuniting the Labour organisation in 1950.

From first hand experience, Brendan Corish discovered the huge weight politics and public prominence placed on the family unit. In his own rise to power within Labour and the upper echelons of government, the lack of quality time proved to be a burden on the family. As a father, Brendan Corish felt 'remiss' and his wife, Phyllis Corish, found it equally hard 'to understand why he had to do the state some service and so much of it.'³⁹ Two and a half years before Brendan Corish's birth, almost 2,000 prisoners were interned including his father under the Defence of the Realm Act (D.O.R.A.).⁴⁰ Richard Corish's activities during the lockout and in the years that followed made him a marked man in the eyes of the R.I.C. and there were some locals who were afraid to be seen with him. In addition, the Corish family home in William Street was constantly under police surveillance. Furthermore, the English authorities of that time believed that Irish socialism and republicanism were closely aligned.⁴¹ It was for these reasons that the R.I.C. took his father into custody. The story of his arrest was often retold to Brendan Corish and his siblings. As his mother, Catherine Corish, in her ninety-eighth year recalled with remarkable clarity: 'this morning it was pouring rain....and out on the garden path was a stalwart bobby....and I said "what is he arrested for? What has he done?" They wouldn't answer me....There were six police men standing on their guns...."You take your time" I said to Dick. "Fix yourself up. Don't rush now. You've got time enough."⁴²

As explained earlier, Brendan Corish's father was a staunch republican. His mother had very strong nationalist affiliations too. As the cattle train carrying the prisoners travelled through Wexford after the rising, Des Corish recalled: 'there was a [neighbour] Maggie Byrne, [who] lived opposite....who came over and said "Katie,

³⁸ Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Desmond Corish, Wexford, 17 Sept. 2009.

³⁹ Philip Corish, 'Concluding remarks' in Halligan, Brendan (ed.), *The Brendan Corish Seminar Proceedings* (Dublin, 2006), p. 42.

⁴⁰ Lee, J. J., *Ireland 1912-85; Politics and Society* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 37

⁴¹ Roche, Kieran S., 'Richard Corish (1886-1945): "The political rise of a workers' champion"' (Unpublished M.A thesis, St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, 1996), p. 35.

⁴² Recorded interview on 'County Radio Wexford' by Mr Dominic Kiernan with Mrs Catherine Corish, 14 Apr. 1987, courtesy of Mr Desmond Corish. Brendan Corish's sister, Molly Corish, was only three months old when her father was arrested in May 1916.

Katie, come over quick. The train is going down. The prisoners are on it. Dick is on it.”....She ran across and she felt so emotional....“God save Ireland” she said.⁴³

It is evident that Brendan Corish felt the intrusion of politics continuously on his childhood. His father worked tirelessly on behalf of his constituents and ‘never took a holiday in his life.’⁴⁴ Furthermore, it was precisely because of his own high public profile that Richard Corish received a death threat in a black-bordered envelope on 25 March 1920. Inside on a copybook page was written: ‘RICHARD CORISH - BEWARE! IF A POLICEMAN IS SHOT IN WEXFORD YOU WILL BE ASSASSINATED.’⁴⁵ Corish’s father was arrested while sitting as a member of the Sinn Féin Court in the local town hall. It was Richard Corish’s support of the treaty that later attracted the undesired attentions of the local I.R.A. In November 1922, he received yet another death threat, which said: ‘TAKE NOTICE THAT YOU ARE HEREBY WARNED TO LEAVE THE TOWN OF WEXFORD BEFORE 29 NOVEMBER 1922. AFTER ABOVE DATE YOUR LIFE WILL BE IN DANGER....You are respected as a Labour member. Spies will not be tolerated.’⁴⁶ The I.R.A. also attempted to intimidate Brendan Corish during the 1970s because of his involvement in the National Coalition and consequently, security was increased for both he and his family. Similar to his father, Brendan Corish was a highly principled man and his opponents found it an arduous task to deter him from his duty and work.

Brendan Corish loved his hometown of Wexford. In fact, Corish was never happier and more relaxed than when he was driving home across Wexford Bridge after a week in Dáil Éireann.⁴⁷ In Wexford and within the Labour Party, he was known as ‘Big Brendan,’ not purely for his physical stature but for his popularity and influence.⁴⁸ On 12 May 1984, Corish was deservedly conferred with the Freedom of the Borough. Included in this list of honorary people were such distinguished notables as his father, Richard Corish, Charles Stewart Parnell, John Dillion, John Redmond, John F. Kennedy and Éamon de Valera. When he received that honour, Brendan Corish told those

⁴³ Recorded interview on ‘County Radio Wexford’ by Mr Dominic Kiernan with Mr Desmond Corish, 14 Apr. 1987, courtesy of Mr Desmond Corish.

⁴⁴ Corish, Desmond, as cited in Roche, Kieran S., ‘Richard Corish (1886-1945): “The political rise of a workers’ champion”’ (Unpublished M.A thesis, St. Patrick’s College, Maynooth, 1996), p. 1.

⁴⁵ Anonymous death threat to Richard Corish in Roche, Kieran S., ‘Richard Corish (1886-1945): “The political rise of a workers’ champion”’ (Unpublished M.A thesis, St. Patrick’s College, Maynooth, 1996), p. 61. There was no stamp on the letter and so Richard Corish had to pay three pence to receive it.

⁴⁶ Wexford I.R.A. death threat to Richard Corish in Roche, Kieran S., ‘Richard Corish (1886-1945): “The political rise of a workers’ champion”’ (Unpublished M.A thesis, St. Patrick’s College, Maynooth, 1996), p. 62.

⁴⁷ Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Brendan Howlin TD, Wexford, 14 Sept. 2009.

⁴⁸ *The People*, 22 Feb. 1990. See also Horgan, John, *Labour: The Price of Power* (Dublin, 1986), p. 36.

present: 'I have always loved the town, its streets, its character and above all, its people.'⁴⁹ In return, Corish was and still is revered in Wexford town because despite the trappings of power, he remained grounded and unassuming throughout his life. Furthermore, as a TD he often obliged hitchhikers with a lift on his journey to or from the Dáil.⁵⁰ Corish never lost the common touch with his constituents, as was pointed out by Wexford Councillor, Peter Roche: 'not many people in Ireland could walk into their local pub or bookies shop and have the Tánaiste sitting there. This was just an indication of his humility.'⁵¹

Brendan Corish, like his father before him, suffered the negative connotations associated with socialism throughout his political career until it became fashionably more acceptable during the pontificate of Pope John XXIII. In Ireland, the Transport Union never concealed its socialist affinities and instead, continually displayed them quite openly. This brought opposition from churches, most prominently the Catholic Church because of socialism's, albeit communism's godless beliefs. It was the encyclical entitled *Rerum Novarum* issued by Pope Leo XIII on 16 May 1891, which firmly established the church's standing on the issue of labour and capital, until the *Mater et Magistra* encyclical of 1961. Pope Leo XIII gave his support to the formation of trade unions when he wrote: 'the most important of all are workingmen's unions....History attests what excellent results were brought about by the artificers' guilds of olden times....they should become more numerous and more efficient.'⁵² However, the pope also condemned socialism, when he explained that 'socialists, therefore, by endeavouring to transfer the possessions of individuals to the community at large, strike at the interests of every wage-earner, since they would deprive him of the liberty of disposing of his wages and thereby of all hope and possibility of increasing his resources and of bettering his condition in life.'⁵³ Throughout the duration of the lockout, Corish's father was 'accused of inflaming class hatred and of introducing the evils of socialism.'⁵⁴ Brendan Corish also faced similar accusations in his own political

⁴⁹ *The People*, 22 Feb. 1990.

⁵⁰ Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Desmond Corish, Wexford, 1 Mar. 2008.

⁵¹ *The People*, 22 Feb. 1990.

⁵² *Rerum Novarum* (On Capital and Labour) Encyclical of Pope Leo XIII, 15 May 1891, available at: Papal Encyclicals Online, www.papalencyclicals.net (1 Mar. 2008).

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Address to Richard Corish from members of Wexford town and district of the Transport Union, 15 Aug. 1918 (MS in the possession of Mr Desmond Corish and shown to author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair, Wexford, 1 Mar. 2008) It was signed by Patrick Murphy Chairman, Pierce Furlong, vice-chairman, Daniel McDonald, honorary treasurer, John Walsh, T.C., James Larkin, Andrew Tobin, James Whelan, James Roche, Eoin Lacey, James Kehoe, Joseph Nolan, William Staunton, John Kearns and Joseph Kingsbry, honorary secretary.

life. However, in 1960 he used the words ‘Christian socialist’ for the first time to describe the Irish Labour Party.⁵⁵ A further four years later, Corish referred to Labour as ‘a socialist party,’ which reflected the shift in attitudes towards socialism.⁵⁶

Brendan Corish inherited from his father a strong, active Christian faith. In the Labour Party Annual Conference in 1936, Corish’s father proudly declared: ‘I am a Catholic, thank God, and am prepared to take my teaching from the church.’⁵⁷ Brendan Corish attended the local Christian Brother Schools after two years in The Faythe National School. He was also a member of the Catholic Boy Scouts of Ireland in his hometown of Wexford. In 1953, Brendan Corish announced to the Dáil: ‘I am an Irishman second; I am a Catholic first...if the hierarchy give me any direction with regard to Catholic social teaching or Catholic moral teaching, I accept without qualification in all respects the teaching of the hierarchy and the church to which I belong.’⁵⁸ Predictably, this statement was used against Corish later in life. Religion for Brendan Corish was a fundamental belief. Did not the teachings of Catholicism instruct its followers that all other creeds and definitions were secondary?⁵⁹ His statement was not completely surprising from someone of Corish’s background either and also when one considers the context of early 1950s Ireland. After all, his exact wording only became problematic for some with the separation of church and state over time, whereas Brendan Corish firmly believed this declaration was true in 1953. However, in hindsight, it would have been wiser for Brendan Corish had he defined himself as a Christian rather than a Catholic in 1953, so as not to alienate or cause possible offence to the minority Christian groups in Ireland at the time.⁶⁰

Brendan Corish had a passion for the G.A.A. and music. As a young child, he was good at maths in school and always enjoyed participating in group activities.⁶¹ In reference to his youth, he explained: ‘I suppose you could call me a joiner in the sense that I have always joined in the fun and competition since a very early age.’⁶² Corish displayed great ability in both hurling and gaelic football. He played football for the local St John’s Volunteers Club from the age of sixteen and was a member of the

⁵⁵ Gallagher, Michael, *The Irish Labour Party in transition, 1957-82* (Dublin, 1982), p. 55.

⁵⁶ *Irish Times*, 9 June 1964.

⁵⁷ Labour Party Annual Report, 1936, as cited in Devine, Francis, Lane, Fintan and Puirseil, Niamh (eds), *Essays in Irish Labour History: A Festschrift for Elizabeth and John W. Boyle* (Dublin, 2008), p. 193.

⁵⁸ *Dáil Debate*, volume 138, column 839, 29 Apr. 1953.

⁵⁹ Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Desmond Corish, Wexford, 17 Sept. 2009.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.* See also reprint of interview by *The People* reporter Mr Mervyn Moore with Mr Brendan Corish, Jan. 1983 in *The People*, 22 Feb. 1990.

⁶² Reprint of interview by *The People* reporter Mr Mervyn Moore with Mr Brendan Corish, Jan. 1983 in *The People*, 22 Feb. 1990.

county team in all grades. Furthermore, he was part of the five-in-a-row team, which won the senior county championship and Corish also won a Leinster minor medal in 1936.⁶³ He played mostly in the position of right fullback but because of his height, he was often called in at midfield.⁶⁴ Within Corish's club, 'he was looked upon as a "rock" of a footballer, brilliant hands, two fine feet and an ability to set up attacks with sweeping passes out of defence....He was as good a player as any in the game in that particular era.'⁶⁵ It was his skill on the pitch, which first brought Brendan Corish to public attention. It was unfortunate that Corish was forced to end his football career in 1945 when he became a TD. However, he referred to his involvement with the G.A.A. as 'one of the greatest pleasures of my life.'⁶⁶ Corish was also a member of the Wexford Light Opera Society from the 1930s until the demands on him as Minister for Social Welfare in 1954 prevented him from allocating the necessary time and effort to that musical organisation. Nonetheless, he continuously made an effort to attend their annual performances. Corish had a powerful singing voice and included in his repertoire were passages from the musicals of Gilbert and Sullivan, while his favourite tune was 'The West's Awake.'⁶⁷

Brendan Corish was deeply interested in drama. He was involved in the Wexford Little Theatre Group and often received numerous walk-on parts when travelling theatre companies - or 'fit-ups' as they were commonly known at the time - arrived in the town, including one, which belonged to Lord Longford of the Gate Theatre.⁶⁸ Corish's friend, John Walsh, left for London to pursue a career in acting and he was tempted to follow in Walsh's path.⁶⁹ In the end however, Corish decided to vacate that stage for another, or as his brother, Des Corish, aptly explained: 'fate intervened.'⁷⁰ Undoubtedly, Brendan Corish's interest in drama remained an advantage to him as it aided the delivery of inspiring, memorable accomplished performances on the political platform.

Brendan Corish learned a great deal from his father's early involvement in politics. However, it was the final year of Richard Corish's life that had a particular

⁶³ Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Desmond Corish, Wexford, 17 Sept. 2009.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ *St. John's Volunteers 90th Anniversary*, 1983 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 1, miscellaneous items, p. 57). Includes photographs and articles on Brendan Corish.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Brendan Howlin TD, Wexford, 14 Sept. 2009.

⁶⁸ Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Desmond Corish, Wexford, 17 Sept. 2009. See also interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Brendan Howlin TD, Wexford, 14 Sept. 2009.

⁶⁹ Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Desmond Corish, Wexford, 17 Sept. 2009.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

influence on his son. Corish remembered his father's disappointment after the 1944 general election results, which was his final general election contest. His father was never one to lack in spirit, as Brendan Corish recalled his resounding victory in the local election of 1945. Richard Corish received 1,674 votes in that contest, which was more than 4.5 times the quota of 371.⁷¹ Brendan Corish saw his own support fluctuate over the years from his largest per cent share of the vote in the 1961 general election at 28.8 per cent to his lowest result of 10.6 per cent in 1981 and he won the first seat on six occasions but the fourth seat in his last general election.⁷² As his Director of Elections in June 1981, Brendan Howlin recalled that during the count in the Mercy School, St John's Road, Wexford, it looked like Brendan Corish would not hold his seat.⁷³ He left for home, having asked Howlin to give his thank-you farewell speech. After some time, the situation improved and Brendan Howlin ran the short distance to the Corish family home in Belvedere Road. The television was on in the house and Brendan Halligan had forecasted that Corish would lose his seat in Wexford. Corish was informed that he was to be re-elected and both he and Howlin quickly returned to the count. Brendan Howlin remembers clearly the 'moving' radio interview given by Corish at the Mercy School and also how he handled the 'adversities of the night with honour and dignity.'⁷⁴ Howlin believes that it was most likely on that particular night that Brendan Corish 'made up his mind' to retire from politics.⁷⁵ He was a man of 'great clarity' and after the sheer highs and lows experienced at that count, Corish was adamant that he would never 'go through it again.'⁷⁶ The fact that his father did not live long enough to enjoy his own retirement was another contributing factor on Brendan Corish's decision to retire. In fact, Corish learned from his father that there were no assurances in politics, only that the course of a politician's life never ran smoothly.

At the time of his father's death, Brendan Corish was working as a clerical officer in the health section of Wexford County Council from 1939. Prior to the death of Richard Corish, Des Corish remembers his brother as 'very happy at that time.'⁷⁷ He had good friends and family, was busy with acting, involved in the Light Opera Society,

⁷¹ Recorded interview on 'County Radio Wexford' by Mr Dominic Kiernan with Mr Desmond Corish, 14 Apr. 1987, courtesy of Mr Desmond Corish.

⁷² Walker, Brian M. (ed.), *Parliamentary Election Results in Ireland, 1918-92* (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin and Queen's University Belfast, 1992), pp. 204, 244.

⁷³ Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Brendan Howlin TD, Wexford, 14 Sept. 2009. See also Brendan Howlin in Halligan, Brendan (ed.), *The Brendan Corish Seminar Proceedings* (Dublin, 2006), p. 18.

⁷⁴ Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Brendan Howlin TD, Wexford, 14 Sept. 2009.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Desmond Corish, Wexford, 17 Sept. 2009.

the G.A.A. and had no concerns or worries. In fact, on his short journeys from the family home at 1 St Ibar's Villas to work, Brendan Corish was heard 'whistling and singing to himself.'⁷⁸ Before the 1945 by-election, Corish frequently discussed and debated politics with his father. He was on the Labour committee in Wexford and often worked and canvassed in partnership with Richard Corish. Before the summer of 1945, the situation 'never arose' whereby Richard Corish's political successor was discussed by the family as it was expected that he still had quite some time left in politics.⁷⁹

Richard Corish died suddenly on 19 July 1945. He spoke in the Dáil just the week before and was taken to the County Hospital in Wexford only the weekend prior to his death. It was expected that he would make a full recovery but his condition deteriorated and he did not survive surgery. News of Richard Corish's unexpected death was received with deep shock and great sadness not only by his immediate family, friends, relations and the people of Wexford but also by a wider circle of Dáil colleagues, supporters and numerous admirers on a national level. There were many deserving tributes paid to him, which transcended the various party boundaries and social strata. They were a mark of the high esteem Richard Corish was held by so many people and his son was very aware and appreciative of those worthy sentiments. In expressing his condolences, the leader of Fine Gael, Richard Mulcahy, said:

...he [Richard Corish] maintained the affection not only of everybody who met him here in the parliamentary life of the country but of those whom he served so faithfully in local affairs....marks him as a man of tremendous distinction in the affectionate character of his nature and in his devotion to his public duty.⁸⁰

In Richard Corish's death, Brendan Corish not only lost a devoted and loving father but also a most inspirational mentor. Brendan Corish's father did not reach his sixties but yet in his relatively short lifetime, he was a man of many accomplishments. His father was the original leading figure in the Wexford Labour movement. He was the first Labour Mayor of Wexford from 1920 and was an elected TD for his county in 1921 until his untimely death. In the ten elections his father took part in as a Labour candidate from 1922 up until 1944, he won the first seat on five occasions, which one can agree is no easy task.⁸¹ Richard Corish held prominent positions on many local and national boards and organisations. These included the County Wexford Health Board,

⁷⁸ Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Desmond Corish, Wexford, 17 Sept. 2009.

⁷⁹ Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Brendan Howlin TD, Wexford, 14 Sept. 2009. See also interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Desmond Corish, Wexford, 17 Sept. 2009.

⁸⁰ *The People*, 28 July 1945.

⁸¹ Walker, Brian M. (ed.), *Parliamentary Election Results in Ireland, 1918-92* (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin and Queen's University Belfast, 1992), pp. 108, 115, 124, 143, 161.

the Governing Body of University College Dublin, the Greater Dublin Commission, Poor Law Commission and as High Chief Ranger of the National Foresters to name but a few. He was also a major player in the successful establishment of a trade union in Wexford town. The nature of politics in Ireland changed considerably over the period in which Richard Corish was actively involved. From the birth of the state up until a few years short of the Republic of Ireland Act in 1948, Brendan Corish's father was a steadfast figure in an era characterised by unprecedented change. Richard Corish was a republican, pacifist, socialist and democrat who demonstrated to his son that it was possible for these different strands to cohabit in tandem. For those fortunate to have met or known Richard Corish, he was 'living proof of what one resolute mind can accomplish in the face of enormous difficulties.'⁸²

Following the funeral of Richard Corish, a meeting was held later that day by the Labour Party in the Talbot Hotel, Wexford, where the succession issue was discussed. The Labour Party leader, William Norton, attended it but naturally since the Corish family was in mourning, they were not present in the hotel. At that very meeting, it was declared by John Howlin that Brendan Corish was chosen to succeed his father.⁸³ At any rate, he was the obvious choice from the very beginning.⁸⁴ Corish was intelligent, charismatic, had great speaking ability, was sociable and in the family, he stood out as the most likely successor. Brendan Corish had a challenging task ahead of him in emulating his father's work. As one reporter with *The People* newspaper in 1945 wrote that the 'death [of Richard Corish] means a great loss to the Irish Labour Party and Labour in Wexford will find it very difficult to select a representative to fill his place in the affections of the community, to represent them with the same outstanding ability and energy.'⁸⁵ No doubt this matter weighed heavily upon Brendan Corish's mind and was a contributing factor in his decision to take part in the Wexford by-election of December 1945.

On 4 December 1945, five by-elections were held in Clare, Dublin North-West, Wexford, Kerry South and Mayo South. Wexford was a five-seat constituency in the general election of 1944. In that contest, Fianna Fáil won two seats, Fine Gael won one and the remaining seats were divided between the Irish Labour Party and National

⁸² Address to Richard Corish from members of Wexford town and district of the Transport Union, 15 Aug. 1918 (MS in the possession of Mr Desmond Corish and shown to author Sinead Ní Choncubhair, Wexford, 1 Mar. 2008).

⁸³ Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Desmond Corish, Wexford, 17 Sept. 2009.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *The People*, 21 Jul. 1945.

Labour.⁸⁶ The close proximity of the general elections of 1943 and 1944 meant that I.L.P. funds were scarce for the by-elections of 1945. In Wexford, the I.L.P. was not expected to reclaim Richard Corish's seat and instead, it was predicted that Fianna Fáil would win. The national organiser of the I.L.P., Archie Heron, was sent to Wexford as Corish's Director of Elections and he put a tremendous effort into the campaign. Brendan Corish's election agent was his father's cousin, Nick Corish. Remarkably, Nick Corish mortgaged his own home in order to help fund Brendan Corish's campaign.⁸⁷ His wager was an excellent investment and paid off splendidly as Brendan Corish was returned continually to Dáil Éireann up until his retirement in 1982. Wexford was alive with political activity a month before the by-election was due to take place. Fine Gael decided only to contest the by-election in Clare and so the party was absent from campaigning in Wexford. All of Fianna Fáil's elected deputies visited the county at some stage to lend their support to their party's candidate, Robert Moran. Labour also ran an assertive campaign in Wexford. For instance, three I.L.P. TDs visited the constituency in a one-week period, including Big Jim Larkin.⁸⁸ Brendan Corish was only twenty-seven years of age at this point in time but he was easily able to hold an audience. Standing tall and handsome at six foot two with dark black curly hair, Corish's striking presence dominated every podium and attracted the interest of many an onlooker and eventual supporter in the by-election.⁸⁹ Brendan Corish's only sister, Molly Hickey, also spoke at one of his rallies. She was an actress and both were very close-knit. The public approval of her brother was certainly one important influence on Wexford's female voters, as Molly Hickey's 'striking voice....captivated partisans during the election campaign.'⁹⁰ Early on in the campaign, Brendan Corish appealed to a crowd gathered in the village of Camolin 'to elect someone who would give people food, shelter and clothing in return for honest work and not - his first jibe at de Valera - "paper constitutions and dictionary republics."⁹¹

Labour held its final rally in a packed St Peter's Square on 3 December 1945, the location of many historic and memorable assemblies in the past involving Corish's father. Less than 500 metres away, two Fianna Fáil TDs spoke at a public meeting in the

⁸⁶ Walker, Brian M. (ed.), *Parliamentary Election Results in Ireland, 1918-92* (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin and Queen's University Belfast, 1992), p. 166.

⁸⁷ Tom Mooney, 'Wexford voters decide' in *The Echo*, 2002. Tom Mooney is Group Editor of *The Echo* newspaper. Nick Corish was elected Mayor of Wexford in 1955.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ *The People*, 8 Dec. 1945.

⁹¹ Tom Mooney, 'Wexford voters decide' in *The Echo*, 2002.

Bull Ring. Both sets of supporters clashed. There were no reports of injuries but the tension was palpable in the town.⁹² However, Brendan Corish was at this stage suffering from an abscess on his tonsils. His vigorous campaigning during the harsh winter months took its toll on him. Furthermore, Corish was forced to cycle to most of the rallies as there was still a shortage of petrol in the country, despite the ending of World War Two in the previous autumn. Unable to swallow and nursing a high temperature, he was confined to the bed for the count. Of the five by-elections held on 4 December 1945, Fianna Fáil won three in Clare, Dublin North-West and Kerry South and the victory of Major Vivion de Valera ensured the survival of another political family's dynasty. Bernard Commons of Clann na Talmhan won a twelfth seat for the party in Mayo South. In the only by-election contested by Fine Gael in 1945, the party performed very badly in Clare. Fianna Fáil's Patrick Shanahan received more than 2.5 times the number of votes given to Fine Gael's Edward Monahan.⁹³ Labour's John Breen in Dublin North-West received 6,397 first preference votes and his share of 32.1 per cent was not enough to secure a seat.⁹⁴ In Wexford, the count commenced the following morning at nine o'clock in the Church Institute, Enniscorthy and news of the result was awaited with eager anticipation. Shortly before six o'clock, Brendan Corish was elected on the first count with 16,263 votes or 52.2 per cent of the entire valid poll.⁹⁵ Fianna Fáil's Robert Moran came in second place with 37.9 per cent of votes, which was 14.2 per cent less than Corish.⁹⁶ The other candidates, Patrick Kinsella of Clann na Talmhan who was participating in his first ever contest and the Independent, Robert Joseph Murphy, received 9.8 per cent and 4.0 per cent of votes respectively.⁹⁷ The by-election results in Mayo South and Wexford indicated a sizeable level of discontent amongst voters in the Fianna Fáil government. Unfortunately for Brendan Corish, he was also unable to attend the count due to poor health. Corish's Director of Elections, Archie Heron, spoke on his behalf. He said:

Wexford had given the lead to Ireland in the matter of preparing the ground for a future government concerned with the equitable distribution of the wealth of this country....The time was not far distant....when Ireland will give its attention to the things that matter in the daily lives of the people....a forward movement

⁹² Tom Mooney, 'Wexford voters decide' in *The Echo*, 2002.

⁹³ Walker, Brian M. (ed.), *Parliamentary Election Results in Ireland, 1918-92* (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin and Queen's University Belfast, 1992), p. 167.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *The People*, 8 Dec. 1945.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

towards the complete political independence of Ireland and every man, woman and child in Ireland.⁹⁸

The Labour leader, William Norton, who delivered the oration at Richard Corish's graveside, congratulated Brendan Corish on his win. Norton said that Corish's victory was a 'great personal triumph and a magnificent tribute to your late father's work.'⁹⁹ The news of the by-election result was swiftly conveyed around Wexford town. There was great cheering from a large crowd, which gathered outside the office of *The People* newspaper and soon signs of 'V.B.C.' (Victory Brendan Corish) and 'V.L.' (Victory Labour) appeared on the walls.¹⁰⁰ Later that evening, a crowd estimated at nearly 7,000 congregated in The Faythe.¹⁰¹ Accompanied by both the Loch Garman Brass Band and the St Patrick's Fife and Drum Band, Corish's supporters marched down along the main street where the majority of followers continued towards the bridge. There they met Nick Corish, Molly Hickey, Archie Heron and Labour Mayor of Wexford, James Sinnott, travelling back from Enniscorthy.¹⁰² The crowd then made its way to the home of Brendan Corish at 1 St Ibar's Villas. The family lived at 35 William Street until 1923. Molly Hickey appeared at a window on the first floor and told those gathered 'that there was no necessity for her to tell them how proud, how terribly proud they all were and she knew how proud the people felt.'¹⁰³ A speech from Heron followed and he concluded by introducing Wexford's newest deputy to the crowd. The sight of Brendan Corish through the window wrapped up and protected from the cold weather produced another outpouring of delight from the crowd of supporters, which at that stage stretched as far back as the top of Hill Street.¹⁰⁴ Brendan Corish was unable to talk for long but told of hearing his 'late father often say how proud he was of Wexford and how proud he was of its people. Thanks to the triumph in Wexford town that they had at least held Wexford for Labour.'¹⁰⁵ Nick Corish also spoke and his heartfelt appreciation was expressed when he said: 'thanks Wexford, thanks for the magnificent response you gave to the son of Dick Corish. Thanks to all who voted for him.'¹⁰⁶ Brendan Corish received numerous telegrams congratulating him on his great achievement. They included the following message from Labour Cork West TD, Tim

⁹⁸ *The People*, 8 Dec. 1945.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

Murphy, which said: ‘magnificent Wexford. You sent Johnny marching home. Sixteen thousand congratulations.’¹⁰⁷

As heir to his father, the mantle of responsibility was great for Brendan Corish. However, it does not appear that Corish ever laboured under his father’s image. It is probable that he felt a greater ‘sense of responsibility to live up to’ his father rather than actually dwelling in the shadow of Richard Corish’s political life.¹⁰⁸ The political contribution by both men was immense, although it was in this particular area where Brendan Corish eventually outshone his father as he became parliamentary secretary, minister on two occasions, leader of the Labour Party and Tánaiste. In contrast, the opportunity to become a minister was never presented to Richard Corish, although he was an able shadow spokesman for local government. Their track records in election contests were equally impressive and as public figures, both men enjoyed great popularity in their hometown. Their shared concern for the poor and underprivileged sections of Irish society was irrefutable, as was their commitment to the Labour movement. Naturally, there were those who originally thought that Brendan Corish ‘would not be as good as his father.’¹⁰⁹ He heard such comments early in his career but ‘he took it all in his stride.’¹¹⁰ In studying the political career of Brendan Corish, it is to be expected that his achievements and contributions be compared with those of his father. However, no one in 1945 could ever have imagined what lay in store for Brendan Corish, not even Richard Corish, as one can only describe the high positions he reached during his career as exceptional.

Brendan Corish explained that his great personal triumph of 1945 was due to his father’s distinguished career.¹¹¹ However, Corish continually paid tribute to his Director of Elections, Archie Heron, as another factor credited with his success in that by-election.¹¹² He later confessed that those ‘were scenes of joy which I will never forget and nothing that has happened since could ever take its place in my memory.’¹¹³ On 6 December 1945, Brendan Corish – on temporary unpaid leave from Wexford County Council - entered Dáil Éireann as Labour TD for Wexford. Of course, this was not his first visit to the Irish parliament. Richard Corish brought each of his children up to see

¹⁰⁷ *The People*, 8 Dec. 1945.

¹⁰⁸ Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Brendan Howlin TD, Wexford, 14 Sept. 2009. See also interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Desmond Corish, Wexford, 17 Sept. 2009.

¹⁰⁹ Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Desmond Corish, Wexford, 17 Sept. 2009.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ Nicky Furlong, ‘The leader next door’ in *The People*, 15 Dec. 1945.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ Tom Mooney, ‘Wexford voters decide’ in *The Echo*, 2002.

him speak there during the 1930s.¹¹⁴ Brendan Corish looked extremely dapper for the occasion. Professor John Horgan of Dublin City University depicted Corish's entrance to the Dáil, when he wrote:

[It] had a touch of the Keir Hardie about it. He was dressed in a dark navy suit, and wore a brown muffler knotted around his throat. The proletarian overtones of this mode of dress were, it turned out, accidental....In a house in which sartorial standards were more conventional than they are today, the muffler was the only answer to his dilemma.¹¹⁵

An hour after the proceedings in the chamber began; Corish was forced to depart from Leinster House to have an abscess removed.¹¹⁶ At the time, there were only seven Parliamentary Labour Party TDs in Dáil Éireann alongside Brendan Corish. The left-right divide within the party was characterised by James Larkin junior and William Norton respectively. The urban-rural divide was also represented. Six of the eight I.L.P. TDs were from rural constituencies and Martin O'Sullivan and James Larkin junior were the only two public representatives elected for the party from Dublin. The strength of the I.L.P. was mostly confined to Leinster at that point in time and there were only three Munster I.L.P. TDs present in Dáil Éireann. In 1945, the political correspondent of the *Irish Times* credited Corish's entry to the Dáil solely with 'the fact that he is the son of the late Alderman Corish, who had held the seat for the entire period of the state's existence.'¹¹⁷ Over the next thirty-seven years, Brendan Corish proved to those early critics and sceptics that it was not only because of his father's illustrious track record that he received a mandate from the Wexford people. As one of Wexford's most capable TDs, Corish proved that he was rightfully there because of his own merit and reputation, from which he carved out his own political career separate from that of his father. A new era in Labour politics in Wexford commenced but at that particular moment in time it was sufficient to observe: 'Wexford true to Labour and to Corish.'¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴ Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Desmond Corish, Wexford, 1 Mar. 2008.

¹¹⁵ Horgan, John, *Labour: The Price of Power* (Dublin, 1986), p. 32. John Horgan was a former Labour TD and senator. Keir Hardie, (1856-1915), was a Scottish Labour politician.

¹¹⁶ *The People*, 8 Dec. 1945.

¹¹⁷ *Irish Times*, as reported in *The People*, 8 Dec. 1945.

¹¹⁸ James Larkin junior to Brendan Corish, as reported in *The People*, 8 Dec. 1945.

CHAPTER II

BRENDAN CORISH AND THE FIRST INTER-PARTY GOVERNMENT, 1948-51

‘Did it necessarily mean to say that Fianna Fáil must always govern? Hitler thought he was destined to lead Germany; Stalin imagined he was destined to govern the destinies of Russia. Did Mr de Valera think that he had been chosen as the one on whom this country must always depend?’¹

On 12 January 1948, the twelfth Dáil was dissolved by President Seán T. O’Kelly and so ended Brendan Corish’s first term as deputy for Wexford. He had represented the county for just over two years and during that time ‘endeavoured to serve all sections of the community with honesty and justice.’² Corish spent these ‘early years learning the business of politics and making his way within the Parliamentary Labour Party.’³ In his first term, Corish rose to great prominence within the ranks of the party when he was promoted to Vice-Chairman of the I.L.P. in 1946 – a position he retained until 1949 – and also to Chief Whip of the Parliamentary Labour Party in 1947 - a title he held until 1957. Fianna Fáil had governed for sixteen continuous years and with political dominance, complacency was bound to creep in. Furthermore, World War Two, or the Emergency in Ireland, ended during the reign of the last government and thus the real issues of concern centred on domestic matters such as health, housing, unemployment and emigration. Partition was still debated and the threat posed by communism to the Irish people was argued yet again. However, change was imminent.

In advance of polling day, Brendan Corish canvassed tirelessly throughout Wexford. For example, his campaign itinerary for 11 January 1948, was as follows: ‘Adamstown 8.30 a.m., Newbawn 11 a.m., Campile 3 p.m., Duncannon 7 p.m., Fethard 9 p.m.’⁴ Corish was determined to preserve the I.L.P. seat in Wexford, the seat that his father ardently held for so long. In addition, he had to demonstrate that his emphatic victory in the 1945 by-election was no single occurrence. For Brendan Corish, there was a lot more at risk than merely ousting de Valera. Indeed, Corish personally ‘welcomed the general election for the opportunity it presented to the people, not alone to build a strong party capable of governing but an opportunity to express their opinion of the

¹ *The People*, 31 Jan. 1948. Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking in Killinick, County Wexford, as reported in *The People*.

² *Ibid.*, 10 Jan. 1948. Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking in Gorey, County Wexford, as reported in *The People*.

³ Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Brendan Howlin TD, Wexford, 14 Sept. 2009.

⁴ Brendan Corish personal diary 1948, 11 Jan. 1948 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 1, Brendan Corish personal diaries 1940s-1980s).

present government.⁵ Those who listened to Corish's speeches during the campaign were not under any illusion as to the young deputy's assessment of the last government. He held Fianna Fáil in ill repute and its policies in high disregard. He was strongly opposed to the recent supplementary budget where taxes on cigarettes, beer and cinema tickets increased and also because various subsidies on foodstuffs were taken away. Thus, it was apparent to Corish that 'what they [the government] gave to the worker, they took back in substantially greater measure.'⁶ He referred to the fact that the Irish cost of living increased by eighty-one per cent since 1938, while wages on average grew by only sixty per cent.⁷ Two years earlier, the standstill order on wages was revoked but workers were not compensated appropriately in the interim. Thus, a significant gulf existed between earnings and cost and hence real purchasing power by consumers diminished substantially. Furthermore, Irish farmers suffered badly from the Economic War of 1932 to 1938 and Corish rightly criticised the government's woeful neglect of this industry, which at the time, constituted a vital sector of the Irish economy. In order to boost the farming sector, Corish advocated long-term investment for farmers with credit approval and he also supported seasonal employment during the bleak winter months for those engaged in the industry. He believed that alternative employment could be made available in areas such as drainage, reforestation and also in the development of Ireland's natural resources.⁸ Corish felt these measures would ensure the survival and prosperity of all involved in the agricultural sector. He said that 'the land was the property of the farmer but it was the bounden duty of the government to see that such land was made as productive as possible....In Ireland they were rich in the wealth of their manpower and in having twelve million arable acres, surely they could therefore afford to keep less than three million people in comfort.'⁹

The housing situation had steadily deteriorated in Brendan Corish's hometown and across the country. He quite rightly criticised the enactment of the government's housing plan, which was promised with the ending of the war but never fulfilled. Corish acknowledged the impediments that existed during the war but incredibly, only sixteen

⁵ *The People*, 10 Jan. 1948. Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking in Gorey, County Wexford, as reported in *The People*.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 17 Jan. 1948. Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking in the Bull Ring, Wexford, as reported in *The People*.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 31 Jan. 1948. Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking in Carrig-on-Bannow, County Wexford, as reported in *The People*.

⁹ *Ibid.*

new houses were built in Wexford town in the interim, while there was a need for 800.¹⁰ With housing conditions so appalling throughout the country, there was little wonder why the nation's standard of health was so low and Corish recognised this fact clearly.

The incompetence and lack of vision within the government also culminated in the emigration of 267,000 people to Britain from 1940 to 1947.¹¹ There was in actual fact a shortage of workers in Britain at the time, which was fundamental to the British war effort and this attracted many people to cross the Irish Sea in search of work. However, the lack of progress and drive by the cabinet was certainly another factor, which helped resolve any insecurities those Irish emigrants had in leaving the country. Brendan Corish blamed de Valera's party as a major contributor to the serious problem of Irish emigration. His criticism was justified as Fianna Fáil's term in government lasted sixteen years. He correctly identified that the 'population would not flee....to England if they could be certain that a comfortable living could be obtained' at home in Ireland.¹² Corish's solution was a Labour government, or a coalition involving Labour, which would aggressively confront this worsening dilemma.

In retaliation, Fianna Fáil tried to persuade the electorate that it was their party alone, which could bring about a thirty-two county republic. They also attempted to undermine the effective functioning of coalition governments, which at the time was an alien model to the Irish people. De Valera's party also spread fears of a communist takeover in the event of the I.L.P. being elected to government. The National Labour Party also used the red scare tactic towards their Labour counterparts. A photograph of Brendan Corish was published in an issue of the *Irish Democrat*, which at that time was perceived as a communist paper. Thus, Corish was indirectly accused of being a communist. The evidence, to say the very least, was extremely slight against him and as he quite rightly pointed out: 'if his photograph appeared in the *Irish Press*, would they say he was Fianna Fáil?'¹³ As a devout Catholic, Brendan Corish emphatically denied any truth in this claim. He said that he 'did not propose to go from meeting to meeting during the elections protesting that he was a Catholic. He expected that people who

¹⁰ *The People*, 17 Jan. 1948. Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking in the Bull Ring, Wexford, as reported in *The People*.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 31 Jan. 1948. Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking at Carrig-on-Bannow, County Wexford, as reported in *The People*.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 17 Jan. 1948. Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking in the Bull Ring, Wexford, as reported in *The People*.

were Catholics, the same as himself, would respect his religion.’¹⁴ Furthermore, Corish added ‘if communism raised its head in this country it was the workers who would fight it and the Irish Labour Party to which he belonged, with its present leaders, would be the greatest bulwark against communism or fascism this country would have.’¹⁵ It was a ludicrous accusation especially when one remembers the strong Catholic faith Corish possessed. However, it stood as a good example of how low some of Labour’s opponents were willing to stoop in order to make political advantage.

As the date of the general election loomed ever closer, Corish ‘believed that the people would send back a strong Irish Labour Party to the Dáil...and that the election would result in a vote of no confidence in Fianna Fáil...[which] had become lazy and inefficient [and] deserved to be put out of office.’¹⁶ In summarising his own past performance over his short term as a new Dáil deputy, Corish said that ‘he came before the people to face his responsibilities and criticisms of his actions, without regard to low down accusations against his personal character or the reputation of his party.’¹⁷ Indeed, the results of the general election revealed a growing discontent among voters in the Fianna Fáil government and an increase in support for Corish’s party.

The general election to the thirteenth Dáil was held on 4 February 1948. Clann na Poblachta was formed in 1946 and this party had the most candidates seeking election after Fianna Fáil. In Wexford, the constituency remained at five-seats, although the electorate decreased by 5,345.¹⁸ There were fourteen candidates vying for election in 1948, an increase of five from the 1944 figure. Brendan Corish’s running mate was Martin Dunbar and John O’Leary was the National Labour Party’s sole candidate again. They were up against three contenders from Clann na Poblachta, three from Fianna Fáil, three from Fine Gael and finally two Independents. In his first general election contest, Brendan Corish won the first seat when he was elected on the fourth count. He received a highly commendable first preference vote of 6,590, or a 15.6 per cent share of the vote.¹⁹ Fianna Fáil’s Denis Allen received 282 more first preference votes than Corish but took the third seat, while his colleague, James Ryan, won a second seat for de

¹⁴ *The People*, 17 Jan. 1948. Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking in the Bull Ring, Wexford, as reported in *The People*.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Walker, Brian M. (ed.), *Parliamentary Election Results in Ireland, 1918-92* (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin and Queen’s University Belfast, 1992), p. 175.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Valera's party.²⁰ Fine Gael's Sir John Esmonde won the second seat and John O'Leary of National Labour came fifth. Thus, the final state of the parties in Wexford was unchanged from the previous general election of May 1944. Naturally, Brendan Corish was thrilled with his victory and by the fact that his father's honour was upheld. He said that Labour was 'more than satisfied with the result of the elections....our [party] vote has increased by forty per cent. We might have increased it a little more but for the fact that a lot of workers have emigrated to Great Britain.'²¹

Nationally, the I.L.P. won six extra seats, which brought its total up to fourteen.²² The first preference vote of Norton's party remained relatively unchanged but it picked up more transfers in 1948 in contrast with four years earlier. The National Labour Party returned to the Dáil with four seats.²³ Fianna Fáil lost ten seats, which left the party with sixty-six TDs in the new Dáil.²⁴ Fine Gael's share of the votes decreased marginally and it was left with a total of twenty-nine.²⁵ Clann na Poblachta was very disappointed by its performance. In the party's first general election contest, it won ten seats.²⁶ Clann na Talmhan's support fell and it lost four seats, which left the party with a total of seven TDs.²⁷ Independents were the fifth largest body within the new Dáil, with eight seats.²⁸ Fianna Fáil had the largest number of representatives but they were still short of an overall majority. The general election result was inconclusive and thus, it was obvious that a coalition of parties or a government dependent on outside support was required.

The general election in the Carlow-Kilkenny constituency was delayed until 10 February 1948, due to the unexpected death of a candidate. After Brendan Corish's victory in Wexford, he campaigned for the I.L.P. throughout Castlecomer, Callan, Borris, Graigenamagh, Muinibeag and Carlow from 7 February to 9 February 1948. The eventual result in this contest gave two extra sets to Fianna Fáil, two to Fine Gael and one to National Labour.²⁹ It was also during the latter stages of this campaign that the

²⁰ Walker, Brian M. (ed.), *Parliamentary Election Results in Ireland, 1918-92* (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin and Queen's University Belfast, 1992), p. 175.

²¹ *The People*, 14 Feb. 1948. Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking at the election count, 5 Feb. 1948, as reported in *The People*.

²² *Irish Times*, 9 Feb. 1948.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Walker, Brian M. (ed.), *Parliamentary Election Results in Ireland, 1918-92* (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin and Queen's University Belfast, 1992), p. 168.

idea of a coalition among the opposition parties was conjured. Richard Mulcahy, as leader of Fine Gael, was the first to initiate the process. He was strongly opposed to the prospect of de Valera as Taoiseach for a seventh consecutive term. Of course, around the country throughout the election campaign, all the opposition parties directed their criticisms towards the government instead of each other. However, there were exceptions to this rule as both Labour groups had reproached the other and Fianna Fáil in their respective campaigns. On 13 February 1948, a formal meeting attended by all the opposition parties - except for the National Labour Party - took place. Both the I.L.P. and Clann na Poblachta were opposed to the idea of Mulcahy as Taoiseach because of his earlier involvement in the Irish Civil War. In order to avoid hostilities and a possible breakdown in communication, John A. Costello, a past Attorney General, reluctantly accepted the position as coalition leader. The following morning, Brendan Corish attended a joint meeting between the Administrative Council and the Parliamentary Labour Party, at which it was formally agreed that they would enter a coalition. This coalition consisted of Fine Gael, Irish Labour Party, Clann na Poblachta, Clann na Talmhan and six Independents. They were still short and thus needed the support of National Labour to form a majority. Before the election, the Congress of Irish Unions advocated National Labour TDs to support Fianna Fáil and in return de Valera's party believed that they had secured their backing. However, after a counter approach was made to them, the National Labour Party also favoured joining the new coalition. They attended a meeting with the Congress of Irish Unions on 17 February 1948 and again were instructed to vote in favour of de Valera as Taoiseach because of the latter's support for an Irish based trade union league. The National Labour TDs refused and declared they would vote for the new coalition government. Niamh Puirseil aptly explained the situation when she wrote: 'having betrayed their party in 1944, they [National Labour] now betrayed their union and happily, for the chance of a seat at cabinet.'³⁰

On 18 February 1948, John A. Costello replaced Éamon de Valera as Taoiseach to the thirteenth Dáil and Brendan Corish's first experience in government commenced. To say that Labour and their other coalition partners had similar original philosophies is completely untrue as the complete left-right divide was represented. On 17 February 1948, the participants of the first Inter-Party Government drafted a ten-point programme. Most notably for Brendan Corish and the I.L.P., guarantees were given to

³⁰ Puirseil, Niamh, *The Irish Labour Party, 1922-73* (Dublin, 2007), p. 131.

increase both industrial production and the number of houses, the cost of living was to be reduced, key reforms were to be introduced in taxation and social welfare, including the removal of taxes placed on a number of goods and services.

The critics of the first Inter-Party Government believed that it would not last twelve months but it was the sheer dislike of de Valera, which initially brought these parties together and it was also that sentiment which united them for the most part. The historian, Joe Lee, explained this reasoning when he wrote: ‘de Valera had not allowed adequately for the resentment he inspired outside Fianna Fáil. A common enemy covers a multitude of differences.’³¹ Corish was excited about Labour’s involvement in government, albeit a coalition government. Coalition was however better than opposition to the young deputy. His father remained on the opposition benches for his entire political life and no doubt, this fact played on Brendan Corish’s young mind. It appears that Fine Gael’s Patrick McGilligan first considered Corish’s name for a junior cabinet posting during the early negotiation stages of the coalition.³² On 24 February 1948, his appointment was officially confirmed. Brendan Corish was not yet in his thirtieth year when he became Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Local Government. His father was shadow spokesman for this department, so naturally Corish had some prior exposure to this particular field. The role of parliamentary secretary in the first Inter-Party Government was similar to the present day Ministers of State, although these positions were fewer in number as not every minister received a secretary.³³ As parliamentary secretary, Corish was expected to pick up the pieces if the ‘minister was unavailable to answer questions’ in the Dáil, ‘meet deputations’ or ‘open conferences.’³⁴ In reality, this position bestowed Brendan Corish with relatively little power. It did not permit him to attend cabinet meetings unless especially requested to do so, when for example there was a matter concerning his department. However, this position gave him a closer insight into the workings of a department ministry and it was also an acknowledgement from his peers of the capabilities and enthusiasm they knew he possessed. Corish was honoured by his appointment, particularly so soon after entering the Dáil and also as the sole parliamentary secretary of the I.L.P. Indeed, Corish had worked effectively as Vice-Chairman of the Labour Party and also as Chief-Whip of the Parliamentary Labour Party, which no doubt attracted a wide interest from

³¹ Lee, J.J., *Ireland 1912-85; Politics and Society* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 299.

³² McCullagh, David, *A Makeshift Majority: The First Inter-Party Government, 1948-51* (Dublin, 1998), p. 35.

³³ Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Brendan Howlin TD, Wexford, 14 Sept. 2009.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

outside his own party. The other two secretary postings went to Clann na Talmhan's Michael Donnellan to the Minister for Finance and lastly to Corish's future coalition partner, Liam Cosgrave of Fine Gael, who was appointed to both the Taoiseach and Minister of Industry and Commerce.

The Minister for Local Government in the first Inter-Party Government was the Cork West I.L.P. TD, Tim Murphy and both he and Corish worked extremely well together in the Custom House. In 1946, Fianna Fáil created two new departments - social welfare and health - with the latter department formerly associated within the Department of Local Government and Health. Clearly, this was an admission from the previous Fianna Fáil led administration that there were serious problems within these departments, which needed swift addressing. William Norton became the Minister for Social Welfare and he was also appointed Tánaiste. As David McCullagh correctly pointed out: 'Labour was obviously most interested in social welfare and local government, where the new social security scheme and the housing drive were major commitments.'³⁵ The Parliamentary Labour Party assigned both Labour men with their respective ministries but ultimately it was the Minister for Finance, Patrick McGilligan of Fine Gael, who held a tight grasp of the country's purse strings and hence, was able to limit Labour's demands. Linking up with McGilligan from Fine Gael were Dan Morrissey, Richard Mulcahy, Tom O'Higgins and Seán MacEoin, who became Ministers of Industry and Commerce, Education, Defence and Justice respectively. Clann na Poblachta's Seán MacBride and Dr Noel Browne were appointed as Minister for External Affairs and Minister for Health respectively. The National Labour Party had one ministerial post, which was held by its leader, Jim Everett, in the Department of Posts and Telegraphs. They were joined around the cabinet table by the Independent, James Dillon as Minister for Agriculture, Clann na Talmhan's Joe Blowick as Minister for Lands and finally by the Taoiseach, John A. Costello.

The Minister for Local Government and his private secretary had a daunting task ahead of them. The housing industry was severely deprived by the previous governments and naturally it featured as a major issue amongst the electorate. It was almost a decade earlier when 'the Fianna Fáil housing drive, having reached a peak with 17,016 houses built in 1938 to 1939, slowed down sharply under wartime pressure with

³⁵ McCullagh, David, *A Makeshift Majority: The First Inter-Party Government, 1948-51* (Dublin, 1998), p. 41.

only 2,480 houses built in 1943 to 1944.³⁶ Incredibly, there were only 1,108 new homes with state funding built a year before the new coalition government came to power.³⁷ Following the war, there were similar extensive house building plans in operation across Europe, where contributions mostly came from Marshall Aid. Brendan Corish explained the disparity between Ireland's housing situation and that of Europe, when he said: 'the war accentuated the problem [in Europe] but it was not the root cause....one authority estimated the average pre-war deficit as about one-fifth of the elementary requirements....The Irish position differs from the continental one in so far as – paradoxical as it may seem - it is entirely due to the war.'³⁸ Corish also laid the blame of Ireland's poverty at the feet of the British when he said: 'we were a nation who rather than having to start building up our economy, had to turn our attention towards repairing the damage and neglect of an occupying power.'³⁹ In conjunction with the deficiency in house building, the department also faced the serious issues of land acquisition, as well as archaic land and planning acts. Corish believed that:

The control of development boils down to the control of the use of land. Amongst the problems which confront us at the moment there is none more urgently in need of general consideration than that which relates to the use of land....The housing programme as a whole involves an immense but praiseworthy draw on the nation's capital resources.⁴⁰

The department estimated that over the following ten years, the housing programme for local authorities would cost in excess of fifty million pounds - an exorbitant sum in 1940s Ireland.⁴¹ They also planned to build 110,000 houses in the country within a decade.⁴² However, it was important to first overcome the backlog, which existed. In the words of a pragmatist, Corish explained the circumstances when he warned: '[it] is possible by fixing the eyes on grandiose future (or futuristic) programmes to lose sight of the more immediate problems, which a little practical

³⁶ Seán MacEntee to Éamon de Valera, as cited in Lee, J.J., *Ireland 1912-85; Politics and Society* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 309.

³⁷ SA, as cited in Lee, J.J., *Ireland 1912-1985; Politics and Society* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 309.

³⁸ Mr Brendan Corish, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Local Government, speaking to the Dublin Rotary Club, 12 Dec. 1949 (N.A.I., Brendan Corish Local Government (PS) 1948-51, GIS 1/93, pp. 1-2).

³⁹ Mr Brendan Corish, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Local Government, speaking at a meeting of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, Youngstown, Ohio, U.S.A., 17 Mar. 1950 (N.A.I., Brendan Corish Local Government (PS) 1948-51, GIS 1/93, p. 2).

⁴⁰ Mr Brendan Corish, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Local Government, proposing the toast of 'The Institute' at an informal dinner given by the Irish branch of the Town Planning Institute, Dublin, 27 May 1949 (N.A.I., Brendan Corish Local Government (PS) 1948-51, GIS 1/93, p. 3).

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ferriter, Diarmaid, *The transformation of Ireland, 1900-2000* (London, 2004), p. 466.

wisdom and simple planning would remove from our midst today.’⁴³ Of course, the government’s impressive building expansion and other worthwhile initiatives would not have been possible without the necessary financing. Marshall Aid from the Economic Co-operation Administration was an enormous contributor towards the capital projects of the first Inter-Party Government. In order to become Marshall Aid recipients, the government outlined its plans in the *Long-Term Programme* in January 1949. While in office, Costello’s government accepted \$128 million from Marshall Aid.⁴⁴ This type of funding also accounted for 49.5 per cent of the government’s expenditure on capital ventures during the period 1949 to 1952.⁴⁵ Brendan Corish was well aware of the huge benefits accrued from Marshall Aid, when he said: ‘[it] had helped...to bridge the dollar gap which yawns between Ireland and prosperity.’⁴⁶ While in charge, the first Inter-Party Government sought loans, which amounted to £39 million and grants, which equalled \$18 million.⁴⁷ It was after all the period of Keynesian economics where policies to increase aggregate demand were popularly advocated and naturally, this included public works expenditure. Furthermore, the Taoiseach’s advocacy of this type of economic policy was crucial in order to acquire bank loans for the government’s housing projects. Helping Costello in his endeavours were Tim Murphy, Dr. T.K. Whitaker and James McElligott.

Brendan Corish was adamant that the pitiful state in the housing sector would be reversed. He said: ‘without doubt it can be solved. Public organisation, materials, labour force and finance are the four major factors in solving the problem.’⁴⁸ His words were not mere rhetoric. Thirteen months after the new government assumed power, the number of local authority flats and houses built more than doubled to 1,871, in contrast with 729 similar type dwellings, which were constructed a year earlier.⁴⁹ Furthermore, 8,193 homes were in the building process in March 1949, while in the same month a

⁴³ Mr Brendan Corish, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Local Government, proposing the toast of ‘The Institute’ at an informal dinner given by the Irish branch of the Town Planning Institute, Dublin, 27 May 1949 (N.A.I., Brendan Corish Local Government (PS) 1948-51, GIS 1/93, p. 5).

⁴⁴ *Irish Times*, 7 May 1951.

⁴⁵ Whelan, Bernadette, as cited in McCullagh, David, *A Makeshift Majority: The First Inter-Party Government, 1948-51* (Dublin, 1998), p. 145.

⁴⁶ *Irish Independent*, 17 Mar. 1950. Mr Brendan Corish, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Local Government, speaking at the annual St Patrick’s Day banquet of the Irish-American Association, Panther Valley, Pennsylvania, U.S.A., 16 Mar. 1950, as reported in the *Irish Independent*.

⁴⁷ *Irish Times*, 7 May 1951.

⁴⁸ Mr Brendan Corish, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Local Government, speaking to the Dublin Rotary Club, 12 Dec. 1949 (N.A.I., Brendan Corish Local Government (P.S.) 1948-51, G.I.S. 1/93, p. 2).

⁴⁹ *Irish Independent*, 10 June 1949. Mr Michael Keyes, Minister for Local Government, introducing his department’s estimate for 1949, Leinster House, Dublin, 9 June 1949, as reported in the *Irish Independent*.

year earlier, there were only 3,816.⁵⁰ Ireland's building boom was in full swing and 'the rural hovels and city slums left over from the British regime' were being addressed.⁵¹ Naturally, a favourable by-product of this sharp increase in building was the number of labourers it employed. In March 1949, the housing programme employed 3,664 skilled labourers compared to 1,283 twelve months earlier.⁵² Of course, both the minister and his secretary planned for these employment figures to improve further as the pace of building increased. Corish said: 'as long as there are any unemployed at all it will be my endeavour as a deputy and that of the Labour Party to see that every effort is made to reduce the figure.'⁵³

The varying costs associated with building work were a worrying factor for the government but nonetheless the Department of Local Government's budget for 1949 amounted to £1,207,100.⁵⁴ The coalition was, however, dealt a difficult blow in April 1949 by the sudden death of the Minister for Local Government. Only a little over a year in the job, Tim Murphy proved himself as an extremely formidable minister. As Minister for Local Government, he carried out his tasks with the utmost drive and was determined to initiate a fundamental part of the government's programme. In reference to his fellow cabinet colleague, Dr Noel Browne said that Murphy 'was probably the most dedicated and hard-working member of the inter-party cabinet.'⁵⁵ Undoubtedly, the flourishing of the housing sector was a tribute to Tim Murphy's involvement as minister and Brendan Corish missed his participation greatly. The latter was however not expected to become the new Minister for Local Government. In the end, that responsibility was given to Michael Keyes, an I.L.P. TD for Limerick East. Like his predecessor, Keyes worked very well with Brendan Corish in implementing the government's housing plan. To accelerate the pace of house construction in Ireland, the government increased grants to encourage public utility societies and private individuals

⁵⁰ *Irish Independent*, 10 June 1949. Mr Michael Keyes, Minister for Local Government, introducing his department's estimate for 1949, Leinster House, Dublin, 9 June 1949, as reported in the *Irish Independent*.

⁵¹ Mr Brendan Corish, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Local Government, speaking at a meeting of the Ancient Order of Hibernians meeting, Youngstown, Ohio, U.S.A., 17 Mar. 1950 (N.A.I., Brendan Corish Local Government (PS) 1948-51, GIS 1/93, p. 3).

⁵² *Irish Independent*, 10 June 1949. Mr Michael Keyes, Minister for Local Government, introducing his department's estimate for 1949, Leinster House, Dublin, 9 June 1949, as reported in the *Irish Independent*.

⁵³ *The People*, 18 Dec. 1948. Mr Brendan Corish, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Local Government, speaking at a Labour Party meeting, Rathaspeck, County Wexford, as reported in *The People*.

⁵⁴ *Irish Independent*, 10 June 1949. Mr Michael Keyes, Minister for Local Government, introducing his department's estimate for 1949, Leinster House, Dublin, 9 June 1949, as reported in the *Irish Independent*.

⁵⁵ Browne, Noel, *Against the Tide* (Dublin, 1986), p. 200.

to participate in their house-building programme. Under the 1949 Housing (Amendment) Act, the total figure for this category of grants was enlarged more than three fold to £1,750,000.⁵⁶ At the end of 1949, ‘there were 16,000 houses being built - 10,000 by local authorities and 6,000 by private enterprise with state grants. Roughly, out of every ten houses now being built, six were by local authorities and four by private enterprise.’⁵⁷ When the coalition’s housing project was completed in full, it was expected that the government would ‘have provided very nearly one out of three, or if they included state-assisted houses erected by private persons and societies, nearly one half of the houses would be provided by state or local authority activity.’⁵⁸ Corish strongly advocated the involvement of societies. He correctly believed that ‘a public utility society was in a better position to plan for and produce large scale results than the private individual.’⁵⁹ Naturally, the average private individual could not benefit from economies of scale in the same manner as public utilities did. As a Labour man, Corish was adamant of the important role played by government in housing. He prophesied ‘neither this nor the next generation is likely to see housing left absolutely to private enterprise. No risk can be taken, which would recreate the period of neglect whose long term affects could extend into the twenty-second century.’⁶⁰

In 1950, £14 million of the government’s budget was designated for housing, which corresponded to approximately forty-five per cent of the entire capital-spending amount.⁶¹ Both the Minister for Local Government and his parliamentary secretary, Brendan Corish, aspired that the rate of house building would be equalled to the previous year, if not surpassed. Corish was extremely optimistic about the progress that would be made in the coming years when he said that ‘the national housing drive is now a large scale operation partaking of the magnitude of a complete national

⁵⁶ Mr Brendan Corish, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Local Government, speaking at the opening of the Irish Ex Service Men’s Utility Society’s housing scheme, Collins Avenue, Whitehall, Dublin, 19 July 1949 (N.A.I., Brendan Corish Local Government (PS) 1948-51, GIS 1/93, p. 1).

⁵⁷ *Irish Press*, 13 Dec. 1949. Mr Brendan Corish, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Local Government, speaking to the Dublin Rotary Club, 12 Dec. 1949, as reported in the *Irish Press*.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Mr Brendan Corish, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Local Government, speaking at the opening of the Irish Ex Service Men’s Utility Society’s housing scheme, Collins Avenue, Whitehall, Dublin, 19 July 1949 (N.A.I., Brendan Corish Local Government (PS) 1948-51, GIS 1/93, p. 2).

⁶⁰ Mr Brendan Corish, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Local Government, speaking to the Dublin Rotary Club, 12 Dec. 1949 (N.A.I., Brendan Corish Local Government (PS) 1948-51, GIS 1/93, p. 4).

⁶¹ M/EA memo for government, as cited in McCullagh, David, *A Makeshift Majority: The First Inter-Party Government, 1948-51* (Dublin, 1998) p. 149.

reconstruction.’⁶² The capital city saw a massive transformation in its housing development. In January 1950, 2,000 private houses were in the process of being built with state funding in contrast to 600 similar type dwellings a year earlier.⁶³ A new Housing (Amendment) Act was introduced in 1950, which improved previous flaws that existed from earlier laws. This new piece of legislation sought to ‘remove the present restrictions limiting grants to new houses which are built for first occupation, will provide that such grants may be paid to the first purchaser for his own occupation.’⁶⁴ It also increased the maximum size in relation to grant houses by 150 square feet, which set the limit at 1,400 square feet.⁶⁵ The housing drive continued at pace. In 1951, 11,305 houses with state funding were built in Ireland.⁶⁶ This number equalled ten times its corresponding figure from 1947.⁶⁷ It was a remarkable sum and a true testament to the wonderful work carried out by Tim Murphy and Michael Keyes as Ministers for Local Government and their parliamentary secretary, Brendan Corish. Without doubt, they remained true to their 1948 department brochure, entitled *Ireland is Building*.⁶⁸ Not only was an essential component of the government’s programme fulfilled but also the expectations of the coalition were, in fact, surpassed. Brendan Corish was justifiably very proud of Labour’s involvement in Ireland’s housing developments. He said: ‘during the three years when Labour ministers were in charge of housing, tremendous progress was made in overtaking the backlog of housing requirements, while at the same time the long-term programme was placed on a secure footing so that the flow of new houses would continue at an even pace over the coming years.’⁶⁹

The Department of Local Government was also involved in modernising drainage schemes throughout the country, which was another successful venture by the department. The Local Authorities (Works) Act 1949 helped greatly in this process as

⁶² Mr Brendan Corish, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Local Government, speaking at the annual dinner of the Dublin and District House Builders’ Association, Dolphin Hotel, Dublin, 7 Dec. 1950 (N.A.I., Brendan Corish Local Government (PS) 1948-51, GIS 1/93, p. 2).

⁶³ Mr Brendan Corish, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Local Government, responding to the toast of the “House Building Industry” at the Annual Dinner of the Dublin and District House Builders’ Association, Hibernian Hotel, Dublin, 11 Jan. 1950 (N.A.I., Brendan Corish Local Government (PS) 1948-51, GIS 1/93, p. 2).

⁶⁴ *Irish Independent*, 26 June 1950. Mr Brendan Corish, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Local Government, speaking at a Labour Party meeting, Athlone, County Westmeath, as reported in the *Irish Independent*.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Quinn, G., as cited in Lee, J.J., *Ireland 1912-85; Politics and Society* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 309.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Ferriter, Diarmaid, *The transformation of Ireland, 1900-2000* (London, 2004), p. 466.

⁶⁹ Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking at the 1952 Labour Party Annual Conference, Four Provinces Hall, 18 Apr. 1952 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 1, 1948-51 Inter-Party Government, p. 9).

‘every county council and many urban authorities were engaged in drainage works made possible by this act and they....availed....of the offer of one hundred per cent grants.’⁷⁰ This development also helped decrease the level of unemployment. At the end of September 1949, there were 4,500 employed on such schemes.⁷¹ Corish proudly declared in 1950, that the government was spending £1 million on improving sewerage and water systems annually.⁷²

The declaration of the Irish republic was a hugely significant event in the lifetime of the first Inter-Party Government and Corish was immensely pleased by this development. In order to undermine the king’s involvement in the Irish Free State, de Valera introduced the External Relations Act in December 1936. However, over the years this act proved more of an inconvenience to the Irish, than an asset. In 1937, a new constitution was passed and Ireland was made into a republic in all but name. Labour opposed the External Relations Act when it was first passed and their general dislike of it remained. Repealing the act was not one of Labour’s main concerns in its general election campaign of 1948 but Corish had, nevertheless, discussed the futility of this act when he canvassed throughout Wexford. In Gorey, he said: ‘[the] Fianna Fáil party had stated time after time that the twenty-six counties were now entirely free from British rule. If that were the case why did the King of England have to assign the letters of credence to their foreign representatives? Why had they a president at all [but] to be an instrument for the dissolution of Dáil Éireann?’⁷³ Corish wanted a thirty-two county republic and therefore had no time for de Valera’s External Relations Act, which led to confusion over Ireland’s actual position whether as a member of the Commonwealth or as a republic. Corish was also angered by Fianna Fáil’s commandeering of the partition issue. In Killinick, County Wexford, he said: ‘partition was not the concern of Fianna Fáil solely. All parties desired a thirty-two county republic and would work towards that end.’⁷⁴ Certainly, the important role played by James Connolly and the Citizen Army in their fight for Irish independence was engrained in Corish’s mind. He also reproached de Valera because the latter did not make an appeal to the new British Labour

⁷⁰ *Irish Times*, 15 Oct. 1949. Mr Brendan Corish, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Local Government, speaking at a public meeting, Taghmon, County Wexford, 14 Oct. 1949, as reported in the *Irish Times*.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Mr Brendan Corish, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Local Government, speaking at the Annual Dinner of Cumann na nInnealtóirí, Hibernian Hotel, Dublin, 4 Nov. 1950 (N.A.I., Brendan Corish Local Government (PS) 1948-51, GIS 1/93, p. 6).

⁷³ *The People*, 10 Jan. 1948. Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking in Gorey, County Wexford, as reported in *The People*.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 31 Jan. 1948. Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking in Killinick, County Wexford, as reported in *The People*.

government on behalf of the country. Furthermore, Corish accused the former Taoiseach of not advancing Ireland's cause at meetings of the U.N. and belittling the struggle for Irish freedom as a mere 'domestic affair.'⁷⁵ Corish said: 'Connolly and Pearse did not consider the achievement of the freedom of Ireland as a "domestic affair." Must they of this generation let the years pass and make no effort to complete the work so nobly done by the men of Easter week?'⁷⁶ In fact, the first Inter-Party Government and Corish in tow moved a step closer towards completing Irish independence.

It is unclear whether or not the cabinet gave John A. Costello prior permission to repeal the External Relations Act before the Taoiseach embarked on his famous voyage to Canada, via New York in August 1948. It seems that there was no official decision made in the last cabinet meeting prior to Costello's trip. However, it appears that there was some informal agreement reached whereby the act would be revoked with the recommencing of the Dáil.⁷⁷ Certainly, Ireland was no longer an active participant in the Commonwealth, but whether or not the repeal of such an act meant that Ireland would automatically become a republic was open to debate. On 7 September 1948, Costello was asked by a reporter in Ottawa, Canada, to comment on an article, which appeared two days earlier in an Irish paper alleging that the External Relations Act was to be rescinded. Costello's reply was that the cabinet had agreed to abolish the act and he then confirmed that Ireland would no longer be a member of the Commonwealth. The Taoiseach's statement was a complete revelation to some of his cabinet colleagues. Nonetheless, Brendan Corish was delighted with Ireland's newly elevated position on the international stage. He referred to it, when he said: 'Easter Monday, 1949, the Irish nation rejoiced - at seeing for the first time an Irish republic internationally recognised. A partial rejoicing...[since there is] one final step in the road to the achievement of its national objective; the reunion under its national flag of its fellow countrymen in the six north-eastern counties.'⁷⁸ However, Corish did not realise at that particular time that Ireland's new found freedom had such negative ramifications on the prospect of reuniting the country.

⁷⁵ *The People*, 31 Jan. 1948. Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking in Killinick, County Wexford, as reported in *The People*.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ McCullagh, David, *A Makeshift Majority: The First Inter-Party Government, 1948-51* (Dublin, 1998), p. 78.

⁷⁸ Mr Brendan Corish, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Local Government, speaking at the Annual St. Patrick's Day Banquet of the Irish American Association, Panthervalley, Pennsylvania, U.S.A., 16 Mar. 1950 (N.A.I., Brendan Corish Local Government (PS) 1948-51, GIS 1/93, p. 5).

On 21 December 1948, President Seán T. O’Kelly passed the Republic of Ireland Act. The country celebrated its new official status on Easter Monday, 18 April 1949, with festivities led by Brendan Corish in Wexford town. Corish was hopeful ‘that the British Labour government would take some steps to undo the injustice perpetrated by a British government of former years.’⁷⁹ However, Britain responded with the Ireland Act 1949, in May of that year, which accepted southern Ireland’s new status. Northern Ireland was defined as part of the United Kingdom and this situation would continue so long as the Stormont parliament wished. Thus, in Brendan Corish’s opinion, the act was ‘designed to make the partition of our country permanent.’⁸⁰ ‘A clause-iniquitous to the heart of any true Irishmen,’ was how he referred to it.⁸¹ Corish was deeply angered by the copper fastening of partition, particularly because it was a government led by Clement Attlee of the British Labour Party, which enacted it. Brendan Corish abhorred partition. First, he believed it was undemocratic towards the island of Ireland as an entirety and Corish certainly was a strong proponent of democracy. He said:

Of all the democratic rights, the right to national self-determination is the one, which is most fundamental. This is the first right of any democratic nation and without which there cannot be true democracy....Such decisions must be taken by the nation as a whole and in the case of Ireland it means that the majority of Irishmen should be allowed to settle their own affairs. That right is denied [to] us.⁸²

Corish believed that the continuation of partition was yet another example in the long history of British oppression. He said: ‘the history of partition and its accomplishment and the story of its maintenance is a sad and sordid one. Nowhere, in her long history does the perfidy of Britain show clearer than in her relationship with Ireland and

⁷⁹ *Irish Press*, 1 Oct. 1949. Mr Brendan Corish, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Local Government, speaking at the 1949 Labour Party Annual Conference, Cork, 30 Sept. 1949, as reported in the *Irish Press*.

⁸⁰ Mr Brendan Corish, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Local Government, speaking to the Cardiff Branch of the Irish Anti-Partition League of Great Britain, 17 Mar. 1951 (N.A.I., Brendan Corish Local Government (PS) 1948-51, GIS 1/93, p. 4).

⁸¹ Mr Brendan Corish, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Local Government, speaking at the Annual St. Patrick’s Day Banquet of the Irish American Association, Panthervalley, Pennsylvania, U.S.A., 16 Mar. 1950 (N.A.I., Brendan Corish Local Government (PS) 1948-51, GIS 1/93, p. 5).

⁸² Mr Brendan Corish, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Local Government, speaking at a meeting of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, Youngstown, Ohio, U.S.A., 17 Mar. 1950 (N.A.I., Brendan Corish Local Government (PS) 1948-51, GIS 1/93, pp. 4, 6).

nowhere in that relationship is the evidence more damning than in the story of partition.’⁸³

In relation to the national question, the mantle was on Brendan Corish as a public representative to uphold the principles of his nationalist predecessors and heroes, James Connolly and Michael Collins and also his forbearers. In keeping with his father’s aspirations, Brendan Corish said:

We would be breaking faith with Wolfe Tone, Emmett, Pearse and Connolly if now we were to be satisfied with partial freedom. Bearing in mind their example of courage, patience and love of country, Irishmen are still determined to reach the ultimate goal – a republic bounded on all sides by the ocean – a republic, which will conform to the Christian conception of a democratic state.⁸⁴

Corish had a distinct, clear image of Ireland as one united country. He explained that ‘no Irish government that would be worthy of the name, could ever envisage Ireland as other than thirty-two counties.’⁸⁵ His vision of the Irish nation was born from a deep understanding and interest in Ireland’s ancient struggle to gain independence, which he developed as a child. Brendan Corish proudly spoke of the ‘Irish historical tradition moulded by our leaders and thinkers in the past based on an unshakable faith in our Irish way of life and in an unconquerable confidence in our ability to secure the freedom to live that way of life.’⁸⁶ He was resolute in his beliefs. The deep sense of nationalism Corish felt at this particular point in his life was considered quite normal for the time. In 1940s Ireland, memories of both the Irish War of Independence and Irish Civil War were still fresh in the public mind and continuing the struggle for full independence remained an important matter in the lives of many people. Corish’s own family background clearly influenced his thinking in this sphere, as well as the lives of both James Connolly and Michael Collins. His republicanism at this particular stage does however contrast greatly with the more moderate outlook he adopted later in life. Of course, the northern violence of the late 1960s and 1970s led Brendan Corish to reassess his position on Irish republicanism and encouraged him to adopt a far more tolerant attitude towards both unionists and British.

⁸³ Mr Brendan Corish, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Local Government, speaking at the Annual St. Patrick’s Day Banquet of the Irish American Association, Panthervalley, Pennsylvania, U.S.A., 16 Mar. 1950 (N.A.I., Brendan Corish Local Government (PS) 1948-51, GIS 1/93, p. 4).

⁸⁴ Mr Brendan Corish, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Local Government, speaking to the Ancient Order of Hibernians meeting, Youngstown, Ohio, U.S.A., 17 Mar. 1950 (N.A.I., Brendan Corish Local Government (PS) 1948-51, GIS 1/93, p. 1).

⁸⁵ Mr Brendan Corish, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Local Government, speaking to the Hibernian Society of Baltimore, Maryland, U.S.A., 18 Mar. 1950 (N.A.I., Brendan Corish Local Government (PS) 1948-51, GIS 1/93, p. 6).

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

During his involvement with the first Inter-Party Government, Corish attempted to keep partition a relevant issue in the public mind. For example, at an Irish Anti-Partition League forum in Enniscorthy, County Wexford, he advocated those gathered to enlighten English visitors on the injustices of partition, as ‘it was true that most English people were entirely ignorant of the true position.’⁸⁷ Brendan Corish never promoted the use of violence as a means to bring about Irish reunification and hence the reason behind his tactic of informing English visitors. There was also a practical sense to his advocacy for the ending of partition. As parliamentary secretary, he was faced with problems that resulted from partition, which affected the efficient day-to-day running of his department.⁸⁸ In reference to this particular difficulty, Corish said that ‘special legislation of the two parliaments is required to validate co-operation in building bridges to link the two areas, to coordinate transport problems and to carry out joint electricity supply and drainage schemes. Thus, no national economic or social planning can be fully effective in either area while the nation itself remains dismembered.’⁸⁹

Despite Ireland’s new status as a republic, an Irish delegation was sent to the Commonwealth conference in Ontario, Canada on 29 August 1949, which included Brendan Corish. The government was of the opinion that he was competent in delivering what was necessary. After Costello’s surprise announcement at the same event the previous year, there was a keen interest on proceedings by observers back in Ireland. Before Corish embarked on his trip to Canada, he explained the government’s peculiar decision to send Irish representatives to such a meeting. He said that the Irish agreed:

[to] the invitation to go on the clear understanding that we were not in the Commonwealth and were now a sovereign independent republic. Indeed, the rules under which this conference is summoned were amended....specifically to provide for our invitation despite the fact that we had severed our connection with the British Commonwealth. While at the conference we will be the guests of the Canadian Institute of International Affairs.⁹⁰

While at the summit, Corish again voiced his strong opposition to partition. He said: ‘the only remaining difference we have with the British is the partitioning of our

⁸⁷ *Irish Independent*, 25 July 1949.

⁸⁸ Mr Brendan Corish, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Local Government, speaking to the Cardiff Branch of the Irish Anti-Partition League of Great Britain, 17 Mar. 1951 (N.A.I., Brendan Corish Local Government (PS) 1948-51, GIS 1/93, p. 5).

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Irish Press*, 30 Aug. 1949. Mr Brendan Corish, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Local government, speaking to reporters before embarking on his trip to Canada, 29 Aug. 1949, as reported in the *Irish Press*.

country. We will take every opportunity to bring to the forefront the injustice perpetrated on Ireland by an act of the British government.’⁹¹

Brendan Corish remained most vocal on the subject of partition while abroad. At the British Labour conference in Blackpool in June 1949, an Irish Labour delegation was sent to ‘launch an intensive propaganda campaign.’⁹² It was thought that the British Labour Party would be somewhat more sympathetic than their Tory counterparts towards Ireland, especially when the Irish vote in Britain was traditionally left wing. There were three motions on partition up for debate, which included one from the Aston Constituency Branch. It proposed ‘that the ending of partition should be included in the next general programme of the party.’⁹³ However, much to the disappointment of Corish, the issue was given little attention. As the British Deputy Prime Minister, Herbert Morrison, ironically explained: ‘I think it would be most unwise for us to seek to involve the British Labour Party in internal Irish politics. We would prefer to get on with our own politics. We don’t want to interfere with the internal politics of Ireland and with great respect we would like Ireland not to interfere with our internal politics.’⁹⁴ Corish felt that if Ireland’s case were made known to a wider audience the situation would be remedied at a far greater pace and without any bloodshed. He said: ‘if we are to succeed we must make the problem known, we must give the facts to the world and determine that justice shall be brought about finally.’⁹⁵ He believed that the support of North America was pivotal in the battle to restore Irish unity. On a visit to Pennsylvania, in March 1950, Corish told his audience: ‘I know how unfailingly the great weight of the influence of the Irish in America has always been thrown behind the cause of Irish freedom and how in the continuance of that influence there lies one of our greatest hopes for the eventual unity of Ireland.’⁹⁶ Corish also warned the British of the consequences of maintaining the artificial border in a speech somewhat reminiscent to Pádraig Pearse’s famed ‘Life springs from death’ address.⁹⁷ Corish said:

Britain must be made realise that the ‘freedom of small nations’ should be applied to her nearest neighbour; that she can no longer be the plaything of British political parties; and that the destiny of Ireland must be left in the hands of Irishmen. If Britain does not realise that, every British government for years

⁹¹ *Irish Times*, 12 Sept. 1949.

⁹² *Irish Independent*, 6 June 1949.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 8 June 1949.

⁹⁵ Mr Brendan Corish, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Local Government, speaking at the Annual St. Patrick’s Day Banquet of the Irish American Association, Panthervalley, Pennsylvania, U.S.A., 16 Mar. 1950 (N.A.I., Brendan Corish Local Government (P.S.) 1948-51, G.I.S. 1/93, p. 4).

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁹⁷ Macardle, Dorothy, as cited in Coogan, Tim Pat, *Michael Collins: A biography* (London, 1990), p. 39.

to come will be confronted by Irishmen who are still prepared to devote their lives to the attainment of a free and independent Irish republic for all its people.⁹⁸

Corish clearly favoured any publicity available concerning partition but realistically speaking, he and his fellow campaigners were able to do very little else but verbally protest, while remaining within the confines of the law.

Brendan Corish was again disappointed by the decision of the N.I.L.P. to affiliate with its British counterparts, which followed the declaration of the Irish republic. This led to the expulsion of branches and the resignation of northern members who were opposed to the measure. Collections were held in the Republic of Ireland in support of northern nationalists who were contesting the general election of 1949. However, this action had severe negative effects as unionists saw this involvement as unwelcome interference from the south, particularly so soon after Ireland abandoning the Commonwealth. Unionist fears of a united Ireland were fully exploited and thus many working class Protestants - who had previously voted Labour - opted in favour of their unionist candidate instead. Furthermore, the decision of the Northern Ireland Labour Party alienated many Catholic working class voters as well. Gerrymandering was also rife in Northern Ireland and this was clearly illustrated in the 1950 Westminster elections. Nationalists amounted to more than a third of the entire population of Northern Ireland at the time but they only won a sixth or two out of a total of twelve seats.⁹⁹ This was proof to Brendan Corish and his fellow nationalists, that if Ireland were ever to be reunited with the consent of Stormont, it would not happen in their lifetimes. However, the election of Jack Beattie, a Labour MP for West Belfast, in the 1951 Westminster election was a huge source of inspiration to Corish. In his address to the Irish Labour Party Annual Conference in 1952, Corish celebrated Beattie's glorious victory of 1951. He said:

[Beattie's victory] gives hope of speedier progress towards the reunification of our country...[it] has shown us the way forward in winning over to the side of freedom and democracy the Protestant workers of the six counties...only the flag of Labour and a militant, progressive social and economic policy can win over these, our fellow workers.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Mr Brendan Corish, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Local Government, speaking at a meeting of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, Youngstown, Ohio, U.S.A., 17 Mar. 1950 (N.A.I., Brendan Corish Local Government (P.S.) 1948-51, G.I.S. 1/93, p. 9).

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹⁰⁰ Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking at the 1952 Labour Party Annual Conference, Four Provinces Hall, 18 Apr. 1952 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 1, 1948-51 Inter-Party Government, p. 10). Jack Beattie, (1886-1960), was a former leader of the N.I.L.P. who favoured Irish unity. He lost his seat

Of course, in time Brendan Corish saw the full force of the Protestant working class brought to bear through a general strike, which led to the downfall of power-sharing and the collapse of the Sunningdale Agreement in 1974.

Brendan Corish's opposition to Ireland joining NATO was very much related to his stance on partition. His opinion was considered normal for the time and it also reflected that of the government. The United States signalled that Ireland's involvement within NATO was quite favourable to the latter, but because the Irish demanded the ending of partition as a prerequisite to their entry, there was little prospect of the country joining. Furthermore, the issue of neutrality was also interconnected with Ireland's possible participation in NATO. The members of NATO were unperturbed by Ireland's answer however, as they already had access to bases in Northern Ireland. Brendan Corish spoke openly about his dislike of joining NATO. In a speech to the Ancient Order of Hibernians in Ohio, in 1950, he said: 'partition is bitterly resented and no Irish government could subscribe to the Atlantic Pact as long as Britain is not prepared to apply the principles of the pact to Ireland.'¹⁰¹ A critic might suggest that Corish was speaking to a staunchly republican and therefore sympathetic audience, but when one considers his influences and background; it is obvious that he was expressing his own personal belief on the subject at that particular point in time.

The controversial Mother and Child Scheme became synonymous with the work of the first Inter-Party Government and Corish had a very clear opinion on the matter. The plan was not the final cause of the eventual collapse of the government but nonetheless contributed towards its demise. Fianna Fáil's 1947 Health Bill was signed into law on 13 August 1947, but it faced fresh opposition from both the Irish Medical Association and the Catholic Church. On 7 October 1947, the archbishops and bishops wrote of their displeasure over the Mother and Child service to de Valera. Furthermore, the Fine Gael TD, James Dillon, took an action against the act to the High Court in December 1947, as he believed several of its sections were unconstitutional. Most significantly, Dillon's legal counsel included fellow Fine Gael members – Patrick McGilligan, Cecil Lavery and John A. Costello. The fall of the Fianna Fáil government intervened and Dillon's legal challenge was withdrawn after reassurances from the new

in 1949. He then joined the I.L.P. but failed to recapture his old seat in the 1950 Westminster election and in the subsequent by-election held in the same year.

¹⁰¹ Mr Brendan Corish, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Local Government, speaking at a meeting of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, Youngstown, Ohio, U.S.A., 17 Mar. 1950 (N.A.I., Brendan Corish Local Government (PS) 1948-51, GIS 1/93, p. 7).

Minister of Health, Dr. Noel Browne. In 1949, 3,292 infants below the age of twelve months died in Ireland, as well as 4,700 children under the age of sixteen.¹⁰² This figure corresponded to an infant mortality rate of fifty-three in Ireland, in contrast to that of Sweden and England and Wales, which equalled twenty-three and thirty-two respectively.¹⁰³ It was plain for everyone to see that immediate action was necessary in Ireland to bring about an improvement in these figures.

On 25 June 1948, Dr Noel Browne brought the Mother and Child Scheme to the cabinet table again with a number of changes included to pacify the Catholic Church, the Irish Medical Association and James Dillon. These adjustments contained the removal of the compulsory features of treatment and inspection within the act and also treatment charges.¹⁰⁴ Browne secured cabinet approval but he faced major hostility from both the doctors and church. The opposition from the Catholic Church towards this piece of legislation helped to detract from the resistance the doctors showed. Nonetheless, the Irish Medical Association was an extremely formidable opponent of the scheme. Its major bones of contention were the exclusion of a means test and the medical 'profession as a whole becoming salaried officers of the state or local authority.'¹⁰⁵ Ultimately, the association feared a transferral of power overtime to the state, which would have led to a decrease in the incomes of its members. The Catholic Church's main disagreements centred on the issue of universality, state interference in the provision of child health, which they saw as the responsibility of the parent and also education on motherhood. They considered the 'issues involved [in the scheme] as of the greatest moral and religious importance.'¹⁰⁶ Of course, the church in general abhorred state intrusion because they saw it as socialism, which in their opinion related to communism and warned that increased state involvement 'constituted a ready-made instrument for future totalitarian aggression.'¹⁰⁷ A leading figure within the Irish Catholic Church at this time was the Archbishop of Dublin and doctor's son, John Charles McQuaid. The relationship between church and state in the Republic of Ireland was firmly set in place by de Valera through earlier consultations with the archbishop.

¹⁰² Proposals for a Mother and Child Health Service from the Minister of Health, 1950 (I.L.H.S., William Norton MS/10/W.N./Box 6, 92-103, Mother and Child Service 102, p. 2).

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Puirseil, Niamh, *The Irish Labour Party, 1922-73* (Dublin, 2007), p. 153.

¹⁰⁵ Extract from 'Scheme for a National Medical Service' submitted by the Irish Medical Association to the Department of Health, 1949 (I.L.H.S., William Norton MS/10/W.N./Box 6, 92-103, Mother and Child Service 102).

¹⁰⁶ Rev James Staunton to John A. Costello, 10 Oct. 1950 (I.L.H.S., William Norton MS/10/W.N./Box 6, 92-103, Mother and Child Service 102, p. 2). Rev James Staunton was Bishop of Ferns and Secretary to the Hierarchy.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 1.

McQuaid was extremely suspicious of anything with the slightest hint of a communist overtone and he was without doubt one of the church's main detractors on the Mother and Child Scheme. During the 1948 election campaign, Corish completely repudiated communism when he described it as 'one of the greatest evils that ever came to the world.'¹⁰⁸ He went on to say that 'he took his politics from the Irish Labour Party but he took his religion from his church.'¹⁰⁹ However, the action of Brendan Corish during the Mother and Child affair provided evidence of a change in his political influence, for on that occasion the evidence suggests that he took his politics from his church. It has been written that Brendan Corish was a member of the Knights of Columbanus, a highly secretive and conservative group of influential lay Catholic men.¹¹⁰ This suggestion derives from a secondary source, whereas there is no primary source evidence either to support or to deny Corish's supposed membership.¹¹¹ It has also been written that some of Corish's fellow cabinet colleagues were members of this group - William Norton, Richard Mulcahy, Seán MacEoin and Joseph Blowick.¹¹² It is of no surprise to discover that the same order of knights was strongly opposed to Dr Noel Browne's scheme.

As Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Local Government, it was not within the remit of Brendan Corish's post to attend the many cabinet meetings on the Mother and Child debate. However, he was present at an important gathering on 5 April 1951, where the subject was the ill-fated scheme. Browne by this time had not gained the support of the clergy nor the doctors. During the autumn of 1950, he met the bishops on several occasions, one of which included a significant meeting on 11 October 1950 with Archbishop McQuaid. At this meeting Browne thought he had secured the church's approval, while the archbishop's view was the complete opposite. A day later, Costello met with McQuaid and the clergy's objections to the proposal were clearly aired to the Taoiseach. On 6 March 1951, Browne published information on the Mother and Child service despite Costello's earlier reassurances to the hierarchy that the scheme was no longer government policy. In a letter to Dr Noel Browne, Seán MacBride advised: 'the practical difficulties of implementing the scheme in any circumstances are very great. If, in addition, you are faced with the combined opposition of the medical profession, the hierarchy and the voluntary hospitals, the difficulties will

¹⁰⁸ *The People*, 17 Jan. 1948. Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking in the Bull Ring, Wexford, as reported in *The People*.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Bolster, Evelyn, *The Knights of the Order of St Columbanus* (Dublin, 1979), p. 96.

¹¹¹ Brendan Howlin does not personally believe that Brendan Corish was involved in the Knights of Columbanus.

¹¹² Bolster, Evelyn, *The Knights of the Order of St Columbanus* (Dublin, 1979), pp. 95-6.

become nearly insurmountable.’¹¹³ His warning proved prophetic. Additional frantic letters were written and further meetings followed between the main protagonists. On 22 March 1951, Browne invited the church to formally declare whether or not his scheme went against the moral teachings of Catholicism. He also stated that he would accept the church’s answer. The Catholic hierarchy ruled that the scheme went against social teaching after a two-day assembly, which started on 3 April 1951. On 5 April 1951, Brendan Corish attended a meeting with Costello, Norton and Browne. In response to the church’s ruling, Browne said: ‘it is all right. The bishops have not condemned the scheme on grounds of moral.’¹¹⁴ A shocked Corish is reputed to have said: ‘if I had not heard the remark, I could not have believed it to be possible.’¹¹⁵ Dr Noel Browne’s Mother and Child Scheme was clearly no longer feasible and on 10 April 1951, MacBride asked the Minister of Health to resign. Brendan Corish disagreed with Browne’s plan and was unapologetic for opposing it. He said:

....as a junior member, [he] had no hesitation in being directed and guided by the hierarchy on that particular occasion. If he wanted advice on clothes he would have no hesitation in consulting the tailor or draper....Then, in matters where faith and morals were concerned, where Catholic social teaching was concerned, had they to apologise for seeking the opinion of the hierarchy of the church.¹¹⁶

He also referred to Browne’s publishing of the correspondence between the government and bishops, which made international headlines. He said they ‘were splashed across, not only the newspapers in the six counties, but in those of Britain, America and other countries of the world with the object of attempting to show that there was Rome rule in this country and that this government, or any government, was dictated to by the Catholic Church.’¹¹⁷ Corish believed that ‘the only reason those allegations were made by the newspapers concerned was because those people envied them in Ireland, the grand position they occupied and the grand co-operation they always got between the government and Catholic hierarchy of this country.’¹¹⁸ His statement is certainly revealing in that it tells us exactly how Corish approved of the church’s participation in matters of government in 1951.

¹¹³ Seán MacBride to Dr Noel Browne, 8 Mar. 1951 (I.L.H.S., William Norton MS/10/W.N./Box 6, 92-103, Mother and Child Service 102, p. 1).

¹¹⁴ Horgan, John, *Noel Browne: Passionate Outsider* (Dublin, 2000), p. 137.

¹¹⁵ McQuaid, John Charles, as cited in Horgan, John, *Noel Browne: Passionate Outsider* (Dublin, 2000), p. 137.

¹¹⁶ *The People*, 26 May 1951. Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking at a public meeting in New Ross, County Wexford, as reported in *The People*.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

The historian, Niamh Puirseil, described Brendan Corish as a mere “‘bishops’ man’ in relation to the Mother and Child Scheme.¹¹⁹ This labelling, although substantiated by evidence, is somewhat disparaging towards Corish as the context of his disapproval is not included. He did indeed side with the clergy but then so did the vast majority. To have raised his head above the parapet and disagreed with the Catholic Church would have been political suicide for the young deputy and an unimaginable ‘defiance of the hierarchy.’¹²⁰ It was after all 1950s Ireland, the Irish Catholic Church was supremely powerful and it was generally accepted ‘that the government would readily and immediately acquiesce in a decision of the hierarchy concerning faith and morals.’¹²¹ In fact, the position Corish took on this scheme was not considered unusual at the time. Even Browne himself had agreed to back down if the hierarchy said that his plan was contrary to moral teaching. Furthermore, all of the members around the cabinet table also agreed that it would not proceed and instead be replaced by a scheme, which was acceptable to the church. The Irish Trade Union Congress expressed its support of the scheme and there were some rumblings against the stance taken by the cabinet from some members of the Irish Labour Party, although they were quickly quelled. Whatever about the socialist leanings Brendan Corish had, which would have induced him to accept Browne’s new measure; he never would have acted contrary to the church to which he belonged. Of course, as Ireland became more secularised over time and as Corish’s political maturity developed, he formed an independent mind on religious and social matters. However, before the end of both their political lives, the paths of Brendan Corish and Dr Noel Browne most certainly crossed again.

Both Labour factions reunited on 6 June 1950 and this was a great pleasure for Corish to witness. As a result of the break-up of the I.L.P., Labour’s vote was split and the inroads Labour as a movement had earlier made suffered a tremendous setback. Attempts to finally bring both sides together ended in failure at a unity conference held in Bray, County Wicklow in 1947. However, the fact that both parties were participants in the first Inter-Party Government certainly helped towards healing their past acrimonies. Furthermore, the death occurred of Jim Larkin senior in early 1947, while a year earlier William O’Brien retired as General Secretary of the I.T.G.W.U. This meant

¹¹⁹ Niamh Puirseil, ‘Catholic Stakhanovites? Religion and the Irish Labour Party, 1922-73’ in Devine, Francis, Lane, Fintan, and Puirseil, Niamh (eds), *Essays in Irish Labour History: A Festschrift for Elizabeth and John W. Boyle* (Dublin, 2008), p. 153.

¹²⁰ John A. Costello to Dr Noel Browne, 15 Mar. 1951 (I.L.H.S., William Norton MS/10/W.N./Box 6, 92-103, Mother and Child Service 102, p. 1).

¹²¹ John A. Costello to Rev James Staunton, 27 Mar. 1951 (I.L.H.S., William Norton MS/10/W.N./Box 6, 92-103, Mother and Child Service 102, p. 1).

that the animosity between Labour's two biggest rivals was no longer part of the feud between the original I.L.P. and its splinter group. Of course, despite the allegations by the National Labour Party that communism was ripe within the I.L.P., Corish's Labour rivals 'told him they would like to see him elected - like to see him get a seat in the Irish Labour Party' during the 1945 Wexford by-election.¹²² Throughout his 1948 general election campaign, Corish was very optimistic that both parties would soon merge. He said: 'I hope and pray that the time is not far off when we can heal our differences and once again can have a strong, active Labour Party which can accept the responsibility of forming a Labour government.'¹²³ His wish was realised a little over two years later. Corish easily saw the advantages of a united front within Labour. In the history of the party, they had the highest number of branches across the country in 1952 and many new members were joining.¹²⁴ He believed that there was still definite room for improvement within the party and gave the following warning to his fellow Labour delegates:

We are not yet the mass party that a Labour Party should be and that we must be before we can hope to be the government of this country. I feel we are moving rapidly towards that goal so that it behoves us all the more to make that extra effort to build our party, so that it is worthy of the struggles of past generations and fit to bear the title of the party of Connolly and Larkin.¹²⁵

The failure of the first Inter-Party Government to implement William Norton's social welfare plan was a major disappointment to Brendan Corish. There were some around the cabinet table whose opinions differed to those of Norton regarding social welfare but nonetheless the issue was included in the programme for government. The Minister for Finance, Patrick McGilligan, was one such opponent of the scheme. David McCullagh rightly described the protracted enactment of Norton's 1949 Social Welfare Bill as 'tortuous' because it took almost two years to pass.¹²⁶ There was obvious stalling deployed by the government. In December 1950, the wording of the 1950 Social Welfare (Insurance) Bill was given cabinet approval and it eventually received its second reading a further four months later.¹²⁷ However, the election intervened. Its

¹²² *The People*, 17 Jan. 1948. Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking at the Bull Ring, Wexford, as reported in *The People*.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 3 Apr. 1948. Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking at a public victory meeting organised by the Enniscorthy branch of the Irish Labour Party, Enniscorthy, County Wexford, as reported in *The People*.

¹²⁴ Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking at the 1952 Labour Party Annual Conference, Four Provinces Hall, 18 Apr. 1952 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 1, 1948-51 Inter-Party Government, p. 9).

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹²⁶ McCullagh, David, *A Makeshift Majority: The First Inter-Party Government, 1948-51* (Dublin, 1998), p. 183.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 193-4.

defeat was viewed by Corish as a major setback as it was a Labour policy directed by a Labour minister. Nevertheless, there were direct similarities between Norton's plan and that of his successor. The former was also credited with increasing the blind and old age pensions during his reign. Brendan Corish was very appreciative of the efforts of his fellow minister in the field of social welfare. He extended the following praise of William Norton in April 1952: 'neither should we forget that by his work and by his steadfast determination to establish the principle of social security, Mr Norton made it impossible for anyone who succeeded him to ignore the necessity for a scheme.'¹²⁸

The first Inter-Party Government was finally dissolved after a number of Independents withdrew their support over an issue concerning the price of milk. The government's balance of power decreased slightly over the years but this was the death nail for the coalition. The first Inter-Party Government set out on the long and arduous road towards the nation's recovery, although the problems of the country were by no means all completely solved in the lifetime of that coalition. Widely expected to last but a year, the government functioned until 7 May 1951 – more than three years after its creation - and ultimately, the electorate was the judge of Labour's participation in that government. Brendan Corish's first experience of working within a government and a coalition were quite balanced. Top of that government's list of achievements was the incredible housing drive, which Corish had a particular affiliation to. Indeed, as parliamentary secretary, he was one of the key witnesses to its progress. A positive result of this growth in building and the implementation of an effective nationwide drainage programme was that it decreased the level of unemployment. Furthermore, there was actually an increase recorded in the population since 1841 in the 1951 census returns.¹²⁹ As a committed nationalist, the declaration of the Irish republic was a great joy for Corish and yet he did not foresee the negative response of the British in regards to Northern Ireland. There were some advances made in the field of social welfare, albeit not as many as he wanted. The coalition also aided in reuniting both fuelling Labour factions, as their hostilities were proven futile. Certainly, there was strength within a united party and Corish believed that the future would bring about increased power and prosperity for Labour. There were many other positive developments during the course of the first Inter-Party Government, although they are not within the remit of this thesis. However, they are worth mentioning briefly. Such obvious examples

¹²⁸ Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking at the 1952 Labour Party Annual Conference, Four Provinces Hall, 18 Apr. 1952 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 1, 1948-51 Inter-Party Government, p. 8).

¹²⁹ Ferriter, Diarmaid, *The transformation of Ireland, 1900-2000* (London, 2004), p. 463.

included the government's unrelenting war waged against tuberculosis, an enterprising Land Rehabilitation Project, an increase in the construction of hospitals and the setting up of both the Industrial Development Authority and a Commission on Emigration. The latter was finally an admission by an Irish government that there was something not quite right with so many people leaving the country for distant shores.

Outside of politics, Brendan Corish married Phyllis Donoghue on 4 January 1949 and they had three sons during their marriage – Richard, Philip and John. The Opera Festival was set up in Wexford in 1951 and Corish continuously made reference to this annual international event in his diary entries. While in power, Brendan Corish spoke on a wide range of issues that were well outside his brief, such as partition and NATO, which indicated his maturation as a young politician. However, in acknowledging and taking credit for the successes of the coalition, Corish as a member of that same government had to accept collective responsibility for its failures. He was very disappointed about the way in which the government came to an abrupt ending, as all ten points of the programme for government were not fulfilled in time. These included the failure to enforce an acceptable mother and child health plan. The government proposed the development of a real alternative model, which the church would support, although it was not set out in detail. Brendan Corish was also forced to watch on as the implementation of William Norton's social welfare plan was deliberately stalled. Corish discovered that in coalitions there were concessions to be made and that on most, if not on all occasions, it was the weaker party or parties involved who were forced to yield. Furthermore, when so many coalition partners covering the spectrum of political philosophies were involved, compromises were a recurrent feature. This was evident in a government of five political parties plus Independents. Without a majority of representatives, the I.L.P. clearly suffered as a result of its smaller representation in the cabinet. It had diminished power over the government's direction and administered departments of lesser significance. There was also an element of insecurity entwined with coalition. This system of government could fall over any issue and Corish witnessed his fellow Labourite, William Norton, act in the role of peacemaker on numerous occasions. For Brendan Corish, the obvious solution was a Labour Party government and yet, over the past three years democracy prevailed in Corish's opinion and a practical alternative to Fianna Fáil governments was realised. Thus, it was obvious to Corish that there were both advantages and disadvantages to Labour's involvement in the first Inter-Party Government. Brendan

Corish learned some extremely valuable lessons from 1948 to 1951 and they influenced him in future years and future ministries. Coalitions were certainly not ideal. However, at that particular moment in time, he felt that while Labour remained a minority, the party could be enticed into entering another such arrangement. Of course, in 1951 his definitive assessment of coalitions was not set in stone. It took the second Inter-Party Government combined with a longstanding desire for a single Labour Party government to help him finalise his views on that subject. After all, he was not yet thirty-three years of age at the dissolution of the first Inter-Party Government. There was plenty of time left.

CHAPTER III

MINISTER FOR SOCIAL WELFARE, 1954-7: PRAGMATIST OR SOCIALIST?

‘No one but a fool or a political fanatic would suggest that the difficulties which have arisen in this country have sprung up in a day or in the last year or so.’¹

The emergence of an independent Irish entity in 1948 signalled a time of hope and ambition in the country. In the decade that followed, many of those dreams were left unfilled. In 1948 and again in 1954, Brendan Corish was in power. In 1954, he attained the rank of cabinet minister and his promotion was a clear indication of his rise within the framework of both the Labour Party and the Irish government. How did Corish delegate his new authority and what influence, if any, had he within his new ministry? Corish and the governments of the 1950s faced a most difficult challenge. Ireland was in a depressed state. High unemployment, mass emigration and economic stagnation featured prominently throughout this period. According to Brendan Halligan, ‘the fifties, in which he [Corish] had twice served in office were a time of failure, failure all round, when the experiment of independence was actually being questioned and many were giving their verdict by emigrating.’² Corish found his first term as a minister most difficult as the financial constraints imposed by the socio-economic climate of the time infringed greatly on his plans for social reform. With regard to Labour’s electoral strategy of independence, Corish’s second term in office also dictated the course of almost a third of his entire political life.

In the general election campaign that ensued from the collapse of the thirteenth Dáil, Brendan Corish spoke proudly of the record of the first Inter-Party Government. When he canvassed in Enniscorthy, Corish proclaimed: ‘Labour had not the slightest thing to be ashamed of by joining and becoming partners in the inter-party government but would look back [on it] with pride.’³ When he electioneered in New Ross, Corish again defended his party’s position in joining the coalition. He rhetorically asked: ‘had they anything to be ashamed of? Could any Fianna Fáil member say they did wrong to

¹ Mr Brendan Corish, Minister for Social Welfare, speaking at meetings in Graiguenamanagh, County Kilkenny and Muinebeag, Ballinkillen and Borris, County Carlow in support of the Labour Party candidate Mr Herbert Devoy in the Carlow-Kilkenny by-election, 3, 4 Nov. 1956 (N.A.I., Brendan Corish Social Welfare June, 1954-7, GIS 1/95, p. 1).

² Halligan, Brendan (ed.), *The Brendan Corish Seminar Proceedings* (Dublin, 2006), p. 20.

³ *The People*, 19 May 1951. Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking in Enniscorthy, County Wexford, as reported in *The People*.

the people of Ireland in allying themselves with other parties?’⁴ ‘Fianna Fáil had criticised Labour on siding with Fine Gael,’ according to Corish, ‘one would imagine that they had committed treason.’⁵ It was inevitable that Brendan Corish sought to present Labour’s participation in the 1948 coalition in a favourable light. With regard to local government, the Labour Party made tremendous strides in that particular area. One can also appreciate the position Fianna Fáil found itself in as de Valera’s party lost power because of Labour’s siding with Fine Gael. Brendan Corish appreciated the pivotal role played by his party in the last government. He believed that: ‘the stamp of the Labour Party was clearly indented on the progress of the government over the last three years. Labour had shown it was capable of accepting responsibilities.’⁶ He reiterated this viewpoint when he added: ‘in every sphere of political activity, the Labour Party has shown its ability and desire to assist in the work of building this country on a sound economy and has endeavoured to ensure that every Irish citizen will be given a living in accordance with Christian teaching.’⁷ The latter was of course an indirect reference to the Mother and Child affair and to these allegations of communism, which were continuously flung in the direction of the Labour Party. Corish believed that through participation in government, Labour’s *raison d’être* was confirmed. He stated:

We were regarded up to 1948, by a lot of malicious people as rabble rousers and represented as people who stood up on [a] platform and asked for the moon for certain sections. That is not true....If they [the Labour Party] could progress in the same degree within the inter-party government they would be coming closer to the Labour ideal and that meant a Labour government.⁸

Within Labour itself, there was a divergence of opinion over whether or not the party should have canvassed as an independent entity in 1951. Dublin members were most opposed to Labour electioneering with Fine Gael, whereas the party leader, William Norton, was in support. During the campaign, Brendan Corish, like Norton, declared his approval of Labour entering a similar coalition to the first Inter-Party Government. This intention was quite clear, when Corish ‘would repeat what he said in

⁴ *The People*, 26 May 1951. Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking in New Ross, County Wexford, as reported in *The People*.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 19 May 1951. Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking in Enniscorthy, County Wexford, as reported in *The People*.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 12 May 1951. Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking in Enniscorthy, County Wexford, as reported in *The People*.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 19 May 1951. Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking in Enniscorthy, County Wexford, as reported in *The People*.

1948 – that he was prepared to co-operate with any party or group of parties that would co-operate, in turn, in having the fundamentals of the Labour policy adhered to.’⁹

The increased cost of living was an important topic in the run up to the 1951 election. Corish was fully aware of the significant burden rising prices inflicted on families across the country. The higher cost of imports and the devaluation of the punt took its toll on the Irish people. This increase in import prices alone amassed to £29 million.¹⁰ His solution to that particular predicament was - as suggested by a Labour minister - a price-fixing tribunal.¹¹ Corish contrasted his party’s preferred policy of price control to Fianna Fáil’s remedy of wage control. He said: ‘the only way for workers to approve the question of the cost of living was by a reasonable wage demand negotiated in a reasonable way.’¹² In 1951, the balance of payments deficit amounted to £62 million.¹³ Corish’s view of this shortfall was in stark contrast to that of Fianna Fáil. He ‘never looked upon a deficit in the balance of payments as being undesirable in itself. In fact the object of our economic policy has been to bring about such a deficit because in this way and only in this way can we bring about the repatriation of our external assets.’¹⁴ Hence, Corish was unapologetic over his government’s vast spending on capital projects. He exclaimed:

There was a great wail from Fianna Fáil, who said they were running the country into debt and bemoaned the fact they were spending too much....Should they apologise for spending twenty-nine million pounds, if spending it on hospitals, agricultural development....There was no use in the country having money or foreign credits if they were not prepared to use them.¹⁵

Of course, on the other side of the argument was the issue of debt building up, which inevitably arose with increased borrowing by the state and the high burden it consequently placed on future generations to repay. Corish was willing to enter another alliance in 1951, although the attraction of a single Labour government remained his ultimate objective as one would expect. When he broached this subject, he admitted: ‘we were not the government during the last three years. We were only partners in a

⁹ *The People*, 26 May 1951. Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking in New Ross, County Wexford, as reported in *The People*.

¹⁰ Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking at the 1952 Labour Party Annual Conference, Four Provinces Hall, 18 Apr. 1952 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 1, 1948-51 Inter-Party Government, p. 6).

¹¹ *The People*, 26 May 1951. Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking in New Ross, County Wexford, as reported in *The People*.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Lee, J.J., *Ireland 1912-85; Politics and Society* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 322.

¹⁴ Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking at the 1952 Labour Party Annual Conference, Four Provinces Hall, 18 Apr. 1952 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 1, 1948-51 Inter-Party Government, p. 5).

¹⁵ *The People*, 26 May 1951. Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking in New Ross, County Wexford, as reported in *The People*.

government. Whilst we can claim credit for many of the improvements....it must be realised that the full party policy will not be put into operation until we can persuade the Irish people to send us to Dáil Éireann as a majority party.'¹⁶ There, in Corish's admission was a subtle indication of the concessions Labour was forced to make as a lesser member of the coalition. Brendan Corish was after all a pragmatist and he adopted this approach in regard to Labour's role in the first Inter-Party Government. He knew that his party was unable to form a majority government by itself in 1951 and so in order to implement some party policies; Labour had to participate in a coalition for the time being. However, this did not mean that Corish's principles were secondary to him. He felt that he would only continue to support a coalition with Fine Gael so long as Labour's policies were implemented.

In concluding his election campaign, Brendan Corish dwelled on the subject of Irish history and Labour's special relationship with it – an interest he developed from childhood and which influenced his politics in no small measure. To Corish, it was Labour who upheld the virtues of Ireland's great patriots into the 1950s. He professed: 'Labour were the real champions of the cause that Pearse and Connolly laid down their lives for and he hoped their success in the past would now be followed by a victory this time for their three candidates in the county.'¹⁷

On polling day, there were two viable alternatives placed before the Irish electorate - a single party government or a coalition of political parties, which in effect meant Fianna Fáil or a return of the inter-party government. In 1951, there was little enthusiasm for another general election amongst Irish voters. Newspaper reporters wrote accurately of a general degree of apathy among the electorate, as this lack of interest was widely felt throughout the countryside. One can understand the indifference voters felt at the time as the first Inter-Party Government only lasted in power over three years. Moreover, the only other alternative to this coalition of parties was a Fianna Fáil government, which had failed to produce an economic and social recovery for the country. A reporter from *The People* newspaper quite rightly described the 1951 election campaign as:

....the most uneventful election campaign in recent history and....the entire lack of outward public interest....At the end, just as at the beginning, the public are still very much in the twilight, if not in complete darkness as to the difference, if

¹⁶ *The People*, 12 May 1951. Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking in Enniscorthy, County Wexford, as reported in *The People*.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 19 May 1951. Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking in Enniscorthy, County Wexford, as reported in *The People*. The three candidates Brendan Corish referred to were John O'Leary, James Sinnott and of course his own candidature too.

any, between the parties on all the ordinary points of economic and social policy.¹⁸

In comparison to previous general election campaigns, there were also smaller attendances at the various rallies held in Dublin. Furthermore, there were instances when it was ‘almost amusing to see speakers on a platform or dray or lorry shouting through a loud speaker at a meeting that they could have addressed in a whisper. No meeting is a meeting now without a loud speaker.’¹⁹ However, it was Corish who - with or without the aid of a loud speaker – successfully attracted a sizeable turnout to the many political meetings he chaired in his home constituency, which one can attribute to the large-scale popularity he had in Wexford.

The general election to the fourteenth Dáil was held on 30 May 1951. Labour’s first preference vote remained practically intact but it lost four seats, which left the party with a total of sixteen.²⁰ Included in Labour’s casualty list were Roddy Connolly in Louth, Martin O’Sullivan in Dublin North Central, James Pattison in Kilkenny and the former Clann na Poblachta TD, Dr J.P. Brennan, who was a new recruit to the Labour Party. The successes in Dublin of Dr Noel Browne, Michael Ffrench-O’Carroll and Peadar Cowan as Independents were in complete contrast to the fortunes of the I.L.P. whose sole representative was James Larkin, the only candidate elected for the party in that county.²¹

The overall state of the parties remained basically the same in Wexford as they appeared three years earlier. However, there was surprise over the order the candidates were elected. There were ten candidates vying for five seats, which represented a fall of four from the previous election.²² Brendan Corish won the first seat in the previous general election and he was the third candidate elected in 1951. Fianna Fáil’s Dennis Allen beat him by 1,438 votes, or 3.4 per cent to claim the first seat.²³ Corish’s running mate, John O’Leary, received 265 more votes, or 0.6 per cent extra and beat him for the second seat.²⁴ Corish obtained 5,914 votes, or 14.05 per cent, which was 1.5 per cent less than his 1948 result.²⁵ Naturally, this slight drop was personally disappointing to

¹⁸ *The People*, 19 May 1951. Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking in Enniscorthy, County Wexford, as reported in *The People*.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Irish Times*, 2 June 1951.

²¹ Walker, Brian M. (ed.), *Parliamentary Election Results in Ireland, 1918-92* (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin and Queen’s University Belfast, 1992), p. 179.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 175, 183.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 175, 183.

Brendan Corish, especially given his higher public profile as parliamentary secretary. He was adamant that in the next general election, his own individual share of the votes would increase. However, on the night of the count, Corish spoke with delight of Labour's improved overall performance in Wexford. He said: 'Labour had done remarkably well....Since 1943, the Labour vote had increased during every election and while they did not succeed in having three candidates returned on this occasion, it seemed inevitable that the next election would see a further substantial improvement in the Labour vote.'²⁶

Anthony Esmonde of Fine Gael claimed the only seat for his party in Wexford. Labour's third candidate, James Sinnott, obtained 1,561 votes or 3.7 per cent and was therefore well off the mark to win a third seat for the I.L.P.²⁷ Thus, the only real change in the state of the parties in Wexford was that the I.L.P. held two seats in 1951, whereas three years earlier, one of those belonged to National Labour. The signal from Wexford was a clear endorsement for a return of the inter-party government.

Nationally, Fine Gael increased its representation to a total of forty TDs.²⁸ Before the dissolution of the Dáil, Fianna Fáil had sixty-eight seats and it returned with one extra TD.²⁹ The two clan parties – Clann na Poblachta and Clann na Talmhan – were left with two and six deputies respectively.³⁰ As was the case in the general election of 1948, the outcome in 1951 was again inconclusive. Regardless of Fianna Fáil's clear majority over its political rivals, de Valera's party was still short of the obligatory figure required to form a government – the sway of the Independents once again proved paramount.

On 7 June 1951, Corish along with the Administrative Council and Labour's fifteen other elected representatives convened a meeting to debate the party's prospects. Approval was once again given for Labour's partnership in another coalition on the condition that party policies would form part of the programme for government and also the number of cabinet positions held by Labour in the first Inter-Party Government would not be decreased. In 1951, there were fourteen elected Independents to Dáil Éireann, which included Dr Noel Browne and his three fellow sympathisers – Ffrench-

²⁶ *The People*, 26 May 1951. Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking on the night of the 1951 general election count, as reported in *The People*. John O'Leary was unable to make the count and so his daughter, Evelyn O'Leary spoke on his behalf.

²⁷ Walker, Brian M. (ed.), *Parliamentary Election Results in Ireland, 1918-92* (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin and Queen's University Belfast, 1992), p. 183.

²⁸ *Irish Times*, 2 June 1951.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

O'Carroll, Cowan and Jack McQuillan.³¹ These Independents charged the first Inter-Party Government with turning its back on the Mother and Child Scheme - Browne and his supporters now repaid the favour. On 13 June 1951, Éamon de Valera was elected Taoiseach to the fourteenth Dáil, which was his fifth time to occupy that particular role. Fianna Fáil was back in power and Brendan Corish was once again demoted to the opposition benches.

Corish was bitterly disappointed by the poor overall performance of the I.L.P. in the general election of 1951 despite its great success in Wexford. No doubt, Labour's involvement in the first Inter-Party Government and its support for another coalition with Fine Gael impacted negatively upon the party's traditional support base, particularly in working class Dublin. With only one TD left to represent the I.L.P. in Dublin, it was clear that some internal reform of the party was necessary. Certainly, this burden of responsibility rested on the shoulders of the Labour leadership but also on Brendan Corish as Chairman of the Labour Party. In 1951, Corish learned harsh lessons, which moulded his strategic planning for the party when he assumed leadership in 1960.

Brendan Corish's experience in the first inter-party years was a great lesson for him. He witnessed the effective running of a government close at hand and in the life of the fourteenth Dáil, he proved to be an able member of the opposition. Where constructive criticism was due, he was vocal on condemning government policy. Indeed, there was a lot to criticise. One major difficulty faced by the new government was the issue of emigration – a debate, which remained problematic for those in power throughout the 1950s. During this period, the Irish exodus reached heights, which was not previously seen since the nineteenth century. For example, around 400,000 people left Ireland during the 1950s.³² Furthermore, the commission set up to investigate emigration was still at work and its members were not ready to report their findings until 1954.

The attitude of the Taoiseach, Éamon de Valera, towards emigration in the early 1950s was in hindsight quite astonishing. It displayed a severe naivety on his part, although one might possibly claim that de Valera's general lack of understanding for emigrants stemmed from the emigration of his own mother to the U.S.A. Speaking in Galway in 1951, the Taoiseach remarked: 'the saddest part of all this is that work is available at home and in conditions infinitely better from the point of view of both health and morals....There is no doubt that many of those who emigrate could find

³¹ *Irish Times*, 2 June 1951.

³² Keogh, Dermot, *Twentieth Century Ireland* (Rev. ed., Dublin, 2005), p. 222.

employment at home at as good, or better, wages – and with living conditions far better – than they find in Britain.’³³ De Valera was also critical in his analysis on the effect Irish emigration had on the domestic economy. He believed that ‘not only do they [emigrants] fail to improve their own circumstances by going abroad, but they leave enterprises for the development of our own national resources without sufficient labour to enable progress to be made as rapidly as we would all desire.’³⁴ To these emigrants, the issue was one of survival. The harsh reality of the 1950s meant there was little choice for these people but to emigrate. Irish industry was severely underdeveloped. Thus they were forced to leave the country in search of work. The historian, Dermot Keogh, aptly described this mass emigration - particularly from the western seaboard - as a ‘haemorrhage’ of the Irish population.³⁵ His description was certainly accurate. From 1951 to 1956, Ireland’s emigration figure equalled 197,000.³⁶ This amount represented an increase of 77,000 on the number of Irish who left during the period 1946 to 1951.³⁷ These figures led Brendan Corish to remark that ‘men and cattle were now the main exports of the country.’³⁸ Corish ‘did not claim that the [first] Inter-Party Government had stemmed the tide of emigration but [he believed that] the situation had gravely worsened under Fianna Fáil.’³⁹ In fact, Corish’s opinion was justified as the 1951 census of population recorded an increase. Indeed, John O’Brien’s collection of essays entitled *The Vanishing Irish*, epitomised Ireland’s fragile social climate of the time.⁴⁰

The Commission on Emigration later identified the economy as the principle cause of Irish emigration.⁴¹ This was one definite area, which Corish believed the government could be of greater influence. However, de Valera’s choice of Seán MacEntee as Minister for Finance was a clear signal of the government’s return to conservatism as the minister advocated the pursuit of deflationary policies. In an effort to prevent the balance of payments deteriorating further, subsidies were lowered on

³³ *Irish Times*, 30 Aug. 1951. Mr Éamon de Valera, Taoiseach, speaking at a jubilee dinner for the Fianna Fáil party, Galway, as reported in the *Irish Times*.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Keogh, Dermot, *Twentieth Century Ireland* (Rev. ed., Dublin, 2005), p. 222.

³⁶ *Census of Population 1956*, as cited in Daly, Mary E., *The Slow Failure: Population Decline and Independent Ireland, 1920-73* (Wisconsin, 2006), p. 184.

³⁷ *Ibid.* The total number of Irish emigrants from 1946 to 1951 was 120,000.

³⁸ *Irish Independent*, 17 May 1954. Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking in Tagoat, County Wexford, as reported in the *Irish Independent*.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ O’Brien, John A. (ed.), *The Vanishing Irish* (New York, 1954).

⁴¹ Tracey Connolly, ‘The Commission on Emigration, 1948-54’ in Keogh, Dermot, O’Shea, Finbarr and Quinlan, Carmel (eds), *The Lost Decade: Ireland in the 1950s* (Cork, 2004), p. 99.

essential foodstuffs and higher penalties were imposed on beer, petrol, tobacco and income tax in the government's early budget on 2 April 1952. Furthermore, during his speech, MacEntee 'denounced the system of food subsidies, a system introduced by his own party.'⁴²

Brendan Corish abhorred the 1952 budget because of its regressive nature and referred to it as 'a vicious anti-working class budget and a bankers' budget.'⁴³ His condemnation was justified as the budget directly targeted the most vulnerable in society as subsidies were lowered and duties were raised. It was also clearly not based on the principle of equality. Furthermore, the government's action contributed to a rise in the cost of living in 1954 by twenty-three per cent and also added to the high level of emigration.⁴⁴ Corish was understandably annoyed with the various Independents, which helped to get the budget passed. Indeed, Dr Noel Browne was reproached eighteen years later at the 1970 Labour Party Conference by Corish for his part in the 1952 budget. Following Labour's momentous ruling in favour of coalition, there was 'a bitter exchange....when Browne shouted "shame! shame!" at Brendan Corish, to be met with the retort, "I never shouted shame when you voted to abolish food subsidies."' ⁴⁵

In response to the budget, Labour organised a protest meeting outside the G.P.O. for 6 April 1952, which attracted more than 20,000 people.⁴⁶ Eight days later, there was a similar protest held in Enniscorthy. The government stated that the reckless spending of the previous administration was to blame for the severity of its budget. At the Enniscorthy meeting, Corish denied this accusation. He enquired: 'was there any Fianna Fáil supporter present who thought it [the budget] was good? They might have the pip-squeaks who would protest that the last government was responsible for it and who would allege they had left the country in debt because they had spent too much....the last government did not spend enough.'⁴⁷ However, the Department of Finance failed to anticipate the slight economic turnaround in the latter part of 1951 and in the following year. One can also say that MacEntee overreacted. Brendan Corish continued to promote a capital investment programme. He said that 'his anxiety was and still was to try to have invested in this country every single pound note they could get....he did not

⁴² 'Irish affairs, latest from the capital' in *The People*, 5 Apr. 1952.

⁴³ Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking at the 1952 Annual Labour Party Conference, Four Provinces Hall, 18 Apr. 1952 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 1, 1948-51 Inter-Party Government, p. 2).

⁴⁴ *The People*, 1 May 1954. Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking during the 1954 general election campaign, Gorey, County Wexford, as reported in *The People*.

⁴⁵ Horgan, John, *Labour: The Price of Power* (Dublin, 1986), p. 65.

⁴⁶ *The People*, 12 Apr. 1952.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 19 Apr. 1952. Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking at a budget protest organised by the Labour Party, Enniscorthy, County Wexford, as reported in *The People*.

care if it came from Hong Kong – they were prepared to invest that money and to get the Irish people to invest their money here in their own country.’⁴⁸ Corish’s statement was not mere rhetoric as it was blatantly obvious that a need for investment existed in the country at the time. The spending of the previous government had accumulated while the coalition was in power but this money was directed at worthwhile investments. Corish warned the government’s supporters not to allow their verdict of the budget be clouded by their loyalty to Fianna Fáil. He asked:

What would the people of Enniscorthy do to himself and Johnny O’Leary if they were still in an inter-party government and supported such a budget as that? They would take them down off the platform and probably throw them into the river but the Fianna Fáil supporters were most loyal, for their great white chief [de Valera] could do no wrong.⁴⁹

Three weeks after the budget was passed, the Labour Party held its national conference on 24 April 1953. Its timing was flawless. In his speech to the Labour delegates, Corish again condemned the budget from ‘the context of the overall economic situation and the state of the economy.’⁵⁰ He warned: ‘higher prices mean lower purchasing power, which in turn involves fewer purchases’ and predicted that ‘increases in unemployment will follow.’⁵¹ Corish also outlined a counter proposal to the government’s programme. He said: ‘there is an alternative to the Tory policy and outlook of Fianna Fáil and it lies in the implementation of the Labour policy of development of the national economy and the full utilisation of our resources of men, materials and money.’⁵²

Ireland’s poor economic performance continued. From 1951 to 1954 the Irish G.N.P. figure grew a little over two per cent.⁵³ Furthermore, unemployment levels reached 73,000 by 1954.⁵⁴ It was clear that the government inspired little confidence in its people. Moreover, the negative ramifications of the 1952 budget were felt years after the collapse of the fourteenth Dáil. At a Wexford Labour Party meeting in 1955, Corish said: ‘the budget of 1952 did so much harm to the country that some time must

⁴⁸ *The People*, 19 Apr. 1952. Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking at a budget protest organised by the Labour Party, Enniscorthy, County Wexford, as reported in *The People*.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking at the 1952 Labour Party Annual Conference, Four Provinces Hall, 18 Apr. 1952 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 1, 1948-51 Inter-Party Government, p. 2).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁵³ Gerry O’Hanlon, ‘Population Change in the 1950s: A Statistical Review’ in Keogh, Dermot, O’Shea, Finbarr and Quinlan, Carmel (eds), *The Lost Decade: Ireland in the 1950s* (Cork, 2004), p. 74.

⁵⁴ *Irish Independent*, 30 Apr. 1954. Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking on Radio Éireann’s party political broadcast for the 1954 general election campaign on behalf of the Labour Party, 29 Apr. 1954, as reported in the *Irish Independent*.

necessarily elapse before the damage could be repaired. That budget was responsible for an abnormal increase in unemployment in the following years....[and it had] a serious effect on the cost of living.’⁵⁵

Naturally, the Fianna Fáil government of 1951 to 1954 was not devoid of some successes, which Corish duly acknowledged despite being in opposition at the time. Most notably, de Valera and his party overcame the controversial Mother and Child debacle with the introduction of Dr Jim Ryan’s 1953 health act and they also managed to bring both the hierarchy and doctors onboard with the inclusion of a relatively moderate means test. During its term in power, the government also made advances towards reforming social welfare. Brendan Corish credited William Norton with many of the improvements contained in Ryan’s 1952 social welfare act. Corish said: ‘in particular the provisions of the new Bill relating to unemployment and disability benefits, widows’ pensions and maternity allowances...have been so completely adopted in the new Bill that practically all the relevant sections are the same [as Norton’s Bill], word for word.’⁵⁶ Nonetheless, he was still critical of the exclusion of several key components of Norton’s scheme in Ryan’s act, which included death grants and pensions for the retired.⁵⁷ However, despite all these improvements in social welfare reform from 1951 to 1954, many families were left struggling to survive as the cost of living soared.

On 24 April 1954, the life of the fourteenth Dáil was brought to an end following the withdrawal of support from the Independents. Labour lost one of its seats in the nine by-elections held during the government’s reign.⁵⁸ The net effect was Fianna Fáil down one, Independents unchanged and finally Fine Gael increased its representation by two.⁵⁹ The result of the general election revealed the extent of the electorate’s discontent with its government but also their faith in the opposition parties for a viable solution. As a pragmatist, Brendan Corish once again favoured Labour’s participation in another coalition and he endorsed it vocally. Naturally, his approval was inline with the official party view from the previous conference but there were rumblings of disquiet from Labour members in Dublin. On 10 May 1954, James Larkin

⁵⁵ Mr Brendan Corish, Minister for Social Welfare, speaking at a meeting of Wexford Area Council of the Labour Party, 22 May 1955 (N.A.I., Brendan Corish Social Welfare June, 1954-7, GIS 1/95, p. 1).

⁵⁶ Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking at the 1952 Labour Party Annual Conference, Four Provinces Hall, 18 Apr. 1952 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 1, 1948-51 Inter-Party Government, p. 8).

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Walker, Brian M. (ed.), *Parliamentary Election Results in Ireland, 1918-92* (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin and Queen’s University Belfast, 1992), p. 183.

⁵⁹ Ibid., pp. 183-4.

declared at a meeting in Clanbrassil Street, Dublin that ‘party policy was not decided by any individual, whether that be Mr Norton, Mr Corish, Mr Larkin or Mr Kyne.’⁶⁰ This statement is revealing as it indicated the weight of Corish’s growing influence within the party. It also reminds us of his attachment to coalitions, a view, which he dramatically reversed a few short years later. Brendan Corish’s support for Labour’s involvement in another coalition was certainly based on pragmatism. As a realist, he was fully attuned to the fact that Labour was unable to lead a majority government by itself in 1954. However, he was unwilling to sacrifice everything for political office. If Labour’s policies were not incorporated into the coalition’s programme, then he felt that his party would be better off in opposition until it could form its own majority government.

In 1954, the electorate was once again faced with the narrow choice of either Fianna Fáil or an inter-party government. However, the election campaigns of the parties were given a new dimension that year as Radio Éireann transmitted political broadcasts. Brendan Corish gave one of Labour’s two addresses to the nation on 29 April 1954 following on from Seán MacEntee, Richard Mulcahy and Seán Lemass. From the outset, Corish acknowledged that a lot of voters had grown weary of Irish politics. This admission was from a politician, who despite the trappings of power remained connected with his public. He said:

I am sure that many of you....have expressed yourselves as being fed up with politics. We in the Labour Party think of politics, not in terms of slogans, catch-cries, false promises or high sounding economic theories but in terms of men and women and the difficulties that confront them throughout their lives....these are the things that really matter in this election, as in every election.⁶¹

Corish listed the cost of living and unemployment as the two main issues of the general election.⁶² It is surprising that emigration was not included in his list, although naturally it was discussed as a by-product of unemployment. Corish also promoted the Labour Party’s election programme live on air. He said its first point was committed to

⁶⁰ *Irish Times*, 11 May 1954. Mr James Larkin TD, speaking at a Labour Party meeting, Clonbrassil Street, Dublin, 10 May 1954, as reported in the *Irish Times*.

⁶¹ *The People*, 1 May 1954. Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking on Radio Éireann’s party political broadcast for the 1954 general election campaign on behalf of the Labour Party, 29 Apr. 1954, as reported in *The People*.

⁶² *Irish Independent*, 30 Apr. 1954. Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking on Radio Éireann’s party political broadcast for the 1954 general election campaign on behalf of the Labour Party, 29 Apr. 1954, as reported in the *Irish Independent*.

lowering the price of food through reinstating subsidies on essential food products.⁶³ He also promised to increase social welfare payments to the unemployed, pensioners and widows. This measure would ‘enable these people in less fortunate circumstances to live in some decency and comfort.’⁶⁴ During his broadcast, he spoke of the immediate need to find secure employment with fair wages and conditions for those who were eager to return to work.⁶⁵ Corish also accepted that financial constraints were burdens that all governments had to overcome. In the language of a realist, he warned:

Finance will always be the obstacle to real development and real progress in this country....No matter how well intentioned a government might be towards the expansion of agriculture, the development of our industrial resources....their good intentions cannot bear fruit if policies of credit restriction and high interest rates are pursued by the banks.⁶⁶

Clearly, Corish gained from his experience as parliamentary secretary in the first Inter-Party Government as he fully realised the constraints imposed by finance. He was most certainly not a young, naïve politician and again, Corish’s statement is indicative of his pragmatism as a politician. Most importantly, there was hope in his message. Corish said: ‘with full employment will come greater prosperity and a better life for our people....Prosperity and security for the worker must also mean prosperity for the shopkeeper and for the farmer. Full employment will mean greater production, so that state and local services can be more easily paid for and....taxation eased.’⁶⁷ Corish was deeply enthused by Irish history and so he ended his speech with a reference to the proclamation of Easter week. This was also a call to those now disillusioned with politics. He said:

The younger generation will not be satisfied with mere lip service to the principles of the proclamation. They demand that....reality [be] given to the guarantee of equal rights and equal opportunities. This can only be achieved through political action. You – all of you – have a duty to exercise your right as a citizen and cast your vote on polling day.⁶⁸

⁶³ *Irish Independent*, 30 Apr. 1954. Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking on Radio Éireann’s party political broadcast for the 1954 general election campaign on behalf of the Labour Party, 29 Apr. 1954, as reported in the *Irish Independent*.

⁶⁴ *The People*, 1 May 1954. Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking on Radio Éireann’s party political broadcast for the 1954 general election campaign on behalf of the Labour Party, 29 Apr. 1954, as reported in *The People*.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

Therefore, Corish had in a clear, precise and engaging manner set out his political intentions. If elected to government, these promises would have to be fulfilled. It proved a tall order.

It is interesting to note that on the day Brendan Corish made his radio broadcast, the leader of the Labour Party, William Norton, addressed a crowd in Narraghmore, a village in Norton's native constituency of Kildare.⁶⁹ While electioneering, William Norton always remained within the confines of his home constituency. The fact that Corish was chosen to give Labour's first election broadcast on Radio Éireann, was a true testament to his rise within the party. He was selected over other high profile Labour figures such as Thomas Kyne, James Everett and James Larkin. The attributes Corish had included great speaking ability, youthful vigour, a positive image among the public and media and no doubt, his interest in drama also added to his overall performance on the radio. Corish was still Chief Whip of the Parliamentary Labour Party and naturally was viewed as a possible successor to Norton. However, one might also suggest that it was symbolic. The radio was a new medium for Irish general election campaigns and Corish, who was not yet in his thirty-sixth year, embodied Labour's future.

Brendan Corish launched his own vigorous campaign in Wexford. He was eager to improve upon his last election performance in 1951 and was determined to maintain Labour's two seats. As a productive backbencher in the fourteenth Dáil, he held the government accountable for their misdeeds and 'defeatist attitude.'⁷⁰ He also gained greater publicity, particularly in his opposition to the 1952 'hunger budget.'⁷¹ Furthermore, Corish as an elected representative 'was always freely available to everyone, irrespective of class, creed or political affiliations.'⁷² This accessibility was a trait passed down by his father and also a lesson Corish taught to his political successor in Wexford, Brendan Howlin. Despite its imposition on family life, Corish's accessibility to his constituents remained a consistent feature throughout his political career and no doubt, contributed towards his high popularity among locals in Wexford. Brendan Howlin recalled how:

One Saturday night...he [Corish] was at home after a day's clinics when a knock came to the door. A constituent presented himself with an issue. When

⁶⁹ *Irish Independent*, 30 Apr. 1954. William Norton gave his national radio address on 12 May 1954.

⁷⁰ *The People*, 1 May 1954. Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking during the 1954 general election campaign, Gorey, County Wexford, as reported in *The People*.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 8 May 1954. Mr Brendan Corish, TD speaking during the 1954 general election campaign, Bull Ring, Wexford, as reported in *The People*.

⁷² *Ibid.*

invited in by Brendan, the constituent....hesitated. He explained that in fact he voted for Sir Anthony Esmond TD but felt that he couldn't bother a gentleman with his problem! He got service just the same.⁷³

Brendan Corish also remarked on his immense effort to maintain availability when he acknowledged that 'at times it meant I almost needed eyes in the back of my head to wave or say hello on the streets.'⁷⁴ His statement was indicative of how local politics in Ireland was at that time and no doubt, the strain between the local agenda and the national agenda was difficult to balance for some TDs.

Corish referred to the general election in 1954 as 'a bread and butter election,' as they 'represented the essential foods, clothing and other necessities.'⁷⁵ Naturally, he wanted the core issues of the election to focus on the concerns of the people. When he canvassed in Gorey, Corish accused Fianna Fáil of having reneged on an earlier promise the party made to the public. He said 'in 1951, the Taoiseach promised in a seventeen-point plan that food subsidies would not be removed. People accepted the Fianna Fáil party on that promise....the dismay and disgust....when they discovered on 3 April 1952 that the promise had been broken. The food subsidies were removed.'⁷⁶ Corish also charged the government with attempting to divide the Labour Party. He said: 'Fianna Fáil had thrown out accusations at members of the movement as being pro-Fine Gael and pro-Fianna Fáil....It was not whom they [Labour] voted for but what they voted for.'⁷⁷ Of course, this was another tactic used by the government party to create a sense of division within the I.L.P., which contrasted with the display of unity showed by Fianna Fáil and its supporters.

Emigration was a topic frequently discussed by Brendan Corish when he electioneered in his home constituency. He accepted that 'many of the people listening to him had felt the curse of emigration in their homes as one of the family was forced to travel to England to seek work....The people must feel very cynical towards a government who accept emigration so easily.'⁷⁸ However, he was also critical of Fianna Fáil's relief schemes for the unemployed. He quite rightly viewed it as an inappropriate

⁷³ Brendan Howlin in Halligan, Brendan (ed.), *The Brendan Corish Seminar Proceedings* (Dublin, 2006), p. 17.

⁷⁴ Reprint of interview by *The People* reporter Mr Mervyn Moore with Mr Brendan Corish, Jan. 1983 in *The People*, 22 Feb. 1990.

⁷⁵ *The People*, 8 May 1954. Mr Brendan Corish, TD speaking during the 1954 general election campaign, Bull Ring, Wexford, as reported in *The People*.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 1 May 1954. Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking during the 1954 general election campaign, Gorey, County Wexford, as reported in *The People*.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

solution in the long-term as it only offered short-term benefits and temporary security for those out of work. Corish then spoke of Ireland's progress - or lack of - since the withdrawal of the British from the twenty-six counties. He declared: 'since 1922 a measure of freedom had been gained in this country but unemployment and emigration are just as common now as then....The people still had their troubles....and still wondered when and if there would be a change. The Labour Party could bring about that long awaited change because they stood for the people.'⁷⁹ In addition, Brendan Corish gave his verdict on what constituted an effective government. He said that 'a government could always be judged as a success or a failure by the number of unemployed. If they are to judge the present government by these standards they must say that they had failed.'⁸⁰ During the first Inter-Party Government years, the number for those out of work saw a slight fall, although the figure remained overall far too high. If one had taken the unemployment figure three years later as the principle-determining factor of the effectiveness of the fifteenth Dáil, it too would have been deemed a failure.

On 18 May 1954, the Irish electorate went to the polls again. For Corish, the results were a success. Labour's portion of the votes remained intact but it won three additional seats, which brought its total to nineteen.⁸¹ Maureen O'Carroll in Dublin North-Central and Denis Larkin in Dublin North East won two of Labour's new seats.⁸² Their victories contrasted with the loss of seats for Dr Noel Browne, Michael Ffrench-O'Carroll and Peter Cowan in Dublin South-East, Dublin South-West and Dublin North-East respectively.⁸³ Cowan remained an Independent, while Ffrench-O'Carroll and Browne joined the ranks of Fianna Fáil. In 1954, Labour's support base was greater in Leinster than in Munster as eleven of its TDs came from Leinster. The urban-rural divide was still present. Only five of the Parliamentary Labour Party TDs were elected from urban constituencies and four of these came from Dublin. Both Clann na Poblachta and Clann na Talmhan won three and five seats respectively.⁸⁴ Support for the government fell. Prior to the dissolution, Fianna Fáil had seventy-two seats and it

⁷⁹ *The People*, 1 May 1954. Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking during the 1954 election campaign, Gorey, County Wexford, as reported in *The People*.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Irish Times*, 29 May 1954. See also Walker, Brian M. (ed.), *Parliamentary Election Results in Ireland, 1918-92* (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin and Queen's University Belfast, 1992), p. 190. Polling in Wicklow was delayed until 26 May 1954 due to the death of the Fianna Fáil candidate, P. Ledwidge. Labour's nineteen TDs included the outgoing Ceann Comhairle, Patrick Hogan who was automatically returned.

⁸² Walker, Brian M. (ed.), *Parliamentary Election Results in Ireland, 1918-92* (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin and Queen's University Belfast, 1992), p. 186.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Irish Times*, 29 May 1954.

returned to the Dáil with sixty-five.⁸⁵ The main victor was Fine Gael, which won a total of fifty seats.⁸⁶ As the historian, Joe Lee explained, Fine Gael ‘achieved this by the simple device of doing nothing in opposition. Fianna Fáil was entirely the architect of its own defeat.’⁸⁷ One might claim that Labour was similar to Fine Gael in that respect, although Norton’s party remained vociferous in opposition with their organised protest against the 1952 budget as a prime example.

In Wexford, the state of the parties was identical to three years earlier. Eight men contested the election, which included two Labour candidates.⁸⁸ Brendan Corish won 7,001 first preference votes or 16.8 per cent, which was an increase of 1,087 or 2.7 per cent from 1951.⁸⁹ He claimed the second seat for Labour, whereas he won the third seat in the previous general election.⁹⁰ This was a great achievement for Corish. It demonstrated his effective work as a member of the opposition. It is worth noting that Corish’s growth in support occurred following a stint on the backbenches. In contrast, in the general election after his first government involvement, Corish received a 14.1 per cent share of the vote, whereas in 1948, his personal tally measured in at 15.6 per cent.⁹¹ It appeared that Corish’s voting pattern followed a similar line to that of his party nationally. However, on the night of the count Brendan Corish had another reason to celebrate. Labour managed to hold on to its two seats in Wexford when his party colleague, John O’Leary, was returned to the Dáil. O’Leary received 6,150 first preference votes or 14.8 per cent and won the final seat in Wexford.⁹² In his victory speech, Corish said: ‘as far as the Labour Party were concerned they were very, very pleased with the result of the election...the Labour Party had retained the same percentage as in 1951, though they only had two candidates on this occasion.’⁹³ He also spoke of ‘the proud tradition of County Wexford of being the only county in Ireland with two Labour deputies for such a long period,’ which was of course a tribute to the electoral achievements of his own father.⁹⁴

⁸⁵ *Irish Times*, 29 May 1954. See also Walker, Brian M. (ed.), *Parliamentary Election Results in Ireland, 1918-92* (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin and Queen’s University Belfast, 1992), p. 190.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Lee, J.J., *Ireland 1912-85; Politics and Society* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 326.

⁸⁸ Walker, Brian M. (ed.), *Parliamentary Election Results in Ireland, 1918-92* (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin and Queen’s University Belfast, 1992), p. 190.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 183, 190.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 175, 183.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 190.

⁹³ *The People*, 22 May 1954. Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking on the night of the 1954 general election count, as reported in *The People*.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

James Ryan and Denis Allen won two seats for Fianna Fáil in Wexford. Ryan won the first seat with 7,214 first preference votes or 17.3 per cent – 0.5 per cent more than Corish.⁹⁵ Anthony Esmonde received 6,247 or fifteen per cent of votes and won the third and only seat for Fine Gael.⁹⁶ Allen followed him with 6,173 votes or 14.8 per cent.⁹⁷ As Corish declared: ‘the people of Wexford had now made their choice’ and that was the second Inter-Party Government.⁹⁸

A series of meetings were held between Labour and Fine Gael on the prospects of forming a new coalition. Norton’s party insisted on four ministries and one Labour parliamentary secretary. The I.L.P. learned from its mistakes in the first Inter-Party Government. If the party was to have any real influence on the direction of government policy, it was imperative that they were in charge of at least one of the three main departments.⁹⁹ This would give Labour a ‘sense of security’ in any new coalition.¹⁰⁰ Eventually, the parties reached an agreement on a twelve-point programme for government. Most importantly for Corish and Labour, these promises included a reduction on the duty on butter, the construction of more houses, the setting up of a public investment board and social welfare reforms. Brendan Corish had personal responsibility for advancing social welfare. There was some vagueness in the presentation of several of these aims. A writer with the *Irish Times* warned, that it was a ‘mistake for the Labour Party to assume that everything is tied up in neat blue ribbons....the agreement in relation to all other points [except for price reductions] in Labour’s submission is formulated so ambiguously that it provides Fine Gael with enough room for manoeuvre to raise a very large question mark.’¹⁰¹ Clearly, compromises are inevitable in all coalitions and Brendan Corish, as a pragmatist, understood this fully. As a minister in the second Inter-Party Government, he was forced to work within the confines of coalition and finance to ensure that key improvements were introduced in social welfare.

A special conference organised for the Labour Party was held in Dublin on 30 May 1954 and more than 700 delegates attended.¹⁰² Those who favoured Labour’s

⁹⁵ Walker, Brian M. (ed.), *Parliamentary Election Results in Ireland, 1918-92* (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin and Queen’s University Belfast, 1992), p. 190.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *The People*, 22 May 1954. Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking on the night of the 1954 general election count, as reported in *The People*.

⁹⁹ Aknefton, ‘Pin-pointing politics’ in *Irish Times*, 5 June 1954.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Irish Times*, 31 May 1954.

partnership in another coalition were a lot more numerous than those who opposed it and since Dublin anti-coalitionist members abstained from the all-important vote, one could easily have predicted that consent would be given to the party's entry. Therefore, all the groundwork was finally put in place for Brendan Corish's second period in office.

On 2 June 1954, John A. Costello was elected Taoiseach by a majority of thirteen votes and thus the second Inter-Party Government came into being.¹⁰³ This coalition consisted of Fine Gael, the Labour Party and Clann na Talmhan. MacBride's Clann na Poblachta did not participate directly but it gave outside support to the new government. In contrast to the former inter-party government, this coalition did not have to appease every whim of the Independents. Hence, it was thought that its stability would be more intact than was the situation from 1948 to 1951. Newspaper reporters of the period also remarked upon the youthfulness of the cabinet, which led one correspondent from *The People* to write: 'a most notable feature is the inclusion of so many young men of promise.'¹⁰⁴ It was hoped that this combination of youthful vigour and innovation would help inspire a recovery in Ireland. Fine Gael was given eight ministries in the second Inter-Party Government. Patrick McGilligan did not return to Finance in 1954 and in his place, the position went to the conservative, Gerard Sweetman. McGilligan became Attorney General instead. Richard Mulcahy was chosen as Minister for Education and General Seán MacEoin was given defence. Patrick O'Donnell became the new Minister for Local Government and T.F. O'Higgins was put in charge of the Department of Health. James Dillon accepted the agriculture portfolio. Liam Cosgrave led external affairs and according to Stephen Collins, 'it was during this period that Cosgrave renewed his acquaintance with Brendan Corish.'¹⁰⁵ As Minister for Lands, Joseph Blowick was Clann na Talmhan's only TD who received a ministry. It was the Parliamentary Labour Party that decided which of its four TDs to appoint as ministers. Eventually, Michael Keyes and James Everett were given responsibility for the Department of Posts and Telegraphs and the Department of Law. William Norton became Tánaiste for a second time and was also made Minister for Industry and Commerce. In reference to Labour's management of the latter department, a reporter

¹⁰³ *Dáil Debate*, volume 146, column 34, 2 June 1954.

¹⁰⁴ 'Irish affairs, latest from the capital' in *The People*, 5 June 1954.

¹⁰⁵ Collins, Stephen, *The Cosgrave Legacy* (Dublin, 1996), p. 75.

with the *Irish Times* wrote that it was: ‘a wonderful opportunity and the greatest yet provided if Labour can measure up to the degree of imagination required.’¹⁰⁶

The Parliamentary Labour Party chose Brendan Corish as Minister for Social Welfare to the fifteenth Dáil. Like his father before him, Corish always showed concern over the plight of Ireland’s poor and underprivileged. At the age of thirty-five, he was the second youngest minister seated around the cabinet table after Liam Cosgrave. Corish was naturally thrilled by his new appointment, particularly because his father never experienced a cabinet posting during his career. Therefore, Brendan Corish fully appreciated the honour and opportunities presented to him as a minister. On 4 June 1954, a homecoming reception was held in Wexford town to honour Corish. On his journey home from Dublin, he was met by a public procession led by St Patrick’s Fife and Drum Band on Wexford Bridge. They proceeded to the Bull Ring where a crowd gathered in celebration. Corish’s running mate, John O’Leary, was very generous in his praise of the new Minister for Social Welfare. He said: ‘the joy and delight in having Labour representation in the cabinet, which he was feeling, increased when one of the men chosen was the young man of ability from Wexford, Brendan Corish.’¹⁰⁷ At the reception, O’Leary also spoke of the Corish political dynasty. He said: ‘the name of Corish was honoured and respected in Wexford more than forty years ago....It was what was to be expected that Wexford gave such a welcome to his son, Brendan Corish, on his first return to the town after being chosen as Minister for Social Welfare.’¹⁰⁸ Corish was ‘overwhelmed’ by the welcome he received.¹⁰⁹ During his speech he assured his audience ‘that, as far as his constituents were concerned, he might be the Minister for Social Welfare but to the people of the town and county of Wexford....It made no difference to him what they wanted to approach him about or what the affiliations were of the people concerned. He was at their service.’¹¹⁰

The new government was in power less than a month when the findings of the Commission on Emigration were presented to the Dáil. This report detailed the reasons why so many Irish people left the country. The causes were poverty, a weak economy and lack of continuous growth, a poor standard of living, unemployment or no security

¹⁰⁶ Aknefton, ‘Pin-pointing politics’ in *Irish Times*, 5 June 1954.

¹⁰⁷ *The People*, 12 June 1954. Mr John O’Leary TD, speaking at a homecoming reception in honour of the appointment of Mr Brendan Corish as Minister for Social Welfare, Bull Ring, Wexford, 4 June 1954, as reported in *The People*.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, Mr Brendan Corish, Minister for Social Welfare, speaking at his homecoming reception after his ministerial appointment, Bull Ring, Wexford, 4 June 1954, as reported in *The People*.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

in Irish jobs, unexpected pregnancies, desire for adventure or travel and to improve their circumstances.¹¹¹ In 1954, 43,000 Irish people left the country.¹¹² The reality of 1950s Ireland was indeed far removed from de Valera's 1943 utopian vision of the country. His image was 'of a people who were satisfied with frugal comfort....a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children....and the laughter of comely maidens.'¹¹³ This was in stark contrast to a decaying countryside, which had a glaring absence of industry and ships full of young Irish emigrants bound for Britain and North America. The coalition parties spent fewer years in power during the 1950s but they too must shoulder some of the blame for Ireland's mass emigration in this decade. Whatever good intentions Corish and his government had in their attempts to turn the tide of Irish emigration, this wave did not relent. From July to December 1955, emigration rose again; it decreased a little in the following year but reached a new height of 54,000 in 1957.¹¹⁴ A cynic might argue that emigration was a convenient solution to Ireland's unemployment problem and that the remittance from emigrants contributed significantly to Irish revenue. What is certain, is that the departure of so many young people 'reduced the potential for development [in Ireland], creating a more conservative society which was less amenable to change.'¹¹⁵ There were a number of recommendations put forward in the Commission on Emigration report, including one, which advocated an extra source of income for farmers.¹¹⁶ In fact, during Corish's 1948 general election campaign, he promoted this type of additional income as one possible deterrent to emigration. Of course, as Minister for Social Welfare, it was possible for Brendan Corish to indirectly reduce the emigration figures along with his cabinet colleagues. He increased social welfare benefits but the cost of living rose at a greater pace.

¹¹¹ Enda Delaney, 'The Vanishing Irish? The Exodus from Ireland in the 1950s' in Keogh, Dermot, O'Shea, Finbarr and Quinlan, Carmel (eds), *The Lost Decade: Ireland in the 1950s* (Cork, 2004), pp. 82-3, 85-6. See also Tracey Connolly, 'The Commission on Emigration, 1948-54' in Keogh, Dermot, O'Shea, Finbarr and Quinlan, Carmel (eds), *The Lost Decade: Ireland in the 1950s* (Cork, 2004), pp. 92-3.

¹¹² Daly, Mary E., *The Slow Failure: Population Decline and Independent Ireland, 1920-73* (Wisconsin, 2006), p. 185.

¹¹³ Moynihan, Maurice (ed.), *Speeches and Statements by Éamon de Valera, 1917-73* (Dublin, 1980), p. 466.

¹¹⁴ *Irish Times*, as cited in Daly, Mary E., *The Slow Failure: Population Decline and Independent Ireland, 1920-73* (Wisconsin, 2006), p. 185.

¹¹⁵ Tracey Connolly, 'The Commission on Emigration, 1948-54' in Keogh, Dermot, O'Shea, Finbarr and Quinlan, Carmel (eds), *The Lost Decade: Ireland in the 1950s* (Cork, 2004), p. 98.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 99-100.

Before 1954, Brendan Corish's only experience in government was as parliamentary secretary for three years. In the second Inter-Party Government, he was forced to learn quickly on the job. As Brendan Halligan explained: '[Corish was] a constant student too, who easily acknowledged what he didn't know and kept learning; and kept developing as a result.'¹¹⁷ With this new post, came greater responsibility, which naturally encroached upon his precious time with the family. As well as weekly clinics, Dáil sittings and parliamentary party appointments to keep, there were also cabinet meetings to attend and a department to run. He was a proponent of the welfare state and as minister, Corish had to ensure equitable social welfare benefits while he remained within the confines of his department's allocated expenditure. It was also up to the discretion of Corish and his advisors how best to distribute this money among the various deserving beneficiaries. One of Corish's earliest actions as Minister for Social Welfare was to ensure that the amount given to recipients of unemployment benefits was neither decreased nor stopped.¹¹⁸ He also intended to decrease the waiting time for receipt of benefit for those who were newly made redundant. Corish worked well in government with both his cabinet colleagues and his departmental staff. Meath's newly elected Labour TD, James Tully, referred to him as 'a very human member of the government who was always ready to give consideration to any grievances which were put forward.'¹¹⁹

In Corish's first year as minister, he followed through with an earlier promise regarding pension increases. Payments for the blind were also improved along with orphans and widows' pensions. In addition, he brought a Bill before the house, which concerned workmen's compensation. In his estimation, this Bill signified 'a very big advance for workers. Substantial increases in payment of weekly benefit....and the maximum compensation in the case of fatal accidents were provided. The Bill also....was of considerable benefit to injured workers.'¹²⁰

Brendan Corish was pleased with the government's overall record during its first year in power. He said:

¹¹⁷ Halligan, Brendan (ed.), *The Brendan Corish Seminar Proceedings* (Dublin, 2006), p. 19.

¹¹⁸ *Irish Independent*, 12 June 1954. Mr Brendan Corish, Minister for Social Welfare, speaking at the concluding session of the I.T.G.W.U. conference, Kilkee, County Clare, as reported in the *Irish Independent*.

¹¹⁹ *Drogheda Independent*, 3 Dec. 1955. Mr James Tully TD, speaking at a Victory Social and Supper held by the Slane Branch of the Labour Party, Conyngham Arms Hotel, Slane, Co Meath, as reported in the *Drogheda Independent*.

¹²⁰ Mr Brendan Corish, Minister for Social Welfare, speaking at a Labour Party meeting, Clonmel Town Hall, County Tipperary, 4 June 1955 (N.A.I., Brendan Corish Social Welfare June, 1954-7, GIS 1/95, p. 1).

Although barely twelve months in office....the government could point to many solid achievements. It might be true to say that the progress had not been spectacular nor as rapid as many might wish but it must be remembered that the initial period of a government's term of office are one of review and examination when the foundations were laid upon, which a stronger and better social services could be built.¹²¹

In an attempt to lower the cost of living, the government in its first budget decreased the duty on butter by five pence per pound and thus fulfilled a key pledge of its programme for government.¹²² The coalition also opposed a recommendation by the Prices Advisory Board, which advocated a rise on the tax on tea. Therefore, in Corish's opinion, his government 'had shown evidence of its determination to control the cost of living.'¹²³ The second Inter-Party Government also made inroads into improving Ireland's critical unemployment situation. The number of people in employment had grown by 7,000 in June 1955 compared with the previous year.¹²⁴ These slight improvements led Corish to say: 'in my view the people of this country are as a whole better off than they were when this government took over office and certainly much better off than they would have been had the previous government got back into power.'¹²⁵ Of course, during the 1950s, the Marshall Plan also contributed to the increase in industrial production, which sparked a period of economic growth in many western European countries. It was inevitable that Ireland would experience some net benefits from these economic miracles. Even at this early stage, Corish was adamant that all twelve points of the programme for government would be completed during the lifetime of the fifteenth Dáil. He said: 'we have a programme to carry out and I trust that in the term of this government, every single promise made by it would be fulfilled. This is the first instalment and we intend to carry out to the very letter, to every single dot and comma, the programme we made when we formed the government.'¹²⁶ For Corish, it was the bedrock on which the coalition was built. Furthermore, after the failures of

¹²¹ *Clonmel Nationalist*, 11 June 1955. Mr Brendan Corish, Minister for Social Welfare, speaking at a Labour Party meeting, Clonmel Town Hall, County Tipperary, 4 June 1955, as reported in the *Clonmel Nationalist*.

¹²² *Enniscorthy Guardian*, 26 Mar. 1955. Mr Brendan Corish, Minister for Social Welfare, speaking in Enniscorthy, County Wexford, as reported in the *Enniscorthy Guardian*.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ *Clonmel Nationalist*, 11 June 1955. Mr Brendan Corish, Minister for Social Welfare, speaking at a Labour Party meeting, Clonmel Town Hall, County Tipperary, 4 June 1955, as reported in the *Clonmel Nationalist*.

¹²⁵ *Irish Independent*, 3 Oct. 1955. Mr Brendan Corish, Minister for Social Welfare, speaking at a meeting of Wexford Area Council of the Labour Party, as reported in the *Irish Independent*.

¹²⁶ *Clonmel Nationalist*, 11 June 1955. Mr Brendan Corish, Minister for Social Welfare, speaking at a Labour Party meeting, Clonmel Town Hall, County Tipperary, 4 June 1955, as reported in the *Clonmel Nationalist*.

the first Inter-Party Government, Corish was determined that Labour's second experience in coalition would be far more productive than its first.

Brendan Corish was also outspoken on issues, which, although not directly related to his department were nonetheless important to Irish society and politics. This again demonstrated his development as a young politician. His practicality and deep sense of nationalism extended beyond the sphere of politics and naturally, as Minister of Social Welfare, his words carried greater weight in the press. For instance, he favoured protectionism for Irish industry and also advocated a 'Buy Irish' policy. He believed that the pursuit of this latter type of action would lead to a decrease in both unemployment levels and Irish imports and thus would help to reduce the country's balance of payments deficit. He said: 'one of our greatest defects was....an inferiority complex in the matter of home produced goods. We had a tendency to show marked preference for the foreign product and to belittle our own.'¹²⁷ In 1957, Corish saw this act as a remnant of Ireland's past as subjects of imperial Britain, where political independence did not lead to complete economic independence for the Irish.

The coalition's progress so far was acceptable to Brendan Corish but there were many Labour supporters who were unhappy with it, particularly the trade unions. In an interview with the *Irish Times* on 8 October 1955, Corish defended Labour's independence in government when he said: 'to me it is beyond question that the Labour Party is functioning as a virile entity. It has an influence in government commensurate with the number of its elected members....'¹²⁸ Niamh Puirseil explained that Corish's public approval of the coalition demonstrated 'a leadership unwilling to concede that the party was in any difficulty whatever.'¹²⁹ Puirseil added: 'it was only natural that a government minister would try to portray the situation in a good light, but Corish failed to address the concerns of the many Labour members and supporters who felt the party had lost sight of its *raison d'être*.'¹³⁰ Niamh Puirseil's analysis is accurate, although she fails to examine the context of Corish's approval. Of course, the dichotomy in a politician's job is that while in opposition, one is expected to be critically vocal but when in government, compliance or the ability to compromise is demanded. Brendan Corish witnessed the collapse of the first Inter-Party Government by a handful of

¹²⁷ *Irish Independent*, 28 Jan. 1957. Mr Brendan Corish, Minister for Social Welfare, speaking at the annual re-union of the Wexford branch of the Labour Party, Talbot Hotel, Wexford, as reported in the *Irish Independent*.

¹²⁸ *Irish Times*, 8 Oct. 1955. Mr Brendan Corish, Minister for Social Welfare, speaking in an interview with a reporter of the *Irish Times*.

¹²⁹ Puirseil, Niamh, *The Irish Labour Party, 1922-73* (Dublin, 2007), p. 184.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

Independents. As a pragmatist, he learned from Browne's Mother and Child affair that it was better to work from within a government to bring about change than to simply give up, especially at that early stage. Furthermore, if he personally did not show faith in his coalition partners then it was most unfair to expect the Irish electorate to trust its government. Labour had to show that it was a mature party capable of working effectively with other political groups. What was the alternative? A third general election in less than a decade and most likely victory handed to Fianna Fáil? However, during the life of the second Inter-Party Government, Corish was called more frequently to its defence as harsh and regressive measures were introduced.

The balance of payments deficit amounted to thirty-five million pounds in 1955.¹³¹ In an act similar to Fianna Fáil in 1952, the coalition was forced to raise the tax on a basic food item. This time the price of tea was increased instead of butter. To counteract this decision, Corish increased social welfare benefits again, with a cost of £250,000.¹³² He hoped that as a result of these extra payments, the burden of the price increase would not be so severe on those on the margins of Irish society. In fact, Corish, since his ministerial appointment, had raised pensions by £1.25 and in November 1955 brought a Bill before the Dáil that doubled Christmas pensions.¹³³ At the same time, he was able to declare that unemployment was down by 10,000 compared to twelve months earlier.¹³⁴ Corish acknowledged that the cost of living in Ireland had risen but promised that Fianna Fáil's wages standstill order would not be reintroduced.¹³⁵

In an attempt to attract foreign investment to Ireland, the Minister for Industry and Commerce, William Norton, visited the U.S.A. in January 1956. The backdrop to his departure was of course Ireland's soaring emigration. While Norton was abroad, Corish became the acting Minister for Industry and Commerce. Corish accepted 'that the expansion of our general industrial economy was a matter of fundamental importance....[and] it was desirable and essential that every possible opportunity be

¹³¹ Kennedy, K. and Dowling, B.R., as cited in Lee, J.J., *Ireland 1912-85; Politics and Society* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 326.

¹³² *Irish Press*, 21 Nov. 1955. Mr Brendan Corish, Minister for Social Welfare, speaking in Pallaskenry, County Limerick, as reported in the *Irish Press*.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 28 Nov. 1955. Mr Brendan Corish, Minister for Social Welfare, speaking at a public meeting in Castlerea, County Roscommon, as reported in the *Irish Press*.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ *Drogheda Independent*, 3 Dec. 1955. Mr Brendan Corish, Minister for Social Welfare, speaking at a Victory Social and Supper held by the Slane Branch of the Labour Party, Conyngham Arms Hotel, Slane, County Meath, as reported in the *Drogheda Independent*.

made use of to increase the country's export potential.'¹³⁶ He correctly recognised that other industries outside agriculture required development as there had been an over reliance on the Irish farming sector in the past.

1956 proved to be a most difficult year for the coalition and for Corish. While William Norton was touring the U.S.A., Gerard Sweetman, as Minister for Finance, brought forward a number of policies aimed at curbing inflation. They included an interest rate increase. However, similar to Seán MacEntee's 1952 budget, Sweetman's actions had a detrimental effect on the Irish economy and led to further increases in unemployment and emigration. Sweetman's actions were defended by Corish, when the latter said: 'in all its decisions the government was mindful of the whole community.'¹³⁷ Corish was also quick to point out that a surplus £1.5 million was spent in 1955 on social welfare benefits.¹³⁸ The introduction of additional import levies and extra taxes followed in March 1955. Corish again came to the government's defence. He said:

When the deficiency in the balance of payments made it imperative that remedial measures be taken every effort had been made to ensure that these measures would cause the least hardship. It would have been relatively easy to impose crippling taxation and take away the purchasing power of the people....However, the present government was trying to shield the general public as far as possible and were prepared to adopt less repressive measures than their predecessors.¹³⁹

As a member of the coalition, it was expected that Corish would defend the actions of the second Inter-Party Government, as the only other alternative was to resign. Furthermore, these actions were deemed necessary by the government at that point in time.

In late April 1956, Corish told delegates at the Labour Party Annual Conference in Athlone, County Westmeath, that 'the Labour Party's participation in the government had been well worth while over the past twelve months so far as social benefits were concerned.'¹⁴⁰ He also declared that 'there is a case for improvement in social welfare

¹³⁶ *Irish Times*, 25 Jan. 1956. Mr Brendan Corish, Minister for Social Welfare and acting Minister for Industry and Commerce, speaking at the opening the Shoe and Leather Trade Fair, Mansion House, Dublin, 24 Jan. 1956, as reported in the *Irish Times*.

¹³⁷ *Irish Independent*, 27 Feb. 1956. Mr Brendan Corish, Minister for Social Welfare, speaking at a coalition meeting in support of the Clann na Poblachta candidate, Ms Kathleen O'Connor in the Kerry North by-election, Castleisland, County Kerry, as reported in the *Irish Independent*.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ Mr Brendan Corish, Minister for Social Welfare, speaking in support of the Labour Party candidate, Mr Michael Davin in the Laois-Offaly by-election, Durrow, County Laois, 15 Apr. 1956 (N.A.I., Brendan Corish Social Welfare June, 1954-7, GIS 1/95, p. 1).

¹⁴⁰ *Irish Press*, 28 Apr. 1956. Mr Brendan Corish, Minister for Social Welfare, speaking at the 1956 Labour Party Annual Conference, Royal Hotel, Athlone, County Westmeath, as reported in the *Irish Press*.

benefits and I want to assure the conference as far as I can that improvements will be effected this year.’¹⁴¹ The annual budget was presented to the Dáil shortly afterwards and further tax increases were introduced. Minor social welfare increases were outlined for Corish’s department despite an overall decrease in government expenditure. Sweetman once again increased import levies in July 1956, without any great objection from the Labour benches. Corish explained that the further rise in import prices was to encourage Irish ‘people not to buy non-essential goods manufactured outside this country.’¹⁴² His argument made sense, although naturally, vulnerable workers felt financially burdened by this increase. In shielding the government, Corish also criticised the behaviour of the opposition party during those difficult months and accused them of endeavouring to make political gain. He said Fianna Fáil’s

...one thought is the party line, they are not in the least concerned about the nation – they hope that all kinds of catastrophes will arise so that...[they] may reap some advantage from them. A rise in the cost of bread for example would be a godsend to them because they might make some party capital out of it...[Fianna Fáil] have for months been magnifying every difficulty...¹⁴³

Of course, Fianna Fáil’s conduct was not entirely surprising as the opposition was naturally expected to criticise government policy. Labour and Fine Gael acted in a similar manner during the previous Dáil term. Corish also blamed Fianna Fáil for their attempt ‘to drive a wedge between the parties forming the inter-party government in the hope that they would get back in power, not because of any merits of their own but because there would be no one else available.’¹⁴⁴ Furthermore, he indicated ‘that if Fianna Fáil had been in power, much more ruthless measures would have been taken to restore the balance of payments so that the party could maintain that they were a strong government as they often boasted.’¹⁴⁵ He believed that these measures would no doubt have included tax increases and the withdrawal of food subsidies. The evidence

¹⁴¹ *Irish Press*, 28 Apr. 1956. Mr Brendan Corish, Minister for Social Welfare, speaking at the 1956 Labour Party Annual Conference, Royal Hotel, Athlone, County Westmeath, as reported in the *Irish Press*.

¹⁴² Mr Brendan Corish, Minister for Social Welfare, speaking in support of the Labour Party candidate, Mr Cornelius Desmond in the Cork Borough by-election, Cork, 28 July 1956 (N.A.I., Brendan Corish Social Welfare June, 1954-7, GIS 1/95, p. 2).

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ Mr Brendan Corish, Minister for Social Welfare, speaking at meetings in support of the Labour Party candidate, Mr Herbert Devoy in the Carlow-Kilkenny by-election, Graiguenamanagh, County Kilkenny and Muinebeag, Ballinkillen and Borris, County Carlow, 3, 4 Nov. 1956 (N.A.I., Brendan Corish Social Welfare June, 1954-7, GIS 1/95, p. 1).

¹⁴⁵ *Irish Press*, 8 Oct. 1956. Mr Brendan Corish, Minister for Social Welfare, speaking at a Labour Party conference, Kilkenny, 7 Oct. 1956, as reported in the *Irish Press*.

corroborates Corish's statement as Fianna Fáil introduced the Wages Standstill Order during the Emergency and the 1952 budget was equally as harsh.

On 5 October 1956, the Taoiseach, John A. Costello, gave a speech at an inter-party conference attended by senators and TDs, which addressed Ireland's economic crisis. During his speech, he outlined proposals for the expansion of investment and employment and an increase in exports too.¹⁴⁶ Costello also called for the establishment of a Capital Investment Committee, Agricultural Production Council and the Industrial Advisory Council. According to Niamh Puirseil, Costello's statement 'represented a significant step in the right direction....[however] the fact was that a great deal of the Taoiseach's speech was made up of government policy – featured from the outset in the government's twelve-point policy programme – but which it failed to pursue....it was too little too late.'¹⁴⁷ In hindsight, the Taoiseach should have made his announcement earlier. However, the coalition did not expect the dissolution of the fifteenth Dáil so quickly. After all, it was only in session for a little over two years when Costello issued his statement. Certainly, the Taoiseach and his cabinet colleagues thought they had the necessary time to implement these changes during the natural life of the government.

On top of an economic crisis, the coalition was also faced with a resurgence of I.R.A. activity north of the border, which was launched from the Republic of Ireland. Corish was a staunch republican like his father but he was also a pacifist and deplored any form of military violence. Under Operation Harvest, a series of I.R.A. attacks were initiated along the boundary and in all of the six counties except for Tyrone in November and December 1956. On New Year's Day 1957, two members of the I.R.A. were killed during a raid on a R.U.C. barracks in Brookeborough, County Fermanagh. The deaths of Fergal O'Hanlon and Seán South resulted in a large outpouring of sympathy for Ireland's newest martyrs. The 'massive turnouts at the funerals of South and O'Hanlon convinced many republicans in the south that the Taoiseach, Costello, would not move against them.'¹⁴⁸ However, the second Inter-Party Government reintroduced a policy of internment in response, similar to that pursued by former Irish governments. Under the 1939 Offences Against the State Act, the Gardaí were allowed to imprison members of the I.R.A.

¹⁴⁶ *Irish Times*, 6 Oct. 1956. Mr John A. Costello, Taoiseach, speaking at an inter-party conference, Engineers' Hall, Dawson Street, Dublin, 5 Oct. 1956, as reported in the *Irish Times*.

¹⁴⁷ Puirseil, Niamh, *The Irish Labour Party, 1922-73* (Dublin, 2007), p. 193.

¹⁴⁸ McGuffin, John, *Internment* (Kerry, 1973), p. 57.

The security of the government itself was undermined as it was forced to rely more heavily on Clann na Poblachta's external support for survival. Seven by-elections occurred during the fifteenth Dáil and the results were damning for the coalition. Both Clann na Poblachta and Independents were left unchanged; Fine Gael was down two, Labour down one and Fianna Fáil up three.¹⁴⁹ The very life of the second coalition was held in the balance by Clann na Poblachta. MacBride's party completely disagreed with the government's stance on the internment of I.R.A. members and also with Sweetman's severe policies. The fallout proved too much for MacBride and on 28 January 1957, he tabled a no confidence motion. The second Inter-Party Government collapsed on 12 February 1957 - two years and eight months after it was formed. Brendan Corish's term as Minister for Social Welfare was over. In reference to its abrupt conclusion, Corish said that 'it was not unlikely that the government could have survived the motions of "no confidence"...by the narrowest of majorities but the government would have been unstable and unable to plan their subsequent programme in the proper way.'¹⁵⁰ He added that 'he personally would not want to be a minister in any government if he felt that the people wanted a change and he would always be in favour of allowing the people to decide when there was any doubt in the matter.'¹⁵¹ The evidence suggests that Corish would not have wished to see the second Inter-Party Government continue along such an arduous path.

The extent of Corish's commitment to socialism throughout this period has been the subject of debate amongst historians such as Michael Gallagher and Niamh Puirseil.¹⁵² His tacit acceptance or at times his clear defence of Sweetman's conservative policies, naturally raises questions over Corish's socialist credentials. In fact, his acceptance was attributed more to pragmatism than conservatism, as the real alternative was a collapse of the coalition. When he was first promoted as Minister for Social Welfare, the political correspondent of the *Irish Press* wrote that 'apart from Mr Everett and Mr Norton, the other Labour nominees....seem to have been selected as "also rans." Mr Corish in social welfare will cause no worry to Fine Gael conservatives. No safer man, even in their own ranks, could have been put in charge of an important

¹⁴⁹ Walker, Brian M. (ed.), *Parliamentary Election Results in Ireland, 1918-92* (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin and Queen's University Belfast, 1992), p. 191.

¹⁵⁰ *Irish Independent*, 14 Feb. 1957. Mr Brendan Corish, Minister for Social Welfare, speaking at a Labour Party convention, Enniscorthy, County Wexford, as reported in the *Irish Independent*.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² Gallagher, Michael, *The Irish Labour Party in transition, 1957-82* (Dublin, 1982), p. 41. See also Puirseil, Niamh, *The Irish Labour Party 1922-73* (Dublin, 2007), p. 213.

spending department.’¹⁵³ However, this may have been an example of Fianna Fáil’s resentment as portrayed by its newspaper rather than objective journalism. According to Michael Gallagher, when Corish became leader of the Labour Party in 1960, he was ‘a largely unknown quantity at the time, for although he had generally been more assertive of a distinctive Labour image than Norton had, in other respects his record was not encouraging from the viewpoint of those who hoped to see the party move to the left.’¹⁵⁴ Certainly, Corish’s socialism was not as radical as that of James Connolly or the Larkins. At this stage in his political career, Brendan Corish’s ‘knowledge of socialism was not theoretically or philosophically’ based, but instead, he viewed it in terms of ‘practicality.’¹⁵⁵ As his career in politics progressed, Corish ‘developed over time a philosophical approach’ to it, but in the 1950s, his interpretation of socialism meant a ‘decent [standard of] housing, working conditions, safety and health’ for all employees and their families.¹⁵⁶ Richard Corish adopted a similar approach during his lifetime too and as a young boy, Brendan Corish was exposed to his father’s personal understanding of socialism. Of course, this did not necessarily mean that Brendan Corish automatically inherited his father’s beliefs. In fact, it grew from a deep concern and commitment towards the betterment of society, which his father nurtured. It is correct to say that Richard Corish’s socialism was far more radical than that of his son in the 1950s. However, Brendan Corish always ‘considered himself a socialist because he believed in the equality of people,’ social solidarity, fairness for workers and in the improvement of working conditions.¹⁵⁷ That was his interpretation of socialism at that particular point in time. Within the I.L.P. itself, there were varying interpretations of socialism from extreme left to left-of-centre. One must also not forget that socialism in Ireland was still a taboo subject and it was not exactly easy to travel around the country preaching its merits. In fact, at that time in Ireland, to be a socialist was generally considered anathema. The eastern half of Europe was under Soviet control following the Second World War and governments sympathetic to Soviet ideals were in operation in these countries. In 1956, socialism received negative international media attention through the involvement of Soviet forces and Hungarian communists in the Hungarian Revolution.

However, Corish should have voiced his objections to government policies, which were blatantly anti-social and in conflict with Labour’s principles. The former

¹⁵³ *Irish Press*, as reported in *The People*, 5 June 1954.

¹⁵⁴ Gallagher, Michael, *The Irish Labour Party in transition, 1957-82* (Dublin, 1982), p. 41.

¹⁵⁵ Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Brendan Howlin TD, Wexford, 14 Sept. 2009.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Desmond Corish, Wexford, 17 Sept. 2009.

Taoiseach, Dr Garret FitzGerald, recalled an interview from 1962 between Brendan Corish and journalists from mainland Europe. It conveyed perfectly the public feeling towards socialism at that time. FitzGerald recounted how: ‘...a Dutch woman journalist, asked was he [Corish] a socialist? Addressing me, as well as the journalist, he [Corish] exclaimed: “Garret, imagine what would happen if I got up on a platform in Duncannon and announced that I was a socialist. Sure, I wouldn’t get a vote in the place!”’¹⁵⁸ It is also worth mentioning that when socialism became less of a taboo in Ireland under the progressive pontificate of John XXIII, Corish declared his longstanding dedication to it and as Labour leader, a socialist course was mapped for the party. These actions prove that Brendan Corish was a pragmatic socialist. He always believed in socialism but was wary of attracting red scare propaganda within a society, which at that time was overtly hostile towards socialists.

Corish referred to his personal involvement in the second Inter-Party Government in a short conversation with fellow Labour Party member, Dr John O’Connell. The exchange expressed Corish’s frustration during his occupancy of the Department of Social Welfare, although the reply he received was disingenuous.

...a party colleague [once] asked Brendan Corish what it had been like being Minister for Social Welfare in this administration. ‘I used to lie awake at night, worrying about the unemployed,’ Corish replied. The response was ungenerous but understandable, ‘Brendan, the difference between you and me is that I would sleep at night – and I’d do something about them during the day.’¹⁵⁹

Of course, a minister’s job is never quite as simple as that at any given period of time or under any administration. There are always external factors, which can threaten the effectiveness of a government. Its success rate is determined by the scale of improvements introduced and also by the mechanism used to confront difficulties. Certainly, the governments of the 1950s faced serious problems. For his part, Brendan Corish as Minister for Social Welfare, tried as best he could to reduce the huge strain felt by the most underprivileged and vulnerable sections of the Irish population. This was attempted while curtailments were imposed on his department. The Workmen’s Compensation Act was successfully passed in 1955 and through this law, greater protection was given to workers. Corish increased social welfare payments – most

¹⁵⁸ Garret FitzGerald in Halligan, Brendan (ed.), *The Brendan Corish Seminar Proceedings* (Dublin, 2006), p. 11. Garret FitzGerald, as Chairman of the European Movement was asked by Seán Lemass in 1962 to invite influential journalists from mainland Europe to Ireland in order to meet and interview the leaders of the three main Irish political parties. Duncannon is a small fishing village in southwest County Wexford.

¹⁵⁹ O’Connell, John, as cited in Puirseil, Niamh, *The Irish Labour Party, 1922-73* (Dublin, 2007), p. 189.

notably, disability and unemployment allowances improved by twenty-five per cent.¹⁶⁰ Yet their real benefits were hard to appreciate as the cost of living escalated. The V.H.I. was formed in 1957 and over time, it proved to be of considerable worth to Irish society. Corish's inability to introduce early retirement pensions for men at sixty-five and women at sixty was understandably, a huge source of regret. Furthermore, the overall disappointment he felt as a member of that coalition outweighed any slight improvements he personally introduced. The second Inter-Party Government, during its short reign, was unsuccessful in carrying out its twelve-point programme. Instead, it introduced unpopular measures, which depressed the Irish economy and its people. The wishes and expectations of the youthful government went unfulfilled. The evidence from the 1950s suggested there was very little difference between the second coalition and a Fianna Fáil government. They both pursued the policy of protectionism for far too long. One raised the duty on tea, the other the tax on butter. Neither offered a viable solution.

Emigration also continued unabated in this period and the full extent of the problem was revealed in the census compiled in 1956. It reported a population of 2.9 million, the smallest number since 1841.¹⁶¹ Corish's disappointment cannot be underestimated. He publicly supported the government and its policies, but he was less convinced in private. Brendan Halligan explained that 'he [Corish] was deeply unhappy in that government because of the cutbacks in social welfare.'¹⁶² In fact, Halligan went so far as to say that in Corish's 'case, the experience of office seared his soul and he brooded on the economic and political failure of the second Inter-Party Government for the rest of his life.'¹⁶³ The coalition of 1954 to 1957 was a failure on three counts – as a government, for the Labour Party and personally for Brendan Corish. As was the situation in the first Inter-Party Government, Labour again failed to push through a sufficient number of socially progressive legislative measures while it propped up the government. It is also worth noting that Corish kept very little from this period in his private collection of papers, as no doubt he did not wish to be constantly reminded of those many failures. His experience in the second Inter-Party Government served as a

¹⁶⁰ *The People*, 23 Feb. 1957. Mr Brendan Corish, Minister for Social Welfare, speaking in New Ross, County Wexford, as reported in *The People*.

¹⁶¹ Enda Delaney, 'The Vanishing Irish? The Exodus from Ireland in the 1950s' in Keogh, Dermot O'Shea, Finbarr and Quinlan, Carmel (eds), *The Lost Decade: Ireland in the 1950s* (Cork, 2004), pp. 81-2.

¹⁶² Brendan Halligan, 'Commentary on the Brendan Corish papers' in Halligan, Brendan (ed.), *The Brendan Corish Seminar Proceedings* (Dublin, 2006), p. 5.

¹⁶³ Halligan, Brendan (ed.), *The Brendan Corish Seminar Proceedings* (Dublin, 2006), p. 20.

difficult, yet invaluable education to him. According to Brendan Halligan, Corish was adamant 'that Labour would never again enter coalition unless it had the policies and the requisite personnel of ministerial calibre.'¹⁶⁴ His party was not formed in 1912 merely to prop up coalitions. Instead of membership in another similar inter-party government, he decided to strive towards the ideal of a single Labour Party government. The poor performance by the I.L.P. in the general election on 5 March 1957 served as confirmation that a new direction was necessary for Labour. Never were the limitations of power so acutely felt by Corish. He entered government full of hope and vigour in 1954. Three years later, he left disillusioned.

¹⁶⁴ Brendan Halligan, 'On Brendan Corish: the man who transformed Labour' in Halligan, Brendan (ed.), *The Brendan Corish Seminar Proceedings* (Dublin, 2006), p. 53.

CHAPTER IV

NEW DIRECTION FOR LABOUR, 1960-9

‘It has been suggested recently that there is room for only two political parties in this country. If that is so, then one of the two must be the Labour Party.’¹

The 1960s was a decade of unprecedented change internationally as huge technological advances occurred and many old traditions and beliefs were questioned. Man entered space for the first time and eight years later walked on the moon, the Second Vatican Council was convened, the atrocities of the Vietnam War brought people out on to the streets in protest, students rioted and the peaceful civil rights demonstrations in the U.S.A. inspired Catholics in Northern Ireland. In the Republic of Ireland there was change, albeit at a slower pace. The tide of emigration receded as the Irish economy gradually improved - although the latter’s performance during the 1950s was so abysmal, one might have said that it could only but improve. A new generation came to the fore in Irish politics as many veterans of the civil war in Ireland succumbed to old age and were forced to retire. In March 1960, Brendan Corish became leader of the Labour Party. Over the following decade, he set about a dramatic transformation of the party. Through his leadership, Labour was no longer a tired, demoralised and hesitant organisation. Instead, it became dynamic, radical and attractive to new enthusiastic and prominent recruits. Corish offered the Irish electorate a real alternative to governments led by the civil war parties of Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael. The groundwork was prepared as Labour asserted its independence and definitive party policies were developed. Furthermore, Labour finally affirmed socialism as its fundamental principle in public. How did Labour’s opponents, the Irish electorate and conservatives within the party react? Did Corish’s prophecy that ‘the seventies will be socialist’ prove correct?² Indeed, did Brendan Corish make history as Labour’s first Taoiseach?

The last general election of the 1950s was held on 5 March 1957. The campaign was for the most part clean, as one commentator remarked that ‘neither Great Britain nor America nor any other country ever had an election campaign that was as businesslike, orderly and dignified. The English newspapers got no mud to sling at us.’³ In advance of polling day, Fianna Fáil’s campaign slogan was ‘Wives put your

¹ Brendan Corish, ‘The role of Labour’ in Mac Aonghusa, Proinsias (ed.), *Corish Speaks: Speeches on National Affairs by the Leader of the Labour Party, Brendan Corish* (Dublin, 1966), p. 38. Mr Brendan Corish, leader of the Labour Party, speaking in Mallow, County Cork, 1964.

² Corish, Brendan, *The New Republic: Complete text of ‘The New Republic’ Address by Brendan Corish* (Dublin, 1968), p. 3.

³ ‘Irish affairs, latest from the capital’ in *The People*, 16 Mar. 1957.

husbands to work.’⁴ Of course, Seán Lemass earlier stressed the need to provide 100,000 Irish jobs in his famous Clery’s speech in Dublin in October 1955.⁵ Brendan Corish was strongly opposed to a return of the inter-party style of government, as Michael Gallagher wrote: ‘of its [Labour] ministers, only the Minister for Social Welfare, Brendan Corish, laid any stress on the separate identity of the Labour Party.’⁶ Having fully supported Labour’s coalition involvement in the past, Corish was not afraid to change his mind on this subject after the fall of the second Inter-Party Government. In light of the disappointing record of that government, his opposition to Labour’s participation in another coalition was certainly not all that surprising. When he spoke on Radio Éireann on 22 February 1957, Corish stated: ‘...we conceive it our duty as a minority party to maintain a distinctive Labour viewpoint whether in or out of government.’⁷ Arguably, Labour did not successfully uphold that separate position during the years of the second Inter-Party Government as Corish had defended government policy in public, which at times conflicted with that of the Labour Party, while he disagreed in private. During the radio broadcast, Corish attempted to clarify the exact difference between Labour and the other political groups. As well as ideological differences, he ‘said that the distinctiveness of the Labour Party lay in its approach to the problems of people, the right of our people to work and enjoy a decent standard of living....’⁸ Again, that individual approach by the Labour Party was found rather lacking from 1954 to 1957.

Speaking at the Labour Party convention in Wexford in February 1957, Corish informed delegates:

[that] it was highly desirable that the people should have the opportunity of pronouncing their verdict on the measures which had been taken by the government to meet the situation which arose because of the deficit in the balance of payments. It was essential, however, for the people to know exactly the position which would have developed and it was even more essential for them to know what other parties would have done if they had been in power.⁹

⁴ *The People*, 30 Sept. 1961. Mr Brendan Corish, leader of the Labour Party, speaking at a meeting of election workers, Corish Memorial Hall, Wexford, 25 Sept. 1961, as reported in *The People*.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Irish Times*, 23 Feb. 1957. Mr Brendan Corish, Minister for Social Welfare, speaking on behalf of the Labour Party on Radio Éireann, 22 Feb. 1957, as reported in the *Irish Times*.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *The People*, 16 Feb. 1957. Mr Brendan Corish, Minister for Social Welfare, speaking at the Labour Party convention, Captain Weafer Memorial Hall, Spring Valley, Enniscorthy, County Wexford, as reported in *The People*.

A week later, Corish canvassed in New Ross. On that occasion, he spoke of the government's newest capital programme, which at long last was in progress. He argued that 'it was a grand thing for those who did not now support the government's policy to talk in glib terms about long-term programmes....surely they must start with a short-term one and put their workers to work....[These] measures....would not be merely stopgap ones but would be so designed as to fit into the long-term plans....'¹⁰ Thus, it was apparent that Brendan Corish's 1957 election campaign strategy was twofold. First and most significantly, he advocated Labour's independence and individuality as a political party. Second, he did not attempt to distance himself from the past actions of the coalition and instead explained the necessity of the government's measures. It was not surprising that Corish tried to present Labour's participation in the best possible light. As a pragmatist, he understood this approach was necessary in order to secure Labour's share of votes in the general election.

Three years earlier, Brendan Corish took the second seat after he received 16.8 per cent of votes in the 1954 general election.¹¹ On that occasion, Labour won two seats in Wexford.¹² Was Corish as successful in 1957, particularly after his spell in government? The answer was no. Brendan Corish received 6,205 first preference votes or 16.4 per cent – a fall of 0.4 per cent from 1954.¹³ His colleague, John O'Leary, lost his seat to Fine Gael's Anthony Esmonde by 1.5 per cent.¹⁴ Discontent with Labour's involvement in the coalition was the most likely dominant cause of its fall in support in the county, although in fact the I.L.P. only lost out by a trivial amount and was unfortunate not to take a second seat. Fianna Fáil won an extra seat, which brought its total up to three.¹⁵ Denis Allen won the first seat, James Ryan the second and Seán Browne the fourth.¹⁶ Thus, the state of the parties in Wexford was: Fianna Fáil three and both Labour and Fine Gael were left with only a seat each. The Wexford electorate clearly demonstrated its dissatisfaction with the participants of the second Inter-Party Government. On the night of the count, Corish said that 'he regretted the loss of his old

¹⁰ *The People*, 23 Feb. 1957. Mr Brendan Corish, Minister for Social Welfare, speaking at a meeting in New Ross, County Wexford, as reported in *The People*.

¹¹ Walker, Brian M. (ed.), *Parliamentary Election Results in Ireland, 1918-92* (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin and Queen's University Belfast, 1992), p. 190.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 190, 197.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 190, 197.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

colleague, Mr O’Leary.’¹⁷ He also stated ‘that the Labour Party had dropped a small percentage – about 1.5 - in the election [in Wexford] but that was enough to lose them a seat even though it was very small. However, they would come back fighting again.’¹⁸

Nationally, the turnout for the 1957 general election was down on previous years. Paul Daly explained the situation fittingly, when he wrote:

....even those who did not vote could hardly be blamed for casting a cold eye over the political system. The three previous governments had all failed to complete a full term in office and....no party had managed to present a coherent, realistic approach to the enormous social and economic challenges facing the country. Indeed, the very fact that in 1957 the main party leaders were old men....seemed to sum up the torpor that had gripped political life.¹⁹

Daly is correct in his reasoning as 1957 marked the fourth general election held in less than a decade in Ireland. Therefore, it was quite understandable that a portion of the Irish electorate was weary of politics, as the main political parties all failed to live up to their endless election promises. Furthermore, Labour suffered from the outset as three of its prominent TDs – Michael Keyes, James Larkin and Seán Dunne – decided not to seek re-election in 1957. Their losses were keenly felt on polling day, particularly in the capital. Roddy Connolly replaced Larkin in Dublin South-Central but the former failed to hold onto the party’s seat and James Larkin’s brother, Denis Larkin, was left the sole representative of the I.L.P. in Dublin.²⁰ Labour only received 9.1 per cent or 111,700 votes, which left the party with a total number of twelve seats.²¹ Labour’s former coalition partner, Fine Gael, did not fare much better as it lost ten seats.²² 1957 also saw the return of Sinn Féin candidates for election and the party successfully claimed four seats.²³ However, these deputies abstained from entering Leinster House. Seán MacBride lost his seat in Dublin South-West and Clann na Poblachta had just one party member elected.²⁴ Clann na Talmhan returned with only three TDs.²⁵ Fianna Fáil won an overall majority and returned to the sixteenth Dáil with seventy-eight seats.²⁶ Joe

¹⁷ *The People*, 9 Mar. 1957. Mr Brendan Corish, speaking on the night of the 1957 election count, as reported in *The People*.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Daly, Paul, *Creating Ireland: The words and events that shaped us* (Dublin, 2008), p. 119.

²⁰ Walker, Brian M. (ed.), *Parliamentary Election Results in Ireland, 1918-92* (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin and Queen’s University Belfast, 1992), pp. 193-4.

²¹ Annual Report of the Labour Party, 1969 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 3, Labour Party Annual Reports 1967-79, p. 19). See also *Irish Times*, 8 Mar. 1957. Labour’s twelve TDs included the outgoing Ceann Comhairle, Patrick Hogan who was automatically returned.

²² *Irish Times*, 8 Mar. 1957.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

Lee's correct interpretation of this result was 'more a vote of no confidence in the other parties than of confidence in Fianna Fáil, whose popular vote rose only marginally.'²⁷ The Irish electorate's growing disillusionment with all three of the main political parties was clearly evident. Voters were dissatisfied with the previous coalition's record, yet they were not overly enthusiastic or convinced by the alternative of a Fianna Fáil government. Similar to 1951, the Labour Party suffered more from its coalition membership than Fine Gael had. This was ample evidence both to Corish and an ever-increasing disenchanted bunch of Labourites that the future of the party lay in the formation of a single party government and not in coalition.

De Valera was once again successfully nominated as Taoiseach. His allocation of ministries to his cabinet colleagues caused a little surprise, as Dr Jim Ryan was appointed to finance and Seán MacEntee to the Department of Health. After MacEntee's disastrous 1952 budget and the fallout that ensued, his reappointment to his former ministry was too great a gamble for the stability of Fianna Fáil, which even de Valera was unwilling to risk. The life of the sixteenth Dáil proved eventful. Leadership changes arose in the three main parties, a referendum on proportional representation and a presidential election were held. At last, a change occurred in the government's approach to economic planning. Furthermore, a small fishing village in Brendan Corish's home constituency made national headlines and he personally expressed strong views on the subject.

Under canon law, children of mixed marriages were required to be brought up as Catholics. This matter came to the fore again when a mother in the Wexford village of Fethard-on-Sea refused to send her two daughters, Eileen and Mary, to the local Catholic school.²⁸ Sheila Cloney was a Protestant and her husband, Seán Cloney, was a local Catholic farmer. The predicament snowballed when Sheila Cloney left with her children for Northern Ireland on 27 April 1957. Ian Paisley, among others, came to her aid and helped the family travel to Scotland. In response, a boycott on Protestant owned businesses and shops was initiated by local Catholics in Fethard-on-Sea on 13 May 1957. Members of the Catholic hierarchy also supported the boycott. No doubt, the contentious issue of sending children of mixed marriages to Catholic schools was raised in the past. However, there was an increased media presence in 1957 and the boycott

²⁷ Lee, J. J., *Ireland 1912-85; Politics and Society* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 327.

²⁸ Recorded interview on 'RTÉ Radio 1' by Diarmaid Ferriter with Sr Margaret MacCurtain and Catherine McGuinness, 13 May 2007.

soon made national headlines on both radio and newspapers.²⁹ It also featured in *Time* magazine and was discussed in both Stormont and Leinster House. On 4 July 1957, Dr Noel Browne requested the Taoiseach to issue a formal statement on the boycott. De Valera replied with:

...I regard this boycott as ill conceived, ill considered and futile for the achievement of the purpose for which it seems to have been intended; that I regard it as unjust and cruel to confound the innocent with the guilty....and that I beg of all who have regard for the fair name, good repute and well-being of our nation to use their influence to bring this deplorable affair to a speedy end.³⁰

The response by Brendan Corish was less diplomatic. He enquired: ‘what steps has the Taoiseach taken to find out whether or not there is, in fact, a boycott? Will the Taoiseach endeavour to ensure that certain people will not conspire in this part of the country to kidnap Catholic children?’³¹ As a devout Roman Catholic, Brendan Corish had definite views on the situation. Religion was hugely important to Corish and he should not be reproached on account of his own personal religious beliefs, which he was more than entitled to hold. Nevertheless, as a public representative his declaration was inappropriate, although not considered a complete revelation for the time. Corish later acknowledged in a conversation with Justin Keating that the boycott was not right. He was leader of the party at that stage and Keating was a newly elected Labour TD. Keating told Corish that he ‘was in Fethard that summer and what was done was wrong....[Keating] reiterated, “That was wrong Brendan” and he [Corish] hummed a bit and then he said “yes it was.”’³² Corish could easily have denied his past fault and avoided a direct answer, which is so customary to politics. Nevertheless, Corish did not. As Keating admitted that ‘any fool can go and say that’s my opinion and I never change it but it takes greatness of soul to acknowledge a mistake especially in a public person and to change his mind and in a much more important way a little later.’³³ For Brendan Corish, this episode marked the second occasion in his life where religion and politics came in direct conflict following on from the Mother and Child Scheme in the first Inter-Party Government. It was also an important lesson for him, which with the benefit of hindsight he would have handled differently and more sympathetically. Furthermore, Dr Noel Browne later referred to Brendan Corish as the ‘Bastard of Fethard,’ which said

²⁹ Recorded interview on ‘RTÉ Radio 1’ by Diarmaid Ferriter with Sr Margaret MacCurtain and Catherine McGuinness, 13 May 2007.

³⁰ *Dáil Debate*, volume 163, column 731, 4 July 1957.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Justin Keating in Halligan, Brendan (ed.), *The Brendan Corish Seminar Proceedings* (Dublin, 2006), pp. 23-4.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

more about Browne's ill regard for Corish than it did about the conduct of the Wexford TD.³⁴

The Fethard-on-Sea boycott ended in August 1957 and Sheila Cloney returned home with her two daughters in April 1958. Both parents continued to attend their separate churches and the children were home schooled - neither Catholics nor Protestants claimed victory. In 1998, the Bishop of Ferns, Dr Brendan Comiskey publicly apologised for the boycott. It was a most unfortunate and regrettable episode. The boycott demonstrated that southern Catholics were as sectarian as northern unionists. Both Catholics and Protestants and north and south were separated even further and northern unionists used the episode as propaganda fodder.³⁵ A small fishing village was divided, but most significantly it caused untold distress for the family in question. That was the greatest tragedy.

Labour's 1957 annual conference was held in June of that year and it marked a turning point in the party's history as its electoral strategy was changed. Corish was clear on which path he wished Labour to follow - 'his antipathy to coalition had been born out of his experience in the disappointing 1954 to 1957 cabinet.'³⁶ During the proceedings, which were held mainly in private, delegates 'overwhelmingly passed a resolution calling for "the drafting of a comprehensive statement of policy on the basis that Labour will not again take part in an inter-party government."' It would remain in opposition until it achieved a parliamentary majority.³⁷ Over time, Corish became synonymous with Labour's go-it-alone policy. However, it is worth noting that he did not personally initiate this tactic. There was a growing despondence among party members with the idea of coalition, which included Brendan Corish. Certainly, Corish helped preserve Labour's independence throughout the 1960s, but he was by no means its sole instigator. Of course, the easier option for Labour would have been to form a pact or coalition with Fine Gael, but the negative experience of the I.L.P. in the second Inter-Party Government encouraged its members to pursue a less dependent position in parliament. In addition, Labour believed Fianna Fáil's support would decline with de Valera's departure. Fine Gael was in a weakened position after the last general election and when that party collapsed, Labour would fill the void in a two-party, left-right

³⁴ Edwards, Owen Dudley, as cited in Puirseil, Niamh, *The Irish Labour Party, 1922-73* (Dublin, 2007), p. 213.

³⁵ Recorded interview on 'RTÉ Radio 1' by Diarmaid Ferriter with Sr Margaret MacCurtain and Catherine McGuinness, 13 May 2007.

³⁶ Brendan Halligan, 'On Brendan Corish: the man who transformed Labour' in Halligan, Brendan (ed.), *The Brendan Corish Seminar Proceedings* (Dublin, 2006), p. 53.

³⁷ Gallagher, Michael, *The Irish Labour Party in transition, 1957-82* (Dublin, 1982), p. 162.

political structure. In fact, if Labour maintained its independence for long enough, the party believed that the eventual realignment of Irish politics would result. Furthermore, one must also look at the alternative presented to Labour delegates. If the party continued along the existing path and participated in additional coalitions then it was expected that Labour would fare badly in future general elections. Moreover, its policies could never be implemented in full so long as it remained minor partners in a coalition. The Parliamentary Labour Party was comprised of only twelve TDs at that point in time and so the necessity to take a fresh approach was glaringly obvious. Labour delegates met again eight months later at a specially convened conference in Dublin on 8 February 1958. During this conference, William Norton hinted that a new socially democratic direction would have to be mapped for the party. Indeed, the election of Brendan Corish as Labour leader in 1960 was a catalyst for change within the same party, as he gave it a new definition and sense of identity.

On 17 June 1959, the Labour Party was faced with a major calamity, which threatened not only its plans for internal reform but also its very own existence. De Valera arranged that a referendum on proportional representation was to coincide with a presidential election. The Taoiseach wished to have P.R. replaced by the first-past-the-post electoral system. The reason de Valera publicly gave for altering the voting method was to create a two-party system to help strengthen future Irish parliaments. His private motive was less genuine. Three months short of his seventy-seventh birthday, Éamon de Valera announced his intention to retire from Dáil Éireann and to stand in the forthcoming presidential election. Without de Valera at the helm, it was thought that Fianna Fáil would be seriously weakened at the polls. The opposition believed that the Taoiseach was attempting to safeguard Fianna Fáil's future and the referendum was a farewell gift to his loyal followers. The P.R. system was first used in the twenty-six counties in 1921. It was unfortunate for de Valera that he earlier assured its sanctity when he enshrined P.R. in the Irish Constitution of 1937. Brendan Corish clearly favoured the preservation of P.R. He believed that it conformed to the principles of democracy to a far greater degree than the first-past-the-post system used in Britain. Furthermore, without P.R. in place Labour's chances would be severely depleted, as the I.L.P. would be unable to rely on the transfer of votes in order to get candidates elected.

With Fianna Fáil as the sole advocate for the abolishment of P.R., the possibility arose whereby those who favoured its retention could campaign on a united front. However, that opportunity never materialised. On 17 June 1959, de Valera was elected

President of Ireland when he beat General Seán MacEoin by 538,058 votes to 417,482.³⁸ Fianna Fáil's attempt to amend the constitution proved less successful. The Irish electorate refused to accept the revision by 486,989 votes to 453,319.³⁹ The results of both election and referendum highlighted the fact that although one supported a certain candidate, this did not necessarily mean that voters agreed with every policy promoted by that candidate's party. For Brendan Corish, the outcome of the referendum was a triumph. At the close of the referendum count in Wexford, Corish said that he was 'particularly pleased about the result of the vote of the referendum.'⁴⁰ He also made reference to the small turnout nationally where in excess of a third of the entire electorate refrained from voting. Corish stated that the referendum 'had been imposed on the people and many had not voted for it. He congratulated the people who had voted because there had been a certain amount of apathy on that occasion....'⁴¹ The disenchantment of voters with politics in Ireland clearly remained. It was also evident in the general election held a little over two years earlier. For those who abstained from voting, politics was a nonentity in their lives. In fact, it mattered very little to those people whomever was elected head of state or which voting system the country used. They felt that neither issue infringed upon their practical, day-to-day concerns.

Less than a decade later, Fianna Fáil attempted to have P.R. eliminated for the second time on 16 October 1968. Labour's memorable campaign slogan in that referendum was 'The straight vote is crooked.'⁴² In that particular referendum, sixty per cent of turnout voted against the government's proposal.⁴³ Certainly, the fears of Corish and Labour regarding the future of the party without P.R. in 1959 and 1968 were justified. A correspondent with *The People* bluntly predicted in 1959 that the 'abolition [of P.R.] means the disappearance of every Labour TD from Leinster House.'⁴⁴ Naturally, there was slight exaggeration in reports of that nature, although they were not completely unfounded. It was unlikely that Corish's own seat in Wexford would have been in jeopardy in a first-past-the-post system when one examines his record of first

³⁸ *Irish Times*, 19 June 1959.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 20 June 1959.

⁴⁰ *The People*, 27 June 1959. Mr Brendan Corish TD, speaking at the close of the presidential election and referendum count in the Wexford constituency, as reported in *The People*.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Annual Report of the Labour Party, 1967-8 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 3, Labour Party Annual Reports 1967-79, p. 4).

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁴⁴ 'Irish affairs, latest from the capital' in *The People*, 13 June 1959.

preference votes during the 1950s and 1960s.⁴⁵ However, it is most unlikely that Corish would have reclaimed his seat in his last general election in June 1981, had there been no P.R. in place.⁴⁶ Indeed, the I.L.P. as a minority party had a lot to lose. An upshot of the 1959 P.R. debate was the involvement of the Irish Congress of Trade Union in Labour's referendum campaign. This illustrated that both union and party were able to work quite successfully in tandem. For Labour to have any chance of political success in the future, Corish quite rightly believed that the I.L.P. needed the full support of the trade union movement.

The departure of Éamon de Valera from Leinster House in 1959 heralded a new chapter in Irish political history. Of course, de Valera's monopoly of the Fianna Fáil leadership for so long meant that his successor, Seán Lemass, was almost sixty years of age and hence near retirement when the latter was first appointed Taoiseach on 23 June 1959. Lemass served a long apprenticeship and was keen to imprint his own economic philosophy on the country. Throughout his public career, de Valera was a hugely divisive figure. As a living symbol of the Irish republic, he was both reviled and revered. For his part, Brendan Corish - who opposed de Valera more often than not - was fully aware of the immense personal contribution the former Taoiseach made to the Irish State. Upon de Valera's death in August 1975, the Tánaiste, Brendan Corish, paid the following deserving tribute to Ireland's third president: 'I deeply regret the death of Éamon de Valera. I extend my deepest sympathy to his bereaved family. He devoted the greater part of his long life to the service of the Irish people and will occupy a significant place in the history of this country.'⁴⁷ In comparison, the statement issued by the Taoiseach, Liam Cosgrave, was more formal: 'I have just learned with regret of the death of former President de Valera. The government's offer of a state funeral for the former president has been accepted by the de Valera family.'⁴⁸ The background to Liam Cosgrave's lack of feeling was of course the statement issued by de Valera on the death of W.T. Cosgrave in November 1965, which was equally as cold.

It was not really until 1960 that the Irish economy started to improve. By that time, protectionism was pursued far too enthusiastically and not enough money was

⁴⁵ Walker, Brian M. (ed.), *Parliamentary Election Results in Ireland, 1918-92* (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin and Queen's University Belfast, 1992), pp. 183, 190, 197, 204, 211, 219.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 244.

⁴⁷ Statement issued by Mr Brendan Corish, Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Social Welfare on the death of former President Éamon de Valera, 29 Aug. 1975 (N.A.I., Brendan Corish - Health and Social Welfare 1973-5, GIS 1/100, p. 1).

⁴⁸ Statement issued by Mr Liam Cosgrave, Taoiseach on the death of former President Éamon de Valera, 29 Aug. 1975 (N.A.I., Brendan Corish - Health and Social Welfare 1973-5, GIS 1/100, p. 1).

invested in long-term projects. In 1958, T.K. Whitaker, as Secretary of the Department of Finance, drew up a national economic plan entitled the *First Programme for Economic Expansion*. Fine Gael's Gerard Sweetman first promoted Whitaker as secretary to the department in 1956. In the latter stages of the second Inter-Party Government, the coalition made some initial progress to address Ireland's under performing economy. In 1956, it introduced tax relief on export profits and also set up a Capital Investment Committee in that same year. Whitaker published an essay called *Economic Development* in 1958, on which the First Programme was based. The aim of the programme centred on a 'shift [of] public expenditure from social to productive investment, initially by reducing expenditure on housing....[with] a two per cent annual growth rate over a five year period.'⁴⁹ Fergal Tobin correctly believes that the significance of the 1958 plan lay in its 'desire to chart a definitive course out of the fog of despair and gloom that enveloped the Republic of Ireland in the mid-fifties. The emergence of a rational solution to the terrible crisis and the realisation that Ireland was not fated simply to self-destruction had a profound effect on public confidence.'⁵⁰ However, Corish was less enthused by the First Programme because he could not wholeheartedly approve of a plan, which was intent on reducing social expenditure. Nevertheless, the increase in the volume of Irish trade and general improvement in the economy spoke for itself. There was a one per cent annual growth rate from 1950 to 1958 and that increased to four per cent per annum from 1959 to 1973.⁵¹ Irish exports continued to grow from £104 million in 1956 to £127 million a year later and from £148 million in 1960 to £175 million in the following year, with manufacturing exports soon outgrowing those of agriculture.⁵²

Lemass's vision of Ireland was of a modern and industrialised country. He believed in attracting foreign investment to Ireland through incentives such as tax concessions and grants. Lemass abandoned any old hankering after the Irish agricultural sector as the sole provider of economic growth for future years and he was quick to adopt Whitaker's plan as government policy. In 1962, the government declared its intention to reduce unilateral tariffs. The Control of Manufactures' Acts were repealed in 1964 and a year later, the Anglo-Irish Free Trade Agreement was signed. A further second and third edition of the *First Programme for Economic Expansion* followed in

⁴⁹ Lee, J. J., *Ireland 1912-85; Politics and Society* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 345.

⁵⁰ Tobin, Fergal, *The Best of Decades: Ireland in the 1960s* (Dublin, 1984), p. 6.

⁵¹ Lee, J. J., *Ireland 1912-85; Politics and Society* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 354.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 355-6.

1963 and 1969. A four per cent annual growth rate was planned in the Second Programme for the period 1964 to 1970.⁵³ However, there was an international downturn in both 1965 and 1966. The government's plan proved too ambitious and it was abandoned four years after its publication. The Irish economy improved again in 1967, although the Third Programme was discarded in 1971. As an opposition deputy, it was of no great surprise to discover that Brendan Corish was critical of the pace at which the Irish economy recovered, although he did acknowledge that an improvement had occurred. When he addressed a meeting of election workers in Wexford in 1961, Corish said: 'he did not deny that over the past seven or eight years there had been a certain measure of success in expanding industry, but the rate of progress had been wholly inadequate.'⁵⁴ As a minister in the second Inter-Party Government, Corish justified the pace of recovery during the period 1954 to 1957. However, as a member of the opposition his criticisms were aired, which highlights the contrasting roles of those with power and those without.

Brendan Corish was a strong proponent of economic planning and he believed that it was of fundamental importance to the Irish nation. He appreciated the fact that in order to overcome Ireland's 'serious economic problems people were demanding radical changes as a matter of national urgency.'⁵⁵ He referred to the government's economic programmes as 'little more than a collection of vague aspirations.'⁵⁶ His objectivity as an opposition deputy is certainly questionable. Even so, he was proven correct as both the Second and Third Programmes were abandoned. Corish thought that a more suitable economic plan was one which 'could ensure that none of their resources – physical or human – would be left idle or wasted and that by a combination of public enterprise, co-operative effort and private initiative, all their productive potentialities would be fully developed.'⁵⁷ Corish did not believe that an over reliance on foreign direct investment for Ireland's future economic prosperity should be created either. He said: 'I do not deny that foreign investment, provided it is properly controlled, can be of help to our economy, but it is not enough for us to sit back and wait for foreigners to come here,

⁵³ Tobin, Fergal, *The Best of Decades: Ireland in the 1960s* (Dublin, 1984), p. 6.

⁵⁴ *The People*, 30 Sept. 1961. Mr Brendan Corish, leader of the Labour Party, speaking at a meeting of election workers, Corish Memorial Hall, Wexford, 25 Sept. 1961, as reported in *The People*.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

encouraged by large free gifts from the Irish state and set up industries.’⁵⁸ Instead, Corish wished to see an expansion of the nation’s resources. This would come about through a combination of both public and private ventures and government would play a vital role in completing this task. As Labour leader, Corish developed a solid economic policy for his party. It was imperative for Labour in its attempt to create a realistic alternative government that party documents were formulated on key matters such as economic planning. This was evidence to the electorate that the I.L.P. was intent on forming its own single party government. Furthermore, the findings of the 1961 census highlighted the drastic need for a new approach by government on economics. Once again, the census reported a fall in the Irish population to 2.818 million.⁵⁹ Most notably, a larger decrease occurred in the population figure from 1956 to 1961 than over a thirty-year period since 1931.⁶⁰ The Irish employment figure also decreased from April 1956 to April 1961 by 51,000.⁶¹ Hence, Corish correctly believed that any fall in the unemployment figures was more likely to occur as a greater consequence of emigration rather than job creation. As the Irish economy expanded during the 1960s, net emigration decreased to 16,000 per year from 1961 to 1966 and fell again to 11,000 per annum from 1966 to 1971.⁶² In 1966, the census recorded an increase of 66,000 people from five years earlier and a new total population figure of 2.884 million.⁶³ The 1966 census was evidence that at long last Ireland was recovering.

As a new decade dawned, the election of Brendan Corish as party leader in March 1960 signalled a new era in Labour politics. William Norton led the party for twenty-eight years, but Labour did not progress from 1943 when it won seventeen seats.⁶⁴ Hence, it appears that Norton stayed too long in power. His reign was not dull to say the least as he presided over a party split in 1944 and a reunion six years later. While in charge, Labour fell in and out of favour with both trade unions and electorate; his party supported and opposed Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael at different intervals and internal feuds also occurred. Furthermore, Norton also held the political office of Tánaiste twice. He served the Labour movement as best he could but in 1960 a new

⁵⁸ Brendan Corish, ‘Election, 1961’ in Mac Aonghusa, Proinsias (ed.), *Corish Speaks: Speeches on National Affairs by the Leader of the Labour Party, Brendan Corish* (Dublin, 1966), p. 7. Mr Brendan Corish, leader of the Labour Party, speaking at a Labour Party rally, G.P.O., Dublin, 1961.

⁵⁹ Tobin, Fergal, *The Best of Decades: Ireland in the 1960s* (Dublin, 1984), p. 37.

⁶⁰ *The People*, 30 Sept. 1961. Mr Brendan Corish, leader of the Labour Party, speaking at a meeting of election workers, Corish Memorial Hall, Wexford, 25 Sept. 1961, as reported in *The People*.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Statistical abstract, as cited in Lee, J. J., *Ireland 1912-85: Politics and Society* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 359-60.

⁶³ Lee, J. J., *Ireland 1912-85: Politics and Society* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 154.

⁶⁴ *Irish Times*, 26 June 1943.

sense of direction was required. The character of Irish politics, which included election campaigns, had changed. Politics had evolved in Ireland and it was no longer sufficient for the leader of a political party to confine his electioneering to his home constituency. Moreover, Norton was closely associated with Labour's conservatism and coalitions in the past. In 1960, the party attempted a complete overhaul of its philosophy and strategy – a break with its recent past one might have said. Norton performed well in charge but those were new times with new demands. In February 1960, the resignation of William Norton as leader of the I.L.P. was announced. The principle question was: who would replace him and lead Labour forward into the new decade?

Included in the roll of potential Labour leaders were Seán Casey, Dan Desmond and Brendan Corish. The candidacy of Brendan Corish as leader was an offer, which strongly appealed to the Labour Party. He was of respectable Labour lineage and as a devout Catholic; it was thought that he could effectively counteract allegations, which connected his party to communism. Furthermore, it was felt that if the I.L.P. chose a more left of centre approach to politics in the future, Corish, as a practising Catholic would make that transition more acceptable to Irish voters. Crucially, he was unwilling to concede the party's independence from coalition involvement. Therefore, Labour believed that Brendan Corish would not compromise any long-term goals of the party for some potential short-term benefits. He also had cabinet experience and the support of both James Larkin and William Norton. This in itself was an important factor especially in a party that split in 1944, where factionalism was rife and the complete left-right, urban-rural divides were represented. After the withdrawal of both Casey and Desmond, Brendan Corish, at the age of forty-one, was unanimously elected Labour leader by the Parliamentary Labour Party on 2 March 1960.

From the time Corish first entered Leinster House as a TD in 1945, he always worked hard for the party and tried to improve Labour's standing. He was witty, charismatic, handsome and in the words of Brendan Howlin - 'a dashing figure.'⁶⁵ Brendan Halligan, a contemporary, remembered how: 'Corish looked like a leader, spoke like a leader and behaved like a leader....[He was] tall, muscular, athletic, deep voiced with a mane of hair, he [Corish] quite simply looked the part and got better looking as he grew older.'⁶⁶ Corish's interest in drama remained over the years and he was a skilled orator and debater in Dáil Éireann. He did not require help to write Dáil speeches and John Horgan remembers Corish 'often speaking from a sheaf of notes that

⁶⁵ Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Brendan Howlin TD, Wexford, 14 Sept. 2009.

⁶⁶ Halligan, Brendan (ed.), *The Brendan Corish Seminar Proceedings* (Dublin, 2006), p. 19.

could include as many as fifty or sixty separate points.’⁶⁷ In fact, there is a story told by Horgan involving Corish, when on ‘one unforgettable moment at a Labour Party conference in Limerick, he [Corish] dropped the text of his speech on the floor and continued to deliver it – on live television – without letting anyone notice that he had to cope with the fact that the pages had been handed back to him in the wrong order.’⁶⁸ Praise for Corish’s skills of oratory was not only confined to those within his party as he received compliments from Fianna Fáil too, including one from Brian Lenihan senior, who said that ‘he [Corish] spoke very well in the house....I’ve seen him do it impromptu [on] numerous times. Very underestimated man in that respect....’⁶⁹ Brendan Corish was modest and was always willing to listen and to take advice. He was easy to work with, politically moral and a trade union member who remained loyal to his colleagues and party. His ability to cooperate with his associates was a highly commendable trait, especially when one considers that Corish was forced to share the party leader’s office in Leinster House with William Norton, after the latter refused to vacate when he stepped down as Labour leader. Other politicians or party leaders would certainly not have been as tolerant of such an intrusion as Corish was, although it must be said that both he and Norton got on well together overall. There was a definite likeability factor about Brendan Corish too, which Labour hoped would transcend party loyalties and reflect positively on polling day. The Irish novelist and journalist, John Banville, explained Corish’s general appeal when he wrote:

My parents were Labour voters. It was less a political than a social commitment. Wexford was and still is, I imagine, a strong Labour town. My father was proud of his acquaintance with Brendan Corish, the Labour Party leader and ‘gave him his vote’ as a gesture of solidarity with a good Wexford family. In spirit, my parents were quintessential Fianna Fáilers....⁷⁰

Corish’s charm also extended to the Irish media where his image among reporters was very positive. Professor Brian Farrell paid Corish the following posthumous tribute

⁶⁷ Horgan, John, *Labour: The Price of Power* (Dublin, 1986), p. 37.

⁶⁸ John Horgan, ‘Brendan Corish: An Appreciation’ in Halligan, Brendan (ed.), *The Brendan Corish Seminar Proceedings* (Dublin, 2006), p. 49.

⁶⁹ Brian Lenihan in ‘A man called Corish.’ Referenced as ‘A man called Corish.’ Short film on Mr Brendan Corish compiled from RTÉ material and shown at 2006 Labour Party Conference, 29 Mar. 2006 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 4, RTÉ audio and audio/visual material).

⁷⁰ John Banville, ‘Memory and Forgetting: The Ireland of de Valera and Ó Faoláin’ in Keogh, Dermot, O’Shea, Finbarr and Quinlan, Carmel (eds), *The Lost Decade: Ireland in the 1950s* (Cork, 2004), pp. 21-2.

when he said: ‘...if ever I was in trouble and I had to see a TD, he would be the man I would go to see. He was a man of impeccable credentials in the Labour Party....’⁷¹

There was also a marked difference between Corish and his predecessor. He was eighteen years younger and his mannerism was less overbearing than that of Norton. Michael Gallagher also suggests that symbolically there was a huge difference between both men.⁷² Corish ‘was “lean and hungry” in appearance, whereas Norton looked overweight and complacent.’⁷³ However, it would be unfair and far too simplistic to compare both men merely by their looks. Over the next seventeen years, Corish put his own authentic stamp on the Labour leadership, which was totally distinct from that of his predecessor. This difference in leadership style soon became apparent when Brendan Corish addressed the Historical Society of Trinity College on 11 May 1960.⁷⁴ Certainly, William Norton, as I.L.P. leader was never invited to such a gathering. There was also a significant difference between Corish and the other rival political party leaders. He was nineteen years younger than Seán Lemass. In addition, James Dillon replaced John A. Costello as leader of Fine Gael a year earlier, but Corish was still sixteen years younger than Dillon. Therefore, Corish was part of a younger and eager generation, which emerged in 1960s Ireland. It was thought that his youthful vigour would appeal to idealistic young voters who were not part of an embittered civil war generation. Des Corish explained the suitability of his brother as Labour leader perfectly, when he said: ‘he [Brendan Corish] was old enough to have wisdom and young enough to have energy.’⁷⁵ A political enthusiast might wonder whether or not there was any intrigue involved in Corish’s rise to the Labour leadership. However, just as Brendan Corish emerged as the obvious successor to his father in the 1945 by-election, he again stood out as the clear heir to William Norton in 1960 because of the many talents he possessed.

Brendan Halligan believes that fate also played a certain role when Corish became Labour leader. Halligan explained that:

....those around him [Brendan Corish] simply accepted as a matter of fact that he was destined for leadership. There was never any question but that he was heir to his father and the stuff of ministerial material....Within the party he had

⁷¹ Brian Farrell in ‘A man called Corish.’ Referenced as ‘A man called Corish.’ Short film on Mr Brendan Corish compiled from RTÉ material and shown at 2006 Labour Party Conference, 29 Mar. 2006 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 4, RTÉ audio and audio/visual material).

⁷² Gallagher, Michael, *The Irish Labour Party in transition, 1957-82* (Dublin, 1982), p. 42.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ *Irish Times*, 12 May 1960, Mr Brendan Corish, leader of the Labour Party, speaking at a meeting of the Trinity College Historical Society, Trinity College, Dublin, 11 May 1960, as reported in the *Irish Times*.

⁷⁵ Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Desmond Corish, Wexford, 17 Sept. 2009.

become deputy chairman and then chairman and he was the chief whip. In modern parlance this was a good career path, but not one he contrived or conspired at. It was the career or vocation destiny had ordained. And then....he became leader in 1960.⁷⁶

Corish's rise to power within the I.L.P. was due to his personal characteristic qualities. After he took over from his father, he was singled out for advancement initially because of his own personal attributes. Again, these qualities were the reason why the Labour leadership appeared as simply another step along the ladder for Brendan Corish in 1960. He was determined that Labour would become a coherent national party but he did not manipulate or plan his own political career and was devoid of personal ambition. However, it is inappropriate to make light of the immense task, which faced Corish when he accepted this new post. Within the Labour Party organisation, there was a complete spectrum of political philosophies from socialism and communist sympathisers on the left - which included James Larkin and Roddy Connolly - to right-of-centre conservatives, trade unionists and non-trade unionists, as well as an urban-rural divide. Disagreements between party members were always rife and this culminated in the formation of the breakaway National Labour Party in 1944. Corish's attempts to maintain order and discipline among the different ranks proved a difficult task over time. At all times, one expected 'disagreements' and a 'lively debate' at Labour Party conferences and the media was always present, while the two larger political parties in Ireland always made sure to 'present a united front' in public.⁷⁷ In contrast, 'Fianna Fáil was,' in the words of Brendan Howlin, an 'extraordinary organisation....a national movement....[They were] in every parish....[and benefited from] clientelism [where] progress in state agencies was linked to Fianna Fáil.'⁷⁸ This was a 'potent influence on the electorate' and on the Irish 'psyche.'⁷⁹ A mandate for change was expressed in the Labour Party but there was still much ambiguity over what mantle it would take. There were only twelve Labour parliamentarians on the Dáil benches at the time, which in itself was hardly encouraging. Labour's strength in the capital was weak at this stage while its main support base was located in rural Ireland. Furthermore, since 'Labour had declared itself against further coalitions, the leadership did not encompass the prospect of a place in government in the foreseeable future.'⁸⁰ As Labour leader, Corish was an ex-officio member of the Administrative Council, which

⁷⁶ Halligan, Brendan (ed.), *The Brendan Corish Seminar Proceedings* (Dublin, 2006), pp. 19–20.

⁷⁷ Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Desmond Corish, Wexford, 17 Sept. 2009.

⁷⁸ Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Brendan Howlin TD, Wexford, 14 Sept. 2009.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Gallagher, Michael, *The Irish Labour Party in transition, 1957-82* (Dublin, 1982), p. 41.

controlled the administration and organisation of the party and he could promote six members of the Parliamentary Labour Party to this council.⁸¹ No doubt, the extra burden of leadership responsibility reduced Corish's precious time with his family even further as additional nationwide party meetings and campaigns kept him longer away from home. Brendan Corish's son, Philip Corish, remembers his father being elected as party leader in 1960.⁸² Philip Corish recalled how:

My awareness of my father's political profile probably first came to light in 1960 when he was elected leader of the party and magically persuaded the Christian Brothers to close the school for a half-day. My brother, Dick, and I became very popular – at least we had our Warholian fifteen minutes of fame – but as we were unable to fulfil requests for further escapes from the grind of primary school, our popularity soon waned.⁸³

Irrespective of the huge challenges faced by Brendan Corish in 1960, he was extremely proud of the fact that he was chosen to lead the Labour Party. At the relatively young age of forty-one, he quite rightly viewed it as a wonderful tribute.⁸⁴

In October 1960, the Labour Party held its first conference under new leadership. Seven months after Corish's elevation, delegates were buoyed up. The main focus of debate was on an Administrative Council document, which proposed a merger of the left-wing factions of Irish politics with overtures made to Clann na Poblachta, the National Progressive Democrats and some Independents. In his speech, Corish declared that:

The Labour Party was determined to be a militant force and intended to attract into it those who were progressive....there had been much talk of a third force in Irish politics. What was required was a second force....The second force in fact, would be the broad Labour movement. The Labour Party had decided to try to get a movement that would, in Dáil Éireann and outside it, campaign for the things the party had so long campaigned for.⁸⁵

Corish's choice of words is interesting. In his reference to Labour as a 'militant force,' he meant that his party would go on the offensive politically and that the I.L.P. would become a major weight in Irish politics.⁸⁶ Corish added that 'he did not suggest that the policy statement was revolutionary but it was an effort....[by] the Labour Party to co-

⁸¹ Annual Report of the Labour Party, 1956-7, as cited in Gallagher, Michael, *The Irish Labour Party in transition, 1957-82* (Dublin, 1982), p. 272.

⁸² Philip Corish, 'Concluding remarks' in Halligan, Brendan (ed.), *The Brendan Corish Seminar Proceedings* (Dublin, 2006), p. 40.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Desmond Corish, Wexford, 17 Sept. 2009.

⁸⁵ *Irish Times*, 10 Oct. 1960. Mr Brendan Corish, leader of the Labour Party, speaking at the 1960 Labour Party Annual Conference, Dublin, 8 Oct. 1960, as reported in the *Irish Times*.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

ordinate all the progressive forces. It did not mean that they were going to sink their identity or go into an inter-party government.’⁸⁷ With 140 eligible to vote, the proposal was passed with a majority of eighteen, which in itself indicated the displeasure of a sizeable minority with change.⁸⁸ Corish’s advocacy was an important factor in convincing undecided voters. He believed that Labour should align itself more closely with those of similar left-wing beliefs, for example Clann na Poblachta and the National Progressive Democrats. An alliance of this nature would create a more formidable opponent to the conservative parties in Dáil Éireann. Of course, the content of his conference speech was not wholly unexpected, as it was broadly inline with the statement he made in Trinity College five months earlier. On that occasion, Corish told students that ‘industrial Labour needed a strong political arm and could not be fully effective until its trade union strength was fully represented in the Dáil...The Parliamentary Labour Party, with its limited number of deputies, was not as potent a force as it could be if trade unionists voted Labour.’⁸⁹ During the Trinity College talk, Corish invited individuals and organisations of one mind with the Labour movement to join his party. He affirmed that ‘the party was not the property of the parliamentary members nor of any group. It was open to all to join and could be moulded and wielded to satisfy the desires of all those who believed that the workers of Ireland should have a hand in shaping the country’s destiny.’⁹⁰ Corish wanted the support base of the I.L.P. to include all the working class of Irish society, trade unionists and left-wing sympathisers. Within this base was a large pool of potential voters, which the Labour Party had failed to attract. Corish felt this should be rectified as quickly as possible. If not, he believed that Labour’s hopes of success in the future would amount to nothing. Several meetings were held between Labour and Clann na Poblachta regarding a possible merger but very little progress was made and no formal union was announced between the two parties.

Brendan Corish was in charge of the Labour Party for over a year when he faced his first big test – the general election to the seventeenth Dáil. On 15 September 1961, President Éamon de Valera dissolved the Irish parliament. In the eight by-elections held from 1957 to 1961, Fianna Fáil lost a seat, Fine Gael was up one and Independents were

⁸⁷ *Irish Times*, 10 Oct. 1960. Mr Brendan Corish, leader of the Labour Party, speaking at the 1960 Labour Party Annual Conference, Dublin, 8 Oct. 1960, as reported in the *Irish Times*.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* The exact result was seventy-nine votes in favour versus sixty-one against.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 12 May 1960. Mr Brendan Corish, leader of the Labour Party, speaking at a meeting of the Trinity College Historical Society, Trinity College, Dublin, 11 May 1960, as reported in the *Irish Times*.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

unchanged.⁹¹ There were no deaths or resignations among Labour TDs to cause a by-election, yet the party failed to pick up any additional seats. Nevertheless, the Labour Party was encouraged by the defeat of the P.R. referendum two years earlier, whereas it was viewed as a considerable embarrassment to the government. The local elections also took place in 1960. Labour fared quite reasonably in them, especially in view of the fact that the dismal results of the 1957 general election were still so fresh in the minds of party members. Fianna Fáil was participating in its first general election without Éamon de Valera. While the government felt weakened by de Valera's retirement, in contrast, Brendan Corish's new leadership strengthened the Labour Party. The I.L.P. also benefited from the arrival of Catherine McGuinness who worked as a parliamentary officer for the party. McGuinness proved to be of considerable worth to Labour as she developed a party document on education with Dan Desmond in 1963. She was also a close friend of Brendan Corish. Another positive development was the support of the I.C.T.U. in Labour's 1961 general election campaign.

Brendan Corish's address to the nation was broadcast live on Radio Éireann on 13 September 1961. The main topic of his speech was a call for economic change in Ireland. Corish declared 'that the nation must resolutely and courageously pursue a radical policy of economic change. Labour did not promise an easy solution but at least it had a policy attuned to the particular needs of our economy and to the realities of the 1960s.'⁹² He indicated that proper economic planning was required in order to escape the quagmire in which the country found itself. Corish stated that full economic growth would result from a correct combination of public, private and co-operative inputs.⁹³ He then offered an example of Labour's economic plans. Corish said that 'one of our proposals is that there should be a planning body of independent experts to assist the government and the Oireachtas in carrying out their functions of directing the economy and planning the full use of all our resources.'⁹⁴ Corish's suggestion was both logical and reasonable. Certainly, there were and still are many experts in the field of economics who are not public sector employees. Corish was perfectly correct in his call to Irish governments to harness this source of private expertise.

⁹¹ Walker, Brian M. (ed.), *Parliamentary Election Results in Ireland, 1918-92* (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin and Queen's University Belfast, 1992), p. 198.

⁹² *Irish Times*, 14 Sept. 1961. Mr Brendan Corish, leader of the Labour Party, speaking on a radio broadcast on Radio Éireann, 13 Sept. 1961, as reported in the *Irish Times*.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

The main themes of Labour's 1961 general election campaign were focused on emigration and the need for economic planning.⁹⁵ The recently published 1961 census reported another decline in the Irish population to 2.815 million.⁹⁶ Corish was fully aware of the true extent of the problems posed by unemployment and emigration. He revealed that the net emigration figure from 1956 to 1961 equalled the combined total population of the towns and cities of Cork, Dundalk, Drogheda, Limerick, Galway and Waterford.⁹⁷ Corish compared this mass exodus to 'those [six] cities and towns.... swept away by some natural or man-made catastrophe leaving behind empty houses, deserted streets and complete desolation. That would give....an idea of the magnitude of the flood-tide of emigration over the last five years.'⁹⁸ His choice of analogy is interesting. Irish emigration was viewed by Corish as a major calamity, which needed addressing immediately. Certainly, it was impossible for any Irish politician or person living in the 1960s to have been blind to the fact of Irish emigration. Corish's simile merely re-affirmed an established fact. His solution to emigration and unemployment was of course, proper economic planning as presented in Labour's election programme.

It is surprising to discover that Ireland's application for EEC membership was of so little significance in the run up to the 1961 general election. Lemass earlier indicated that if Britain applied to join the EEC, then Ireland would likewise follow suit. The government formally submitted an application on 1 August 1961. Fine Gael backed Ireland's entry but there were some reservations among members of the Labour Party. They believed that EEC membership would have a negative effect on Irish jobs, goods and companies. However, the former party leader, William Norton, supported Ireland's admission. At a Labour Party conference in Dublin in June 1961, Corish said:

Let us not imagine that membership of the Common Market is something, which need only worry the big industrialists....The question of whether we should join the Common Market, either as a full member or as an associate, is one which deeply concerns all workers and all workers' representatives, whether in the trade unions or in the Labour Party.⁹⁹

Brendan Corish wanted a full debate conducted on Ireland's entry to the EEC. Certainly, he did not wish for the country to rush into any union without having

⁹⁵ 'Brendan Corish on Labour and your future,' 1961 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 4, 1961 general election).

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ *Irish Independent*, 26 Sept. 1961. Mr Brendan Corish, leader of the Labour Party, speaking at a meeting of election workers, Corish Memorial Hall, Wexford, 25 Sept. 1961, as reported in the *Irish Independent*.

⁹⁸ *The People*, 30 Sept. 1961. Mr Brendan Corish, leader of the Labour Party, speaking at a meeting of election workers, Corish Memorial Hall, Wexford, 25 Sept. 1961, as reported in *The People*.

⁹⁹ *Irish Independent*, 22 June 1961. Mr Brendan Corish, leader of the Labour Party, speaking at the 1961 Labour Party Annual Conference, Dublin, as reported in the *Irish Independent*.

engaged in a meaningful debate on the issue first. Corish believed that both his party and the trade unions would have a fundamental role to play in ensuring the protection of workers if Ireland joined the EEC. He added that ‘the trade unions would have to fight more than ever to prevent any rise in unemployment or any depression of the standard of living of the workers. The Labour Party would press in the Dáil for provision to be made for the protection of workers’ interests in any agreement that Ireland might enter into with the EEC.’¹⁰⁰ It is not exactly clear where Corish stood on Ireland and the Common Market in 1961. One might accuse him of wavering a little on that specific issue at that particular point in time. Nonetheless, Corish clarified his position on this matter in the lead up to the 1972 referendum held on Ireland’s participation in the EEC. He advocated a no vote in that referendum, although it was an unpopular decision. However, in January 1963, French President, General de Gaulle, blocked the British entry. He also inadvertently put a stop to Ireland’s hope of joining and so the issue was effectively shelved until 1969.

In advance of polling day, Brendan Corish campaigned extensively throughout the country. Naturally, this commitment impeded on his local campaign in Wexford and also on his cherished private life. In the lead up to the general election, Corish reaffirmed that Labour would not enter another coalition with Fine Gael. He made this intention abundantly clear, when he said: ‘whatever the result of the election, Labour would pursue an independent policy in the next Dáil and would not take part in a government.’¹⁰¹ Despite the fact that Labour was unwilling to form a coalition government, Corish believed nonetheless, that his party would still play an important role in Dáil Éireann. He affirmed that ‘whatever the composition of the next government, we will strive to have our Labour policy adopted by the Dáil and as in the past, we will support proposals and measures that are consistent with our policy and oppose those, which we believe are detrimental to the interests of the people.’¹⁰² This was a pragmatic decision for the I.L.P. In the event of a hung Dáil, Labour would support whatever policies adhered to its set of beliefs. Since the Labour Party was opposed to coalition it was generally expected that Seán Lemass would return as Taoiseach providing that Fianna Fáil first survived the contest without Éamon de Valera.

¹⁰⁰ *Irish Independent*, 22 June 1961. Mr Brendan Corish, leader of the Labour Party, speaking at the 1961 Labour Party Annual Conference, Dublin, as reported in the *Irish Independent*.

¹⁰¹ *Irish Press*, 14 Sept. 1961. Mr Brendan Corish, leader of the Labour Party, speaking on a general election broadcast on Radio Éireann, 13 Sept. 1961, as reported in the *Irish Press*.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

On 4 October 1961, the electorate went to the polls. In Wexford, there were eight contestants. In the previous general election held in 1957, five seats were filled. However, in 1961 there was one seat less. Of the eight candidates, Corish topped the poll on the first count with 9,834 first preference votes or 28.8 per cent, which equalled 1.4 times the quota of 6,820.¹⁰³ He also received eight per cent or 2,753 more votes than his nearest rival, Fine Gael's Sir Anthony Esmonde.¹⁰⁴ The latter claimed the second seat on the first count after receiving 7,081 first preference votes or 20.8 per cent.¹⁰⁵ Corish was naturally thrilled with his own tremendous level of support, which was up 12.4 per cent or 3,629 votes from 1957.¹⁰⁶ His increase in first preference votes was explained by his larger public profile as Labour leader, high level of popularity, effectiveness as an opposition TD and also by the fact that Corish was Labour's only candidate to run in Wexford in 1961. Fianna Fáil won the third and fourth seats in Wexford when both Lorcan Allen and James Ryan were elected to Dáil Éireann with 15.3 per cent and 15.2 per cent of first preference votes respectively.¹⁰⁷ Thus, Fianna Fáil suffered the loss of a seat because of the revision in the Wexford constituency.

Nationally, the I.L.P. gained four extra seats and returned to Leinster House with sixteen TDs - the three seats lost in Carlow-Kilkenny, Meath and Limerick East were all successfully reclaimed.¹⁰⁸ Corish's party received 11.7 per cent or 136,700 votes in the general election.¹⁰⁹ Labour's results fell short of its ambitious plans but despite this, the party made some initial progress. However, Labour's representation in Dublin was still dire to say the least, as Michael Mullin in Dublin North-West was the party's sole representative.¹¹⁰ A further dismal performance in the capital city drew attention to Labour's serious failure to attract Dublin voters. Corish and his party members needed to confront this issue directly if they were anyway serious in forming their own majority government. Fianna Fáil, under Lemass, lost eight seats and Fine Gael won an extra seven.¹¹¹ The National Progressive Democrats returned two TDs and Sinn Féin lost its

¹⁰³ Walker, Brian M. (ed.), *Parliamentary Election Results in Ireland, 1918-92* (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin and Queen's University Belfast, 1992), p. 204.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 197, 204.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

¹⁰⁸ *Irish Times*, 7 Oct. 1961. See also Walker, Brian M. (ed.), *Parliamentary Election Results in Ireland, 1918-92* (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin and Queen's University Belfast, 1992), pp. 199, 202-3. Labour's sixteen TDs included the outgoing Ceann Comhairle, Patrick Hogan who was automatically returned.

¹⁰⁹ Annual Report of the Labour Party, 1969 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 3, Labour Party Annual Reports 1967-79, p. 19).

¹¹⁰ Walker, Brian M. (ed.), *Parliamentary Election Results in Ireland, 1918-92* (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin and Queen's University Belfast, 1992), p. 200.

¹¹¹ *Irish Times*, 7 Oct. 1961.

four seats, indicating that abstentionism in Irish politics was no longer acceptable in the Republic of Ireland.¹¹²

On 11 October 1961, the seventeenth Dáil convened for the first time. Labour immediately sought to assert its independence with the nomination of Taoiseach. Seán MacEntee nominated Lemass as prime minister once again and Dr Jim Ryan seconded the proposal. Seán MacEoin proposed Dillon as a Fine Gael Taoiseach, which was seconded by Cork Borough's Steve Barrett. William Norton then rose to speak and instead of nominating a non-Labour Party leader - as had happened so often in the past - he proposed Brendan Corish as Taoiseach. The reasons Norton stated for submitting Corish's name were 'to reaffirm its [Labour Party] independence and its separateness....His qualifications as a parliamentarian are well and favourably known. His administrative ability as a parliamentary secretary and minister are on record for all to read. He has all the qualifications, which are necessary to make a successful Taoiseach.'¹¹³ Norton added: 'it may well happen that in the procedural arrangements which govern this house there will not be an opportunity for Labour deputies to vote for deputy Corish but, at least, we have put on record the reasons why we have nominated him.'¹¹⁴ The Labour TD for Mid Cork, Dan Desmond, seconded Corish as Taoiseach. Desmond professed 'that the programme for which our colleague deputy Corish stands is different from and completely independent of the policies for which deputy Lemass and deputy Dillon stand. For too long too many people outside have thought it should be the role of the Labour Party, a small political party, to act as a tail-end of one of the larger parties.'¹¹⁵ Desmond continued:

We of the Labour Party believe that while the distance to be travelled may take a little while yet, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael will eventually have to come together. There is nothing between them except the old sores that we hope are nearly now healed. When that time comes, inside this chamber and outside it, people will realise that the Labour Party policy advocated by our leader, deputy Corish, will be the only alternative to the existing system.¹¹⁶

Corish's nomination never got as far as the voting stage. Nevertheless, Labour once again maintained its independence. That was far more important to Labour's TDs than the election of Corish as Taoiseach, especially since there was very little prospect of that happening in 1961. Certainly, it would have made little sense had Labour

¹¹² *Irish Times*, 7 Oct. 1961.

¹¹³ *Dáil Debate*, volume 192, column 20, 11 Oct. 1961.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, column 20-21, 11 Oct. 1961.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, column 21, 11 Oct. 1961.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

proclaimed its outright opposition to coalition and then proceeded to support James Dillon as prime minister. The declaration of independence by the I.L.P. needed to be reinforced by actions such as the recommendation of a Labour Taoiseach. This act was evidence that Labour was attempting to provide the electorate with an alternative to Lemass or Dillon. However, the I.L.P. had still not fully addressed the party's conservatism of the 1950s and hence, it cannot be said that Labour provided Irish voters with a complete and genuine choice to Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael in 1961. In the end, Seán Lemass was elected Taoiseach with the help of the Independents.

For the duration of the seventeenth Dáil, Labour's membership increased, the situation in Dublin improved, the government's turnover tax boosted Labour's popularity, the party's image took a leftward shift and the word socialism was used more frequently. In an interview conducted towards the end of 1960, Corish used the term 'Christian socialism' to define Labour's position.¹¹⁷ One cannot underrate his admission. As a devoted Catholic, Brendan Corish felt that Christianity and socialism were closely connected.¹¹⁸ Did not both sets of beliefs instruct each of its followers to treat everyone equally and that the poorer sections of society should be looked after? However, it appears that Corish was uncomfortable in using the word socialism on its own in 1960. Certainly, socialism was for the most part still a taboo subject in Ireland. His more frequent use of this political and economic theory was a gradual process as Corish was cautious not to attract a red-smear campaign from his opponents. In an interview with the *Irish Times* in June 1964, Brendan Corish advanced to the next stage, so to speak, when he declared that 'all our general and particular policy documents have, in fact, emphasised socialist ideology and any further policies will certainly continue to do so.'¹¹⁹ Again, this confession is quite revealing as it showed the evolution of socialism to a slightly less controversial position. The international context of this statement was also extremely significant. Pope John XXIII succeeded Pope Pius XII in 1958. In 1961, the new pope issued an encyclical entitled *Mater et Magistra* and two years later, *Pacem in Terris* was published, which contained further reflections on social equality.¹²⁰ The social teaching of Pope John XXIII was a huge influence on

¹¹⁷ *Hibernia*, as cited in Gallagher, Michael, *The Irish Labour Party in transition, 1957-82* (Dublin, 1982), p. 44.

¹¹⁸ Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Brendan Howlin TD, Wexford, 14 Sept. 2009. See also interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Desmond Corish, Wexford, 17 Sept. 2009.

¹¹⁹ *Irish Times*, 9 June 1964.

¹²⁰ *Mater et Magistra* (On Christianity and Social Progress) Encyclical of Pope John XXIII, 15 May 1961, available at: Vatican: the Holy See, www.vatican.va (20 Jan. 2009). See also *Pacem in Terris* (On

Brendan Corish as it served to consolidate his politics within his religion.¹²¹ It also reinstated Corish's conviction that it was possible to be a follower of the Catholic Church while espousing socialist policies and that 'Christ was the ultimate socialist.'¹²² Indeed, how could Labour members be accused of having gone along with a godless ideology when the pope himself spoke of social justice? In 1969, Pope John XXIII was depicted by Brendan Corish as 'one of the greatest contributors of all to changing Irish attitudes.'¹²³ Furthermore, the death occurred of William Norton in December 1963. Naturally, Corish felt saddened by the loss of his colleague. However, Norton's unexpected passing gave Corish the eventual freedom to lead Labour in a new direction. Therefore, it is true that both the papacy of John XXIII and the death of William Norton impacted on Corish's leadership from the 1960s and onwards.

Labour's unity statement of 1960 was given extra credence when members of the National Progressive Democrats joined the I.L.P. in November 1963. Corish objected to the membership of Dr Noel Browne because he personally found him difficult to work with and so had his party, as well as former Irish governments. It is probable that his ill feeling over the fall of the first Inter-Party Government and Browne's support of Fianna Fáil's 1952 budget were still quite raw with Brendan Corish too. Nonetheless, Browne made his approval of Labour known in supporting Corish's nomination as Taoiseach in 1961. Niamh Puirseil describes the effect of Labour's new acquisitions as 'considerable, not least because the presence of two self-professed socialists on the Labour benches had shifted Labour significantly leftward overnight.'¹²⁴ Undeniably, the membership of Dr Noel Browne and Jack McQuillan helped strengthen Labour's socialist image. In fact, the initial interest shown by both men in joining the party can be viewed as a real acknowledgement of Labour's intended transformation.

From 1962 onwards, Labour's membership in Dublin began to grow as new youthful recruits enrolled. Certainly, Brendan Corish's age was an important factor regarding many of these younger radical members in their choice of Labour. His

establishing universal peace in truth, justice, charity and liberty) Encyclical of Pope John XXIII, 11 Apr. 1963, available at: Vatican: the Holy See, www.vatican.va (20 Jan. 2009).

¹²¹ Niamh Puirseil, 'Catholic Stakhanovites? Religion and the Irish Labour Party, 1922-73' in Devine, Francis, Lane, Fintan and Puirseil, Niamh (eds), *Essays in Irish Labour History: A Festschrift for Elizabeth and John W. Boyle* (Dublin, 2008), p. 194.

¹²² Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Brendan Howlin TD, Wexford, 14 Sept. 2009.

¹²³ Niamh Puirseil, 'Catholic Stakhanovites? Religion and the Irish Labour Party, 1922-73' in Devine, Francis, Lane, Fintan and Puirseil, Niamh (eds), *Essays in Irish Labour History: A Festschrift for Elizabeth and John W. Boyle* (Dublin, 2008), p. 194.

¹²⁴ Puirseil, Niamh, *The Irish Labour Party, 1922-73* (Dublin, 2007), p. 227.

youthful vigour appealed to them. These young voters were impatient with both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. They wanted a genuine change in Irish politics and society, believing that Labour could provide it.

The reaction of both the government and Fine Gael to Labour's developing socialism is interesting. In April 1963, Lemass claimed 'that the time had arrived for national policy to take "a shift to the left."' ¹²⁵ Within Fine Gael, there were calls from Declan Costello for the party to adopt a more socially progressive outlook. The majority of Costello's draft eight-point proposal was eventually adopted by the *Just Society* programme in May 1964, despite large opposition from Fine Gael conservatives. One might view Fine Gael's new policy as a sign that the latter was attempting to entice Labour into another coalition. If this were the case, then it was proven ineffective in advance of the 1965 general election. There was no degree of persuasion, which convinced the I.L.P. to abandon its go-it-alone policy during this period.

In 1963, the government was confronted with a deficit of thirteen million pounds in its annual budget and as a result, the Minister for Finance, Dr Jim Ryan, introduced a turnover tax of 2.5 per cent on services and shop sales. ¹²⁶ Naturally, Brendan Corish was horrified by Fianna Fáil's new levy, believing that the poor were unfairly targeted once again. He correctly felt that this new measure would cause greater injury to the deprived sections of Irish society since it was placed on vital goods and services. Furthermore, the government issued calls for wage restraint around that particular time too. Corish viewed these actions as 'socially unjust' and 'yet another proof that the government was interested, not in the welfare of the workers but in protecting in every possible way those who were already well off.' ¹²⁷ He added that 'they [the government] want control over wages, yet not only do they refuse to control prices, they themselves wish to take positive steps to increase prices. Such a procedure is both illogical and unjust.' ¹²⁸ Instead, Corish preferred to see the turnover tax replaced by one, which was more equitable. The government's motion to introduce the new tax narrowly avoided defeat but as expected, it led to a rise in the quarterly compiled consumer price index.

On 30 May 1963, Brendan Corish led the Labour Party in a by-election in Dublin North-East caused by the death of Fine Gael's Jack Belton. Denis Larkin lost his seat in this constituency in the 1961 general election and he competed for the I.L.P. in

¹²⁵ Tobin, Fergal, *The Best of Decades: Ireland in the 1960s* (Dublin, 1984), p. 75.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ *Irish Times*, 17 Apr. 1963. Mr Brendan Corish, leader of the Labour Party, speaking in Ferns, County Wexford, 16 Apr. 1963, as reported in the *Irish Times*.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

the 1963 by-election. Larkin ultimately failed to win the by-election but his performance greatly improved on his general election result two years earlier. He received 7,270 first preference votes or 18.5 per cent in the by-election.¹²⁹ This overall improvement was evidence that Labour was beginning to win back voters in the capital, although no one disputed the fact that there was still much work to be done. Certainly, the electorate's resentment over the turnover tax contributed to Larkin's share of the vote. However, there were other factors too, namely that Labour ran an effective election campaign, its public representatives were more vocal in the Dáil and its new leader attracted renewed interest in the party. In the six by-elections held between May 1963 and March 1965, both the government and Fine Gael won two and three seats respectively.¹³⁰ Unfortunately for Labour, Patrick Norton failed to capture his father's seat in the Kildare by-election in February 1964. Furthermore, Jack McQuillan's libel case over claims of communism against him by a councillor in a local newspaper damaged Labour's chances in the Roscommon by-election on 8 July 1964, as the entire episode gave Corish's party unwanted negative publicity in the press. On 10 May 1965, the electorate of Mid-Cork went to the polls following the death of Labour's Dan Desmond. In the lead up to this by-election, Lemass promised to call a general election if Fianna Fáil lost out. Brendan Corish was annoyed by the Taoiseach's statement as he rightly felt that voters should be able to choose their public representatives freely and without any coercion. Corish referred to Lemass as 'hawking around this threat of a general election as if a general election were a hydrogen bomb he was threatening to drop if the people did not rush to do his bidding.'¹³¹ He told voters:

...that a general election is not a hydrogen bomb, nor an outbreak of the Black Death, but a normal democratic process in which the electorate have the opportunity to reject a government...If and it is a very big if, Mr Lemass's threats have any basis in reality, the people of Mid-Cork and of the whole country have nothing to lose and a very great deal to gain from an immediate general election.¹³²

Dan Desmond's widow, Eileen Desmond, won the seat for Labour and Seán Lemass's response was to declare a general election for 7 April 1965.

¹²⁹ Walker, Brian M. (ed.), *Parliamentary Election Results in Ireland, 1918-92* (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin and Queen's University Belfast, 1992), p. 205.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ Brendan Corish, 'Democracy' in Mac Aonghusa, Proinsias (ed.), *Corish Speaks: Speeches on National Affairs by the Leader of the Labour Party, Brendan Corish* (Dublin, 1966), p. 11. Mr Brendan Corish, leader of the Labour Party, speaking in Bandon, County Cork, 1965.

¹³² *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

At a press conference on 23 March 1965, Brendan Corish unveiled Labour's election manifesto, entitled *The Next Five Years*.¹³³ This document called for 'an end to "the free-for-all in price increases," more direct taxation, the introduction of a capital gains tax, less tax evasion and higher social welfare contributions to pay for big improvements in social services....'¹³⁴ Labour's document certainly contained high aspirations. However, Corish was forced to acknowledge that the party programme was not 'a new document; it is the policy of the Labour Party as it was in 1961 but a number of new points have been included.'¹³⁵ Most notably, the term socialism was omitted once again. Evidently, party members felt it unnecessary to include that particular point in the 1965-updated edition. A critic might claim that Labour's new open declaration as a socialist party was taking a long time to rehearse. Definite progress had been made in Ireland but Corish was adamant that there was much more work to be done. The cost of living had grown, net emigration was still unacceptable and furthermore, Ireland had both the largest unemployment figure and also the lowest standard of social services in Europe in 1965.¹³⁶ Brendan Corish's solution was to increase national wealth and a strong Labour representation on the benches of Leinster House would ensure its realisation. There was a lot of interest and speculation over whether or not Labour would join a coalition with Fine Gael if Corish's party held the balance of power in the new Dáil. In fact, Lemass accused Labour of 'preparing to make a bargain with a minority government.'¹³⁷ At a Labour rally in Tullamore, County Offaly on 25 March 1965, Brendan Corish explicitly denied Lemass's statement and any notion that Labour would renounce its go-it-alone policy in the eighteenth Dáil. Corish said:

Whatever the result of this election, Labour will pursue an independent policy in the next Dáil and will not take part in a government. I want to make it clear again that after this election Labour will not enter a coalition with any party. I would hope that this categorical statement would put an end to the accusations made by Fianna Fáil about the course, which Labour will take in the next Dáil.¹³⁸

¹³³ Brendan Corish, 'Democracy' in Mac Aonghusa, Proinsias (ed.), *Corish Speaks: Speeches on National Affairs by the Leader of the Labour Party, Brendan Corish* (Dublin, 1966), pp. 11-12. Mr Brendan Corish, leader of the Labour Party, speaking in Bandon, County Cork, 1965.

¹³⁴ *Irish Times*, 24 Mar. 1965. Mr Brendan Corish, leader of the Labour Party, launching the Labour Party election manifesto, Leinster House, Dublin, 23 Mar. 1965, as reported in the *Irish Times*.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 26 Mar. 1965. Mr Brendan Corish, leader of the Labour Party, speaking at a Labour Party rally, Tullamore, County Offaly, 25 Mar. 1965, as reported in the *Irish Times*.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

He added: ‘all parties will have a responsibility after the election. Labour will fulfil its responsibility, which is to work for the putting into effect of Labour policies in the interests of the country and not to bargain with one party or another.’¹³⁹ This was another pragmatic decision for Labour. Again, in the event of a hung Dáil, the I.L.P. would support policies, which were socially progressive. One can easily understand why Brendan Corish was unwilling to relinquish his party’s independent electoral strategy in 1965. The 1961 general election result was evidence that Labour’s approach was working. Certainly, there was no need to abandon it at that early stage when the alternative was to bargain Labour’s ideals in another inter-party style government and the inevitable fall in support, which would occur after coalition involvement. Again, the desirability of any possible short-term goals such as participation in a coalition did not replace Labour’s long-term ambition to lead a majority government. 1965 also marked the introduction of Telefís Éireann’s involvement in an Irish general election campaign. Brendan Corish was a natural in front of the cameras with his skills as an actor standing to him. On 4 January 1965, he gave a political broadcast on the station. Corish said that ‘the country was capable of greater and more rapid progress, both in agriculture and industry....Increased national wealth was important but it was more important that this wealth should be distributed among all our people in a socially just way.’¹⁴⁰

The general election to the eighteenth Dáil was a victory for Seán Lemass but it was also a success for Brendan Corish and the Labour party. Nationally, Labour received 15.4 per cent or 192,700 votes, which was 3.7 per cent higher than in 1961.¹⁴¹ This gave the party a total of twenty-two seats - an increase of six from the previous general election.¹⁴² Patrick Norton, William Davin and Denis Larkin all managed to regain seats that were previously lost in Kildare, Laois-Offaly and Dublin North-East.¹⁴³ In the capital, Labour won a total of six seats with 18.5 per cent of votes.¹⁴⁴ Included among its newly elected TDs from Dublin were Michael O’Leary, Dr John O’Connell

¹³⁹ *Irish Times*, 26 Mar. 1965. Mr Brendan Corish, leader of the Labour Party, speaking at a Labour Party rally, Tullamore, County Offaly, 25 Mar. 1965, as reported in the *Irish Times*.

¹⁴⁰ *Irish Independent*, 5 Jan. 1965. Mr Brendan Corish, leader of the Labour Party, introducing the Labour TDs Mr Seán Dunne and Mr Seán Casey on a political broadcast on Telefís Éireann, 4 Jan. 1965, as reported in the *Irish Independent*.

¹⁴¹ Annual Report of the Labour Party, 1969 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 3, Labour Party Annual Reports 1967-79, p. 19).

¹⁴² *Irish Times*, 14 Apr. 1965. Labour’s twenty-two TDs included the outgoing Ceann Comhairle, Patrick Hogan who was automatically returned.

¹⁴³ Walker, Brian M. (ed.), *Parliamentary Election Results in Ireland, 1918-92* (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin and Queen’s University Belfast, 1992), pp. 207, 209.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 207-8. See also Annual Report of the Labour Party, 1969 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 3, Labour Party Annual Reports 1967-79, p. 12).

and Frank Cluskey. In fact, Labour's recruitment of O'Leary and O'Connell in particular was testament to the party's success in widening its appeal as graduates and middleclass professionals were embraced. In south Leinster, Labour received twenty-one per cent of the entire votes.¹⁴⁵ Furthermore, Corish's party reached a support level of 18.7 per cent in the Munster constituencies.¹⁴⁶ Fine Gael returned to the Dáil with forty-seven elected deputies, the same total as four years earlier and Liam Cosgrave replaced James Dillon as leader of the party.¹⁴⁷ Fianna Fáil won seventy-two seats and an overall majority.¹⁴⁸ Of the three main political parties, Labour made the biggest gain in terms of seats in the 1965 general election. Once again, this increase was evidence that the party's independent strategy was working. Furthermore, the results from Dublin indicated that Labour was serious in its attempts to address the party's previously small representation in the capital. The 1965 results were certainly encouraging for Brendan Corish and he referred to them as 'a major breakthrough for the Labour Party.'¹⁴⁹ However, the I.L.P. was still fifty seats behind Fianna Fáil and had twenty-five seats less than Fine Gael. One can describe the Labour Party's ambition to win fifty extra seats and lead a majority government by itself in 1965 as very optimistic. Nevertheless, this did not mean that there was anything wrong with Labour's ambition. From experiences in both inter-party governments, Labour was willing to explore a new avenue and the poor election results from 1951 and 1957 reinforced this concept to go-it-alone.

In Wexford, Brendan Corish held on to the first seat with 25.4 per cent or 9,014 first preference votes when he exceeded the quota on the first count.¹⁵⁰ Corish was naturally delighted with his personal achievement. However, his party colleague, Martin Dunbar, was less successful in his bid to win a seat. The distribution of Corish's surplus of 1,910 votes - of which 1,490 went to Dunbar - was not enough for Labour to take two seats in Wexford.¹⁵¹ Sir Anthony Esmonde held on to the second and only seat for Fine

¹⁴⁵ Annual Report of the Labour Party, 1969 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 3, Labour Party Annual Reports 1967-79, p. 12).

¹⁴⁶ Ibid. This figure excluded Cork City.

¹⁴⁷ *Irish Times*, 14 Apr. 1965.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Brendan Corish, 'Where we stand' in Mac Aonghusa, Proinsias (ed.), *Corish Speaks: Speeches on National Affairs by the Leader of the Labour Party, Brendan Corish* (Dublin, 1966), p. 44. Mr Brendan Corish, leader of the Labour Party, speaking at the 1965 Labour Party Annual Conference, Liberty Hall, Dublin, Oct. 1965.

¹⁵⁰ Walker, Brian M. (ed.), *Parliamentary Election Results in Ireland, 1918-92* (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin and Queen's University Belfast, 1992), p. 211.

¹⁵¹ *The People*, 10 Apr. 1965.

Gael, with seventeen per cent or 6,042 first preference votes.¹⁵² Two Fianna Fáil candidates were elected when James J. Kennedy and Lorcan Allen won the third and fourth seats respectively.

On 21 April 1965, the eighteenth Dáil met for the first time and the nomination of Seán Lemass as Taoiseach was successfully passed by a majority of five votes – seventy-two in favour versus sixty-seven against.¹⁵³ Once again, Labour was quick to assert its independence and Labour TD for Meath, James Tully, proposed Brendan Corish as Taoiseach. Realistically speaking, there was little hope of Corish actually becoming prime minister in 1965 as Fianna Fáil had an overall majority in the new Dáil. Therefore, Tully's action was more symbolic than constructive. Certainly, it is most inaccurate to view the eighteenth Dáil as dull from the standpoint of both participants and observers. During its course, a presidential election and a second referendum on P.R. were both held. Labour's move to the left was at long last unambiguous as Corish's party prepared to form a single Labour Party government.

Over a year later, a presidential election took place in the country on 1 June 1966. Interestingly, party colleagues approached Brendan Corish with a proposal to run against both Éamon de Valera and Fine Gael's Tom O'Higgins. Corish declined their invitations. John Horgan explains that Corish's refusal was a pragmatic decision as 'he [Corish] would undoubtedly have done very respectably but realised that the campaign would have been an exhausting journey up a political cul-de-sac.'¹⁵⁴ Furthermore, any realistic presidential aspirations would inevitably have conflicted with Corish's main aim at that time, which was of course to lead a majority Labour Party government. Indeed, politics had already infringed greatly on family time at home in Wexford. Furthermore, his lifestyle would become even more restricted in the event of victory. Attempts were made once again to persuade Brendan Corish to compete as successor to both President Erskine H. Childers before the all-party nomination of President Cearbhall Ó Dálaigh in 1974 and also to Ó Dálaigh himself in 1976. Nonetheless, Corish was not enticed into any presidential contests. In his own modest way, Corish explained in an interview in 1983, that he 'was just not interested in fighting a presidential election. To win the office would certainly have been a wonderful honour but could you imagine me walking down the street to do a five pence Yankee in the

¹⁵² Walker, Brian M. (ed.), *Parliamentary Election Results in Ireland, 1918-92* (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin and Queen's University Belfast, 1992), p. 211.

¹⁵³ *Dáil Debate*, volume 215, column 16, 21 Apr. 1965.

¹⁵⁴ Horgan, John, *Labour: The Price of Power* (Dublin, 1986), p. 33.

bookies?...No matter what office I held I always made sure to be available to people.’¹⁵⁵ Certainly, Brendan Corish would have made a worthy Labour candidate in any Irish presidential election. The former Labour Party leader, Michael O’Leary, summed up Corish’s qualities as a potential president best when the former wrote: ‘the unifying function of the office of president would have suited his open personality.’¹⁵⁶ However, there was a considerable negative effect to Labour’s non-entry in the Irish presidential election of 1966 as it robbed the party of a crucial opportunity to promote itself as a real alternative to Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. In fact, one could go so far as to say that Labour’s omission from the contest helped undermine the credibility of the party in the long term. Therefore, one is right to criticise Labour for not putting a party candidate forward - aside from Brendan Corish - in the 1966 presidential election. Just as the Parliamentary Labour Party nominated Corish as Taoiseach in the Dáil in 1961, 1965 and 1969, the I.L.P. should have proposed a Labour candidate to contest the presidential election in 1966.

The fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising provided the ideal occasion for both public and politicians alike to critically assess the country’s progress since the rebellion of Easter week 1916. Had Irish independence amounted to little more than an elected native figurehead in command and a change of flag over state buildings? Certainly, the ideals of the seven signatories as recorded in the *Proclamation of the Irish Republic*, were all not fully realised fifty years later. Corish was critical of the direction in which Ireland had developed since 1916, although he did acknowledge that the standard of living in the country had improved. In Donnybrook, County Dublin in 1966, Corish said:

Tinkering here and there with our inadequate educational system, our inadequate health services, our inadequate social services, our inadequate housing programme will never succeed in solving the problems, which still face this country fifty years after 1916 and tinkering is all that will be done by either Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael with their established interests and their prior commitment to conservatism.¹⁵⁷

Corish’s critical analysis was justified. In 1966, Ireland had the largest unemployment figure in Europe, the standard of Irish social services was behind that of European

¹⁵⁵ Reprint of interview by *The People* reporter Mr Mervyn Moore with Mr Brendan Corish, Jan. 1983 in *The People*, 22 Feb. 1990.

¹⁵⁶ Michael O’Leary, ‘An appreciation by the former Labour Party leader, Michael O’Leary’ in Halligan, Brendan (ed.), *The Brendan Corish Seminar Proceedings* (Dublin, 2006), p. 56.

¹⁵⁷ Brendan Corish, ‘16 to 66’ in Mac Aonghusa, Proinsias (ed.), *Corish Speaks: Speeches on National Affairs by the Leader of the Labour Party, Brendan Corish* (Dublin, 1966), p. 18. Mr Brendan Corish, leader of the Labour Party, speaking in Donnybrook, County Dublin, 1966.

countries and higher education largely remained a privilege exclusive to the upper classes.¹⁵⁸ Naturally, Corish's solution was a majority Labour Party government in Dáil Éireann. He said that 'until we have a Labour government in Ireland, we must continue to face this failure to make the basic and radical changes in the fabric of our economic and social life that would bring about the republic of Connolly and the other 1916 leaders.'¹⁵⁹

Three years later, the Irish government celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the first meeting of Dáil Éireann on 21 January 1969. This commemoration again presented the perfect opportunity to examine Ireland's development so far in contrast with the Democratic Programme of the first Dáil. It was really important for the Labour Party to partake in this celebration since one of the main contributors to the 1919 programme was the first Labour leader, Tom Johnson. Furthermore, this anniversary was an appropriate time to question the future direction of the country. A special joint session of the Dáil and Seanad was organised for the Mansion House to commemorate the first meeting of both institutions. As leader of the Labour Party, Brendan Corish was permitted to address the dignitaries. He said: 'to my mind the time has come when we must be compelled to implement the ideals contained in the Proclamation of 1916 and in the Democratic Programme of the meeting of Dáil Éireann....We are the inheritors. That is our duty.'¹⁶⁰ He added:

Today a new renaissance is beginning in Ireland and it is the duty of us all to discern it and give expression to it. It is further our duty to direct its path towards the national and social aims enshrined in the foundations of our freedom....As Connolly said: 'the Irish problem is a social problem.' To him Ireland as distinct from its people meant nothing. To us that philosophy hasn't changed.¹⁶¹

It was imperative for Brendan Corish to legitimise Labour's connection with both the 1916 Rising and the meeting of the first Dáil. It proved that his party had as much right to assert its claim on those momentous events as Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael had. Corish also had a deep personal interest in this particular chapter of Irish history as the lives of James Connolly and Michael Collins greatly influenced him. It would also be correct to highlight that another general election was fast approaching in January 1969 - all the

¹⁵⁸ Brendan Corish, '16 to 66' in Mac Aonghusa, Proinsias (ed.), *Corish Speaks: Speeches on National Affairs by the Leader of the Labour Party, Brendan Corish* (Dublin, 1966), p. 17. Mr Brendan Corish, leader of the Labour Party, speaking in Donnybrook, County Dublin, 1966.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ *Irish Times*, 22 Jan. 1969. Mr Brendan Corish, leader of the Labour Party, speaking at the fiftieth anniversary of the meeting of the first Dáil, Mansion House, Dublin, 21 Jan. 1969, as reported in the *Irish Times*.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

more reason for Brendan Corish to draw attention to the failures of past governments to implement both the 1916 Proclamation and Democratic Programme. During the commemoration ceremony of the meeting of the first Dáil, members of the Dublin Housing Action Committee and Students for Democratic Change protested outside. This demonstration indicated a disillusioned section of Irish society towards former governments existed. Could Corish and his party successfully zone in on this disappointment in time for the June 1969 general election?

Labour's dramatic shift to the left occurred during the eighteenth Dáil. From 1960 to 1965, the party's transition to a more socialist philosophy was painstakingly slow. From 1966 onwards, Labour made up for lost time. At the 1965 October conference in Liberty Hall, Dublin, Corish told delegates that 'we can no longer afford to refer merely to the basic principles for which we fight....Now we must spell out in greater clarity and detail the policies for which we stand and the actions, which would be taken by a Labour Party in power.'¹⁶² He added:

By continuing pressure, it [Labour] has succeeded in converting the general public and subsequently both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael to a limited degree of commitment – verbal at any rate – to the ideas of economic planning and social justice but we will not see these socialist policies put into real effect until we see the Labour Party in power and no longer a voice in the wings.¹⁶³

In order for Labour to become more socialist, the party first had to revise documents on a broad range of subjects such as agriculture, the economy, health and foreign policy. Shortly after the October conference, committees were organised for this purpose.

In the lead up to the 1966 annual conference, Brendan Corish openly referred to Labour as 'a socialist party' on the RTÉ current affairs programme 'Division.'¹⁶⁴ The I.L.P. was expected to formally declare its commitment to socialism at the October conference in Liberty Hall. There was much anticipation for Labour's new direction. A reporter with the *Irish Times* wrote that 'even the huge banner over the platform – emblazoned with "Towards a Labour government" – was very much left of centre.'¹⁶⁵ During Corish's speech, 'he stressed his own – and his party's – adherence to a

¹⁶² Brendan Corish, 'Where we stand' in Mac Aonghusa, Proinsias (ed.), *Corish Speaks: Speeches on National Affairs by the Leader of the Labour Party, Brendan Corish* (Dublin, 1966), p. 40. Mr Brendan Corish, leader of the Labour Party, speaking at the 1965 Labour Party Annual Conference, Liberty Hall, Dublin, Oct. 1965.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 40-41.

¹⁶⁴ *Irish Press*, 15 Oct. 1966. Mr Brendan Corish, leader of the Labour Party, speaking on the RTÉ current affairs programme 'Division,' 14 Oct. 1966, as reported in the *Irish Press*.

¹⁶⁵ *Irish Times*, 17 Oct. 1966. The Labour Party Annual Conference, Liberty Hall, Dublin, 16 Oct. 1966.

“coherent socialist philosophy.”¹⁶⁶ His address was extremely well received by Labour members. The *Irish Times* reporter, Donal Foley, wrote that Corish ‘was given a prima donna’s ovation at the conclusion of his thirty minute speech....it was one of Mr Corish’s best performances. He spoke clearly, defiantly and certainly made a sharp impact on the conference delegates, who numbered more than 500.’¹⁶⁷ Indeed, the impact of his speech was strikingly evident as ‘speaker after speaker at that conference followed the Corish line by prefacing their remarks from the platform with the phrase “speaking as a socialist....”’¹⁶⁸ One could criticise Brendan Corish for not stipulating Labour’s socialist philosophy further at the 1966 conference. In fact, prior to his speech, Corish confessed that he ‘wouldn’t spell it out as there were various degrees of socialism.’¹⁶⁹ In 1966, there was a substantial variety of opinion regarding socialism held by Labour Party members as Corish’s own perception contrasted greatly with that of James Larkin for example. Furthermore, the I.L.P. had still not supplied adequate policy documents. However, as leader of the party, it was incumbent on Brendan Corish to define clearly what Labour’s brand of socialism entailed and to ensure that the relevant party documents were in place. Nonetheless, the 1966 conference was still important from Labour’s new departure as the socialist ethos of the party was confirmed.

The ‘New Republic’ speech given by Brendan Corish at the Labour Party Annual Conference in Liberty Hall, Dublin in October 1967 was arguably the most important and impressive speech of his entire political career.¹⁷⁰ More than thirty years later, Corish’s address is still remembered for its unfulfilled prophesy that ‘the seventies will be socialist.’¹⁷¹ However, his speech should account for much more than just a doomed prediction. It was in actual fact, a landmark occasion as Corish presented the Irish electorate with an entirely new type of society built on social democracy.¹⁷² Brendan Halligan quite rightly described Corish’s speech as ‘a milestone in Irish political life. For the first time in a quarter of a century, the leader of a major political

¹⁶⁶ *Irish Times*, 17 Oct. 1966, Mr Brendan Corish, leader of the Labour Party, speaking at the 1966 Labour Party Annual Conference, Liberty Hall, Dublin, 16 Oct. 1966, as reported in the *Irish Times*.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ Horgan, John, *Labour: The Price of Power* (Dublin, 1986), p. 34.

¹⁶⁹ *Irish Times*, 17 Oct. 1966. Mr Brendan Corish, leader of the Labour Party, speaking at the 1966 Labour Party Annual Conference, Liberty Hall, Dublin, 16 Oct. 1966, as reported in the *Irish Times*.

¹⁷⁰ Corish, Brendan, *The New Republic: Complete text of ‘The New Republic’ Address by Brendan Corish* (Dublin, 1968)

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁷² Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Brendan Howlin TD, Wexford, 14 Sept. 2009.

party outlined the philosophy and purpose of his party.’¹⁷³ Corish spent three months preparing his speech with the aid of the General Secretary of the Labour Party, Brendan Halligan. Halligan later described how ‘the sweep of ideas, the inner feeling and the most telling phrases [of the ‘New Republic’ speech] were his [Corish’s] alone.’¹⁷⁴

The content of Brendan Corish’s address was unmistakably socialist. From its outset, Corish outlined the development of a new society in Ireland. He asked: ‘when in the history of this state did the electorate have the opportunity to leave the old departure?...The Irish people now face a crisis of decision...[Labour] must give a socialist alternative....to put an end to national failure and construct a New Republic.’¹⁷⁵ He added: ‘even if it [the electorate] rejects our proposals, at least a genuine choice will have been made. It can never be said again that all the parties were alike and it made no difference whom one voted for.’¹⁷⁶ Corish believed that the Labour Party was on the cusp of a dramatic new chapter in Irish political history. Not only could Labour form a majority government by itself, but also a new Irish society could be created simultaneously. Corish’s society was one, which was based exclusively on socialism. He said: ‘socialists agree on these basic beliefs of freedom, equality, co-operation, community and efficiency....For us, these words mean something. They are our starting point, a foundation on which to build, a measure by which to judge all our achievements and a constant inspiration to act.’¹⁷⁷ Again, one might criticise Corish for not defining his party’s socialism more specifically. He did perhaps anticipate some measure of disapproval when he said: ‘it is not the purpose of this address to analyse the philosophy of socialism in depth or to outline detailed policies, but I assert that no solution exists outside socialism.’¹⁷⁸ Corish also acknowledged that ‘no matter how far left you stand in a Labour Party you will always find yourself to the right of somebody.’¹⁷⁹ The committees set up to develop the various policies for the I.L.P. had not yet finalised their documents. Corish did not wish to appear rash in announcing Labour’s explicit form of socialism before the committees had time to report back with their proposals.

¹⁷³ Brendan Halligan, ‘Foreword’ in Corish, Brendan, *The New Republic: Complete text of ‘The New Republic’ Address by Brendan Corish* (Dublin, 1968), p. 2. Brendan Halligan was General Secretary of the Labour Party from 1967 to 1980.

¹⁷⁴ Brendan Halligan, ‘On Brendan Corish: the man who transformed Labour’ in Halligan, Brendan (ed.), *The Brendan Corish Seminar Proceedings* (Dublin, 2006), pp. 53-4.

¹⁷⁵ Corish, Brendan, *The New Republic: Complete text of ‘The New Republic’ Address by Brendan Corish* (Dublin, 1968), pp. 3-4.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

The overall response from Labour delegates to Brendan Corish's speech was tremendously positive. A reporter with the *Irish Times* wrote: 'Mr Corish's speech caught the mood of the conference. It bathed the delegates in a kind of euphoria.'¹⁸⁰ Corish's support for socialism at the 1967 conference was unequivocal. In fact, one can say that the depth of his socialist loyalties in 1967 was impossible to misinterpret. He spoke fervently and eloquently on the subject. The 'New Republic' speech completely encapsulated Corish's 'own personal philosophy....socialism was "a passion for people," a passionate hatred of injustice and a passionate commitment to equality. Without that passion it was nothing other than an arid intellectual exercise for academics and bar room philosophers.'¹⁸¹ His thinking on socialism had developed over time. In his early life and political career, Brendan Corish, like his father before him viewed socialism in terms of 'practicality,' rather than a lofty theory and in the end, he understood it to mean 'social democracy,' as manifested in his 'New Republic' speech.¹⁸² Certainly, socialism had evolved in Irish society. A decade earlier, it would have been almost impossible to imagine an Irish Labour leader deliver such a speech. During his address, Corish made reference to the transformation, which socialism underwent. He said: 'I can remember when it took real moral courage in this country to say "I belong to Labour; yes, I'm a socialist." Indeed, I know parts of the country today where it still takes moral courage to say so but they are the exception.'¹⁸³ Without doubt, the 'New Republic' speech of 1967 contrasted greatly with some earlier depictions of Corish as a reluctant exponent of socialism. However, socialism was by no means still fully accepted by all sections of Irish society. In 1967, socialists were still considered highly suspicious in the rural constituencies of Ireland. Brendan Corish's attempts to allay the fears of apprehensive voters and to encourage Labour's conservative members to embrace the party's rediscovered socialism proved extremely difficult. Nonetheless, Corish's party moved distinctly to the left. The precise reactions of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael to Labour's leftward shift were fully revealed in the 1969 general election campaign.

Brendan Halligan believes that Corish's '[New Republic] speech committed the party to generating new policies on every aspect of Irish life within twelve months.

¹⁸⁰ *Irish Times*, 16 Oct. 1967. 1967 Labour Party Annual Conference, Liberty Hall, Dublin.

¹⁸¹ Brendan Halligan, 'On Brendan Corish: The man who transformed Labour' in Halligan, Brendan (ed.), *The Brendan Corish Seminar Proceedings* (Dublin, 2006), p. 53.

¹⁸² Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Brendan Howlin TD, Wexford, 14 Sept. 2009.

¹⁸³ Corish, Brendan, *The New Republic: Complete text of 'The New Republic' Address by Brendan Corish* (Dublin, 1968), p. 18.

“I’ve gone out on a limb,” he [Corish] said to me, “now get me in.”¹⁸⁴ Of course, the desire for new party policies did not directly stem from Corish’s 1967 conference speech. The necessity to develop new programmes for Labour existed since the fall of the second Inter-Party Government. Therefore, Corish’s ‘New Republic’ speech merely helped to highlight this urgent need. However, there was increased pressure put on the I.L.P. to produce relevant policy documents as a result of Corish’s speech. Halligan correctly viewed the eventual outcome ‘as an explosion of creative endeavour, which the Labour Party had never experienced before and is unlikely to endure ever again.’¹⁸⁵ On 20 July 1968, a one-day policy conference was held in Liberty Hall, Dublin. There were 400 delegates in attendance and ten discussion papers were debated in separate groups.¹⁸⁶ In December 1968, the Administrative Council ‘convened to give final approval to its policy statements for presentation to annual conference.’¹⁸⁷ At Labour’s conference in January 1969, ten outline policy statements were approved, which included banking and finance, housing, social welfare, agriculture, local government, taxation and worker democracy, education, maritime policy, foreign policy and industrial development.¹⁸⁸ The policies of the I.L.P. were a brave and noble attempt by the party to provide a full assessment of Irish society especially when contrasted with Fianna Fáil’s reluctance to produce any election manifesto during this period.¹⁸⁹ However, in many instances, Labour’s policy aims were more idealistic than realistic. For example, ‘at least one policy group considered issuing a statement advocating the replacement of our Dáil-Westminster system of government with a presidential system.’¹⁹⁰ Nevertheless, Corish and his fellow party members had finally put in place policies to provide backing to Labour’s slogans and speeches. This was another important step reached where Labour’s credibility as an alternative government party was proven. However, the rural conservative element of the I.L.P. remained suspiciously quiet during the policy debates. There was such a momentum for change within the party that the conservatives felt it necessary to bide their time before showing their outright disapproval of Labour’s revived socialism.

¹⁸⁴ Brendan Halligan, ‘On Brendan Corish: the man who transformed Labour’ in Halligan, Brendan (ed.), *The Brendan Corish Seminar Proceedings* (Dublin, 2006), p. 54.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁶ Annual Report of the Labour Party, 1967-8 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 3, Labour Party Annual Reports 1967-79, p. 3).

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁸ Annual Report of the Labour Party, 1969 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 3, Labour Party Annual Reports 1967-79, p. 60).

¹⁸⁹ Gallagher, Michael, *The Irish Labour Party in transition, 1957-82* (Dublin, 1982), p. 83.

¹⁹⁰ Michael O’Leary, ‘An appreciation by the former Labour Party leader, Michael O’Leary’ in Halligan, Brendan (ed.), *The Brendan Corish Seminar Proceedings* (Dublin, 2006), p. 55.

For the duration of the eighteenth Dáil, Labour's membership continued to expand. From 1965 to 1967, party branches grew by fifty per cent.¹⁹¹ In addition, the representation of young people in Labour increased greatly. In 1967, almost half of the Administrative Council members were under thirty-five years of age.¹⁹² As leader of the party, Brendan Corish embodied Labour's youthfulness perfectly. The selection of Brendan Halligan, as Labour's political director in May 1967 was a signal of further change within the party. Eight months later, he was appointed General Secretary of the I.L.P. Halligan played a pivotal role in Labour. He forged a 'clearer ideology' for the party and both he and Corish 'worked closely' together on this task.¹⁹³ Both men got on very well. In fact, Corish always telephoned Halligan with his thoughts from the journey home to Wexford after his week in Dáil Éireann.¹⁹⁴

During this period, Labour successfully recruited prominent individuals in Irish society to the party. They included the former United Nations special representative to the Congo, Dr Conor Cruise O'Brien, R.T.É. presenter and U.C.D. lecturer, Justin Keating, Dr David Thornley of Trinity College and presenter of the Irish television programme, '7-Days' and also Rickard Deasy, the former president of the National Farmers' Association. The membership of these four men in particular, underlined Labour's sincerity to broaden its association. Corish's party also made progress in re-establishing relations with the trade union movement and this was seen in the successful affiliation of both the I.T.G.W.U. and Workers' Union of Ireland. As the largest trade union in Ireland, the re-affiliation of the I.T.G.W.U. on 1 January 1968 was of particular importance to the prosperity of the I.L.P. It had 90,000 members at the time and Brendan Corish warmly welcomed the further strengthening of 'solidarity between the trade union arm of Labour and its political arm.'¹⁹⁵ In the 1967 local elections, Labour made considerable advances in Dublin city. Furthermore, the second P.R. referendum in 1968 resulted in another favourable outcome for Labour as only forty per cent of the turnout voted to abolish the electoral system.¹⁹⁶ Across the Irish Sea, the British Labour Party leader, Harold Wilson, served as prime minister from 1964 to 1970 and again

¹⁹¹ Corish, Brendan, *The New Republic: Complete text of 'The New Republic' Address by Brendan Corish* (Dublin, 1968), p. 18.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Brendan Howlin TD, Wexford, 14 Sept. 2009.

¹⁹⁴ Philip Corish, 'Concluding remarks' in Halligan, Brendan (ed.), *The Brendan Corish Seminar Proceedings* (Dublin, 2006), p. 42.

¹⁹⁵ Annual Report of the Labour Party, 1967-8 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 3, Labour Party Annual Reports 1967-79, p. 11).

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 5.

from 1974 to 1976. Perhaps Corish and his party were swept away by this tide of success.

There were however a series of foreboding signs, which with the benefit of hindsight, made Labour's 1969 disappointment less unexpected. In January 1967, the former Labour vice-chairman, Proinsias Mac Aonghusa, was expelled from the party over unfavourable comments regarding the performance of the Parliamentary Labour Party, which appeared in an unofficial Labour newspaper.¹⁹⁷ Brendan Corish disagreed with the expulsion but Mac Aonghusa was discharged irrespective of this. The resignation of Catherine McGuinness, the parliamentary officer and close colleague of Corish, followed as a result of her husband's ill treatment. Brendan Corish was deeply saddened by her resignation but they always 'remained very close' irrespective of the turbulent nature of her departure.¹⁹⁸ Jack McQuillan resigned from Labour after the withdrawal of the party whip in the Seanad from him over a breakaway trade union appointment. The resignation of the sitting Kildare TD, Patrick Norton, also occurred during the eighteenth Dáil. Labour's new socialist philosophy failed to impress the son of the former Labour leader. He left the party in December 1967 and ran for Fianna Fáil in the 1969 general election. These examples were evidence that disagreements still existed within Labour and that Corish had difficulty in maintaining unity. The expulsion and resignations served as proof of this division. Furthermore, Labour lost two seats in the Cork Borough and Wicklow by-elections of November 1967 and March 1968 following the deaths of Labour's Seán Casey and James Everett. Seán French eventually won the seat for Fianna Fáil in the Cork constituency and Godfrey Timmins of Fine Gael took Everett's old seat. The net results from the seven by-elections held during the eighteenth Dáil term were: Labour down two, Fianna Fáil up three and Fine Gael down one.¹⁹⁹ The fact that the I.L.P. lost two by-elections was proof that Labour's new socialism did not appeal to a large portion of voters. Were these difficulties an omen of Labour's 1969 defeat?

As was the situation in the general elections of 1961 and 1965, Corish was once again unwilling to concede Labour's independent strategy in 1969. At the January 1969 party conference, he reiterated his position again following Michael O'Leary's tabling of an anti-coalition motion. O'Leary thought his proposal would be rejected. In fact, 'it

¹⁹⁷ Horgan, John, *Labour: The Price of Power* (Dublin, 1986), p. 33.

¹⁹⁸ Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Brendan Howlin TD, Wexford, 14 Sept. 2009.

¹⁹⁹ Walker, Brian M. (ed.), *Parliamentary Election Results in Ireland, 1918-92* (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin and Queen's University Belfast, 1992), pp. 211-12.

was saved only by a powerful impromptu intervention in which he [Corish] uttered the prophetic warning that coalition would assuredly give the “kiss of life” to Fine Gael.²⁰⁰ The Labour leader also added that ‘delegates were free to vote in favour of coalition if they wished....and he would accept that decision but were that to happen he would relinquish his leadership “and support socialism from the backbenches.”’²⁰¹ Brendan Corish was unwise in his concluding choice of words as less than three years later, he tabled a motion reversing Labour’s coalition stance in December 1970. At the January 1969 conference, Corish was convinced that coalition was not the right path for Labour. As circumstances changed, he developed a different point of view. He is still remembered to the present day for that memorable quote while the reasons behind his change of mind are for the most part forgotten.²⁰² However, Brendan Corish, as a politician, should have acted more shrewdly at that conference and left himself with room to manoeuvre in regards to Labour’s electoral strategy.

Corish’s persistence to uphold the go-it-alone policy was based on an attempt to develop the left-right divide in Irish politics too. Irish society as a whole was largely conservative. The huge emphasis on property in Ireland remained. Certainly, the transformation in farm ownership from landlord to farmer helped to create a conservative Irish population. In addition, the Irish Civil War not only divided friends and families but it also skewed the alignment of political parties. Instead of creating a parliament of conservatives and socialists similar to any modern democracy, Dáil Éireann became a two-and-a-half party system. The Irish Civil War dominated politics in Ireland for far too long. In 1956, Corish acknowledged that:

Many people were still at the stage where they regarded the side a man took in the civil war as a guide to his fitness to hold office. It would....be a relief to the younger members of the political parties when these petty jealousies and personal hatreds departed from public life and political and national problems were faced in a realistic way.²⁰³

Corish rightly felt that the position one or one’s parents took during the Irish Civil War ought to have no bearing on politics forty years later. The various strands of Irish politics should have been differentiated by policies alone and not personalities. However, the two larger Irish parties were conservative in nature. The Parliamentary

²⁰⁰ Brendan Halligan, ‘On Brendan Corish: the man who transformed Labour’ in Halligan, Brendan (ed.), *The Brendan Corish Seminar Proceedings* (Dublin, 2006), p. 53.

²⁰¹ Puirseil, Niamh, *The Irish Labour Party, 1922-73* (Dublin, 2007), p. 261.

²⁰² Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Desmond Corish, Wexford, 17 Sept. 2009.

²⁰³ Mr Brendan Corish, Minister for Social Welfare, speaking in support of the Labour Party candidate, Mr Herbert Devoy in the Carlow-Kilkenny by-election, Thomastown, County Kilkenny, 10 Nov. 1956 (N.A.I., Brendan Corish Social Welfare June, 1954-7, GIS 1-95, p. 1).

Labour Party as an entirety also acted conservatively on a number of issues in past coalition governments until the adoption of a clearer socialist outlook in the 1960s. Since the I.L.P. opposed coalition, Corish believed that eventually Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael would be forced to coalesce on the occasion of Labour holding the balance of power. In fact, with a union between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, Labour would become the real opposition in Dáil Éireann and hence, a re-alignment of Irish politics would occur. Labour's hope to realign politics in Ireland can again be described as aspirational rather than realistic. However, this did not mean that it was not worth attempting, as the natural separation in all modern democracies is socialism versus conservatism. It is not the two-and-a-half party system pertaining to Ireland.

On 21 May 1969, the eighteenth Dáil was dissolved and Jack Lynch called a general election for 18 June 1969. In 1966, Lynch replaced Lemass as Taoiseach. The Cork Borough TD was the compromise candidate for the Fianna Fáil leadership, beating Charles Haughey, George Colley and Neil Blaney. Labour was well prepared for the 1969 general election. Brendan Corish's son, Philip Corish, recalled that "the seventies will be socialist" years represented for us a time when anything was possible....the party captured the spirit of the time and translated it into a credible political and economic alternative for which we enthusiastically campaigned.²⁰⁴ The general election of 1969 was arguably one of the most important contests Labour faced under Brendan Corish. Having made successive gains in the previous two elections in 1961 and 1965, there was pressure on the party to increase its representation in Dáil Éireann in 1969. Furthermore, Corish and his fellow Labourites had, in fact, spoken of a Dáil majority. For the party to achieve this, Labour needed to win an additional fifty seats. Therefore, it was essential that the I.L.P. fielded enough candidates in order to form a government by itself. Ninety-nine candidates were eventually nominated - the largest number ever put forward by the Labour Party.²⁰⁵

Labour's 1969 general election campaign slogan was based on a phrase from Corish's 1967 annual conference address - 'Let's build the New Republic.'²⁰⁶ Since Brendan Corish was offering the electorate a radical left-wing alternative, Fianna Fáil conducted a deliberate red smear campaign against the I.L.P. Lynch's party felt threatened by Labour's advances over the years, which explained the harshness of its

²⁰⁴ Philip Corish, 'Concluding remarks' in Halligan, Brendan (ed.), *The Brendan Corish Seminar Proceedings* (Dublin, 2006), p. 40.

²⁰⁵ Annual Report of the Labour Party, 1969 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 3, Labour Party Annual Reports 1967-79, pp. 7-8).

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

campaign against the I.L.P. in 1969. In that general election contest, Labourites were faced with widespread accusations of communism. In fact, the Minister for Justice, Michael Moran, dismissed Corish as a mere ‘puppet on a string’ and predicted that the Labour leader would ‘be pushed to make way for the modern Marxist elite on the Labour front.’²⁰⁷ Fianna Fáil’s strategy was to convince voters that Labour’s urban, socialist election candidates were untrustworthy. Lynch’s party depicted these radical nominees as anti-Catholic. Of course, Labour’s alleged communism was in stark contrast to Jack Lynch’s nationwide tour where particular emphasis, it appears, was given to convent visits. Lynch came across as a likeable politician who empathised with the average Irish voter without any great difficulty. Labour’s new policies were also targets of communist allegations as Fianna Fáil chose to misinterpret them intentionally. Furthermore, the government revised the constituency boundaries following their unsuccessful bid to replace P.R. in 1968. Lynch’s party also introduced a giveaway budget in May 1969. It was expected that these actions would help generate votes for Fianna Fáil. Numerous priests around Ireland also directed parishioners not to vote Labour for fear of a communist takeover. Many Irish nuns likewise instructed students to inform their parents of the threat posed by voting Labour and there were also instances when Fine Gael members made similar attacks on Corish’s party. Labour’s reaction to these communist claims was to revert back to the party’s earlier declaration of Christian socialism and reference was drawn to the encyclicals of Pope John XXIII. Instead of redirecting the focus of the core issues of the election campaign back on the concerns of the working class, the I.L.P. was forced to defend its religious credentials. This was one failure of Labour’s 1969 general election campaign.

Three days before the general election occurred, Labour held its final rally at the G.P.O. In his address, Corish spoke of the tactic adopted by Fianna Fáil during the election campaign. He said: ‘different ministers of the decadent Fianna Fáil government have competed in a savage tussle to see who can sink lowest into the gutter in attacking Labour. No lie has been too big and no smear has been too outrageous if it is thought it will hurt Labour’s advance.’²⁰⁸ He added: ‘when even the Donegal mafia are running scared, it can mean only one thing. Labour has arrived. We are writing Fianna Fáil’s

²⁰⁷ *Irish Times*, 7 June 1969. Mr Michael Moran, Minister for Justice, speaking in Ballinrobe, County Mayo, 6 June 1969, as reported in the *Irish Times*.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 16 June 1969. Mr Brendan Corish, leader of the Labour Party, speaking at the final 1969 general election campaign rally of the Labour Party, G.P.O., Dublin, 15 June 1969, as reported in the *Irish Times*.

²⁰⁸ Puirseil, Niamh, *The Irish Labour Party, 1922-73* (Dublin, 2007), p. 240.

epitaph.’²⁰⁹ Corish was fully confident of a Labour victory. He boldly forecast ‘with absolute certainty’ that ‘Labour will win more seats than the other two parties put together.’²¹⁰ Unfortunately for Corish, his prediction proved ill advised.

The result of the 1969 general election was a crushing blow to Brendan Corish and the I.L.P. Labour’s aspiration to lead a government was left in shreds following the loss of four seats.²¹¹ Fine Gael won three additional seats, which brought its total to fifty.²¹² Fianna Fáil was the outright winner and it achieved a Dáil majority with a total of seventy-five TDs.²¹³ There was no realignment of Irish politics nor the creation of a ‘New Republic.’ The successes of 1961 and 1965 were followed up only by failure four years later. Certainly, Labour made considerable progress before its defeat in the 1969 general election. The party’s number of seats in Dáil Éireann increased, its membership base widened significantly, new policies were developed, support in Dublin grew, Labour’s independence was maintained and socialism was finally publicly embraced. The Labour Party underwent a complete overhaul during the reign of Brendan Corish. From the dizzy heights of the ‘New Republic’ speech when it was believed that a Labour government was within the party’s grasp to the presence of only eighteen TDs in the nineteenth Dáil – Labour was most rudely awakened.²¹⁴ The I.L.P. also failed in its attempt to entice the rural, conservative members into a common adoption of socialism. Fianna Fáil’s reaction to Labour’s leftward shift was negative with the launch of a red-smear campaign and the response by voters was to reject the proposition of a Labour government. The conservative civil war parties continued to dominate Irish politics. Brendan Corish’s prophecy that ‘the seventies will be socialist’ proved incorrect.²¹⁵ Corish did not make history as Labour’s first Taoiseach.

²⁰⁹ *Irish Times*, 16 June 1969. Mr Brendan Corish, leader of the Labour Party, speaking at the final 1969 general election campaign rally of the Labour Party, G.P.O., Dublin, 15 June 1969, as reported in the *Irish Times*.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹¹ Annual Report of the Labour Party, 1969 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 3, Labour Party Annual Reports 1967-79, p. 8).

²¹² *Ibid.*, p. 11.

²¹³ *Ibid.* Fianna Fáil’s seventy-five TDs included the outgoing Ceann Comhairle, Comac Breslin who was automatically returned.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

²¹⁵ Corish, Brendan, *The New Republic: Complete text of ‘The New Republic’ Address by Brendan Corish* (Dublin, 1968), p. 3.

CHAPTER V

TÁNAISTE AND MINISTER FOR HEALTH AND SOCIAL WELFARE, 1973-7

‘Some of our own members say we are willing to sell all for the sake of a Mercedes....The country has been damned with doctrinaire socialists who announce that no matter how far left you are, you are always much too much to the right....The paragons of socialism have proven to be the best allies of the forces of conservatism in Ireland.’¹

The 1970s saw Brendan Corish and the Labour Party restored to power, albeit as members of the National Coalition. After sixteen continuous years in opposition, Corish was Tánaiste with responsibility for the Departments of Health and Social Welfare. For this to come about, a dramatic reversal of Labour’s anti-coalition stance was required. The disappointing results of the 1969 general election and moreover, the highly controversial Arms Crisis of 1970 provided the necessary impetus for change, or as Corish so aptly put it: ‘in Fianna Fáil’s difficulty lies Labour’s opportunity.’² In government, Corish encountered an oil crisis, rising inflation, increased unemployment and a further deterioration in the state’s finances. As a member of the government, he was also called upon to ensure the safe transition of Ireland’s entry to the EEC, having opposed an earlier referendum on that very subject. Furthermore, Northern Ireland imploded as the rule of law was replaced by sectarian violence. This escalation of bloodshed reaffirmed for Corish that the only method by which to secure a united Ireland was by peaceful means. While in office, Brendan Corish intended to introduce socially progressive legislation. Did these new Bills become a source of contention between Labour and its coalition partner, Fine Gael? Did the disillusionment and frustration Corish felt during the second Inter-Party Government years re-emerge as the inevitable coalition compromises were negotiated? Indeed, did Labour’s real sense of identity, which Corish helped nurture during the 1960s disappear less than a decade later?

Shortly after the June 1969 general election, Dr Noel Browne sent the following letter to Brendan Corish:

I hope you’re not too discouraged. You could not have done more than you did and we are all proud of you as leader of the Labour Party. All I can do is promise you that having done what I would do to win Dublin for Labour, the

¹ *Irish Times*, 14 May 1971. Mr Brendan Corish, leader of the Labour Party, speaking in Wexford, 13 May 1971, as reported in the *Irish Times*.

² Press Release issued on behalf of the Labour Party, 27 Feb. 1971. Mr Brendan Corish, leader of the Labour Party, speaking at the 1971 Labour Party Annual Conference, Seapoint Ballroom, Salthill, County Galway, 27 Feb. 1971 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 3, Press Releases – Brendan Corish, p. 14).

rest of my political life will be dedicated to winning Ireland for Labour. Just tell me what you would wish me to do.³

However, Corish was hugely disappointed with the general election results. Despite a gain of 31,900 votes for Labour nationally, which measured an increase of 1.6 per cent from 1965, Corish's party lost four seats.⁴ In the Dublin area alone, Labour won 28.3 per cent of the vote.⁵ This corresponded to an increase of 9.8 per cent from the 1965 figure, with ten Dublin Labour TDs elected.⁶ Included in this list were Justin Keating in North County Dublin, Dr Conor Cruise O'Brien in Dublin North-East, Dr Noel Browne in Dublin South-East and Dr David Thornley, who was elected on the first count in Dublin North-West. Of the four elected TDs in the constituency of Dublin South-West, two were I.L.P. members – Dr John O'Connell and Séan Dunne. Labour's improved performance in Dublin was not reflected throughout the remaining countryside. In Munster, for example, only four Labour TDs were elected compared to nine four years earlier.⁷ The Labour Party also lost a number of its outgoing TDs - Patrick McAuliffe, Thomas Kyne and Eileen Desmond and failed to regain seats which were formerly held by the party in the constituencies of Kildare and Laois-Offaly. Furthermore, one could only describe the performance of Labour's high profile candidate, Rickard Deasy in Tipperary North as abysmal as he received no more than 1.8 per cent or 517 first preference votes.⁸ In Wexford, Brendan Corish reclaimed the first seat with 6,939 first preference votes, a loss of 2,075 from four years earlier.⁹ His personal share represented 18.5 per cent of votes cast, which was equal to a fall of 6.9 per cent on his 1965 record.¹⁰ Andrew Doyle and Patrick Mc Donald were chosen to run along side Corish, which partly explains the Labour leader's decrease in votes. In the end, however, neither of the two additional Labour candidates was elected. Doyle won 8.3 per cent or 3,115 first preference votes and McDonald received only 2.2 per cent or 817 first preference votes.¹¹ Corish's hope of Labour taking at least a second seat in Wexford did not transpire. The state of the parties was left unchanged and the remaining seats were

³ Dr Noel Browne to Brendan Corish, as cited in Horgan, John, *Noel Browne: Passionate Outsider* (Dublin, 2000), p. 233.

⁴ Annual Report of the Labour Party, 1969 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 3, Labour Party Annual Reports 1967-79, p. 19).

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁸ Walker, Brian M. (ed.), *Parliamentary Election Results in Ireland, 1918-92* (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin and Queen's University Belfast, 1992), p. 219.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 211, 219.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

distributed between Lorcan Allen and Seán Browne, both of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael's Sir Anthony Esmonde.

The nineteenth Dáil met for the first time on 2 July 1969. After a gruelling election canvass, in which red smears featured so prominently, the opening of the new Dáil term was a highly charged affair, as the I.L.P. castigated Fianna Fáil's conduct. Brendan Corish told the assembled delegates that Fianna Fáil's electioneering and in particular its complete misrepresentation of Labour policy documents was reminiscent of the type of campaign waged against Éamon de Valera's party in 1932. Corish said: 'I believe a disservice was done to the Irish nation in that the campaign promoted by the Fianna Fáil party was one of ensuring that policies would not be spoken about at all, would not be thought about by the people and would not be considered by the people. On the other hand, the politics of fear was exploited to the full.'¹² He added: 'it was good tactics during the election and I must confess that in certain areas it paid off, but it was dishonest and it pushed back Irish politics for decades and decades.'¹³ There were cries of 'watch for the knife' and 'watch for the knife in the back' for Corish from Fianna Fáil's Kevin Boland and Charles Haughey.¹⁴ However, it was Fine Gael's T.F. O'Higgins who gave the most damning criticism of the Labour Party and of Brendan Corish. The TD for South County Dublin said: 'we have heard the leader of the Labour Party whinging about misrepresentation and whinging about smears. We have witnessed him being interrupted by the Fianna Fáil party but the plain fact is that he is the greatest friend Fianna Fáil have in this Dáil and so are the horny-handed sons of toil who sit behind him.'¹⁵ O'Higgins continued:

The leader of the Labour Party need not whinge about smears or misrepresentation....Political parties and political personalities, prima donnas or otherwise, have a responsible role in Irish politics....The Irish people have no use for those who carry perpetual chips on their shoulders and have no intention of ever doing anything about them.¹⁶

One can empathise with Fine Gael's position as the Labour Party had, in fact, handed victory to Fianna Fáil since a coalition was ruled out with Cosgrave prior to the election. Amid all the recriminations and name-calling, Brendan Corish was still convinced that Labour's socialist policies would remain intact. He said: 'we will not turn back. We will pursue these policies relentlessly inside and outside this house. I

¹² *Dáil Debate*, volume 241, column 38, 2 July 1969.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, column 36, 2 July 1969.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, column 41, 2 July 1969.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

believe in the socialist policy of the Labour Party....I believe that socialism in the seventies will provide those opportunities for our people, despite what Fianna Fáil may say now, or what they said before the election.’¹⁷ Despite Corish’s best assurances, Labour’s socialist policies had little chance of implementation in the nineteenth Dáil as the motion nominating Jack Lynch as Taoiseach was carried by a majority of eight votes – seventy-four in favour versus sixty-six against.¹⁸

There were naturally other reasons besides the red smear campaign perpetrated by Fianna Fáil, which explained Labour’s poor performance in the general election of 1969. It is also worth pointing out that Labour, itself, was responsible in many of these cases and so the party is not above reproach with regards to its defeat. First, Labour canvassers were prepared to counteract Fianna Fáil’s allegations of communism with specific answers in a special booklet issued by the party’s National Director of Elections.¹⁹ The Canvasser’s Notes included answers to the following list of contentious questions - ‘Can the [Labour Party’s] policies be called socialist? But aren’t these new policies of yours communist inspired? Many people are saying that in fact you are communist. Are you? Communists sometimes call themselves socialists. What do you say to that?’²⁰ However, only half of these specific notes were taken up.²¹ Therefore, the evidence suggests that the I.L.P. was aware in advance of the damaging campaign Fianna Fáil intended to lead. Ultimately, Labour’s defence was proven porous and thus, it appears that Corish’s party played a role in its own downfall. Second, far too many contestants were chosen to run for the I.L.P. In all but seven of the forty-two constituencies, party candidates had running mates vying for a seat.²² In the majority of these constituencies, there was little or no hope of new candidates being elected, as they were relatively unknown. In hindsight, it would have been wiser had there been less Labour nominees selected in constituencies, where realistically speaking, there was only one or at the most two Labour seats on offer. For example, Labour’s Dan Spring knew from past experience, that his party could only win one seat in the North Kerry constituency and consequently, he was determined to run alone. His persistence paid

¹⁷ *Dáil Debate*, volume 241, column 40, 2 July 1969.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, column 20, 2 July 1969. Frank Cluskey and Dr David Thornley nominated Brendan Corish as Taoiseach.

¹⁹ General Election Canvasser’s Notes issued by the Labour Party, 1969 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 1, 1969 general election).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

²¹ Annual Report of the Labour Party, 1969 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 3, Labour Party Annual Reports 1967-79, p. 17).

²² Walker, Brian M. (ed.), *Parliamentary Election Results in Ireland, 1918-92* (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin and Queen’s University Belfast, 1992), pp. 212-19.

off. Spring eventually took the final seat, despite receiving less first preference votes than Fianna Fáil's Kit Ahern, who subsequently failed to get elected.²³ Third, the response given by many Labour candidates to counteract allegations of communism and large-scale nationalisation was far from satisfactory. Their failure to fully comprehend and discuss the relevant policy documents of the party did not help dispel the fear and suspicion amongst voters. In other instances, the issue of Labour's socialism was neither raised nor promoted. The representation of Corish's party also decreased because Labour did not negotiate a pre-election transfer pact with any of the other political groups. Furthermore, there were many instances when the distribution of transfer votes between Labour candidates was also not encouraged. Indeed, transfers constitute a vital part of the P.R. voting system and the deal hammered out between Corish's party and Fine Gael played a fundamental role in Labour winning an extra seat in 1973. Labour was also hampered by poor organisation in a number of constituencies. The influence of the Catholic Church played a significant part in Labour's drop in support, as the party's socialism was associated with 'soviet Russia and godlessness.'²⁴ A final reason that helps to explain the electorate's reluctance to vote socialist in 1969 and one which, invariably receives lesser coverage was the power and influence of the United States on politics in Ireland at that time. Of course, North America's hatred of communism was well known and fully revealed through its participation in such conflicts as the Vietnam War, Cold War and in particular the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. Its dislike for socialism and trade union strength was also apparent. On top of this was a vibrant Irish community in the U.S.A. in constant communication with relations back home and the first Catholic Irish-American president held office from 1961 to 1963. Clearly, it would be difficult to quantify the magnitude of this influence on the Irish electorate. Nonetheless, it should not be overlooked. However, even with these explanations in hand Corish and his party colleagues faced the same defeat and setback, which marked 1969. With the aim of establishing a Labour government, Brendan Corish set himself a lofty goal. New members were enrolled and the party was completely reshaped but Corish's attempts to attract an adequate source of new voters proved unsuccessful and the disappointing results of the 1969 general election were testament to that specific failure. Again, Labour's expectation to get fifty seats was over ambitious. One can also say that the I.L.P. did not act pragmatically in refusing to

²³ Walker, Brian M. (ed.), *Parliamentary Election Results in Ireland, 1918-92* (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin and Queen's University Belfast, 1992), p. 216.

²⁴ Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Brendan Howlin TD, Wexford, 14 Sept. 2009.

consider a coalition deal with Fine Gael. However, after Labour's disappointing experiences in both inter-party governments, Corish's party was not interested in the role of junior partner in another coalition in 1969.

On 24 July 1969, the nineteenth Dáil began its summer recess. Less than a month later, violent disturbances broke out in the cities of Derry and Belfast. It is worth noting that Northern Ireland failed to generate any great attention among the various political parties in the south in the June 1969 general election campaign. In fact, the six counties featured very little, if not at all in the programmes of successive Irish governments up until the outbreak of the so-called 'Troubles.' Furthermore, it was not until 1965 that a serving Taoiseach – Seán Lemass - and a prime minister of Northern Ireland – Captain Terence O'Neill – met for the very first time. The Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association was formed two years later aiming to achieve full rights for the entire population of the six counties. However, in August 1969 sectarian violence spiralled out of control and it soon spread across the province. It escalated in the Battle of the Bogside in Derry and Catholic houses near the Protestant Shankill Road in Belfast were burnt out. As the B Specials and R.U.C. were seen to act openly in favour of the Protestant majority, the British army was deployed in an attempt by the Westminster government to re-establish peace in Northern Ireland. In a national broadcast given by the Taoiseach, Jack Lynch, on 13 August 1969, he stated: '...the present situation [in Northern Ireland] is the inevitable outcome of the policies pursued for decades by successive Stormont governments. It is clear, also, that the Irish government can no longer stand by and see innocent people injured and perhaps worse.'²⁵ However, successive Irish governments had, for the most part, stood idly by since the Irish Civil War. Field hospitals were set up along the border by the Irish army and a government relief fund was created. Lynch wished to see a United Nations peacekeeping force dispatched to the north, although his British counterpart would never have agreed to such an invitation, as he believed that the violence in Northern Ireland was an internal British matter. The Taoiseach later ruled out the possibility of an armed intrusion from the south into Northern Ireland in a speech given in Dáil Éireann on 22 October 1969. Corish referred to Fianna Fáil's wavering on the Northern Ireland issue as follows: 'it appears that they [Fianna Fáil] want to keep for party advantage all options open....It seems they want to ride two horses that of Fianna Fáil republicanism in order to catch votes and that of respectable horse of pseudo-statesmanship in order to

²⁵ *Irish Times*, 14 Aug. 1969. Mr Jack Lynch, Taoiseach, speaking on a radio and television broadcast to the nation, 13 Aug. 1969, as reported in the *Irish Times*.

impress business interests.²⁶ Of course, the differing views held by Fianna Fáil members regarding Northern Ireland and the type of appropriate response they thought republicans ought to give was fully exposed in the highly controversial Arms Crisis.

Brendan Corish was genuinely concerned with the safe welfare of both nationalists and unionists, as well as the restoration of peace in Northern Ireland. His private papers, which include a collection relating to this subject, testify to that.²⁷ Through links with the Northern Ireland Labour Party, Republican Labour Party, the Council of Labour, I.C.T.U. and the S.D.L.P., which was set up in August 1970, it was possible for Corish and his party to remain fully informed of the unfortunate turn of events as they transpired. However, the Labour Party should have availed of these channels of communication more regularly. Nonetheless, the Parliamentary Labour Party was quick in its initial response to the outbreak of violence in Northern Ireland as a special request to convene Dáil Éireann to discuss the matter was issued. This appeal was denied, despite Corish's assessment of the situation as '...the most important, though frightening development in this country for fifty years.'²⁸ A Labour delegation was sent in May 1969 to the Home Office in London warning of an increase in violence in Northern Ireland. In August 1969, a similar delegation was dispatched to the north, which was followed by yet another group of visiting I.L.P. members to a meeting with Lord Chalfont of the Foreign Office in London, the British Labour Party and its executive. In the words of Brendan Corish, the Irish delegation 'stressed that the people in Derry and Belfast were in danger of their lives at the hands of the B Specials and other fanatics whilst the R.U.C. stood idly by.'²⁹ Corish also brought international attention to the Northern Ireland crisis in his address to a conference of socialist party leaders in Salzburg, Austria, on 3 September 1971.

The violence in Northern Ireland impacted directly on the normal day-to-day running of the government in the Republic of Ireland, when on 6 May 1970; Jack Lynch dismissed two of his ministers - Neil Blaney and Charles Haughey. Kevin Boland - another minister in Lynch's cabinet - and his parliamentary secretary, Paudge Brennan,

²⁶ Press Release issued on behalf of the Labour Party, 30 Jan. 1970. Mr Brendan Corish, leader of the Labour Party, speaking at the 1970 Labour Party Annual Conference, Liberty Hall, Dublin, 30 Jan. 1970 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 3, Press Releases – Brendan Corish, p. 12).

²⁷ Northern Ireland (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, Northern Ireland). See also Press Releases - Brendan Corish (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 3, Press Releases – Brendan Corish).

²⁸ Press Release issued on behalf of the Labour Party, 30 Jan. 1970. Mr Brendan Corish, leader of the Labour Party, speaking at the 1970 Labour Party Annual Conference, Liberty Hall, Dublin, 30 Jan. 1970 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 3, Press Releases – Brendan Corish, p. 11).

²⁹ Ibid.

resigned in protest. It appeared that the state's relief fund, in which Blaney and Haughey both played an important role, was also used in the attempt to import weapons into Dublin, which were destined for Northern Ireland. Lynch was clearly guilty of having turned a blind eye earlier. His initial reaction to the unfolding crisis was slow and his leadership was considerably undermined at first. Paul Daly explained the deep sense of crisis that quickly developed, when he wrote: 'in a matter of forty-eight hours, nearly one third of Lynch's cabinet had resigned or was sacked and the nation became aware of the attempted gun-running plot.'³⁰ On 7 May 1970, Brendan Corish spoke directly in the Dáil on this affair. His feeling of disgust and lack of confidence in the government and in Jack Lynch in particular, was not concealed. He said: 'I am not, nor should I be concerned about the damage to the Fianna Fáil party: what I am concerned about is the damage that these three gentlemen and the Taoiseach and the government party have done to the nation....'³¹ Corish added:

The Taoiseach believes that he has dealt with a national crisis not of long-term national responsibility but of twenty-six county electoral politics, the internal politics of Fianna Fáil. This policy has now crashed to the ground. It is a policy, so far as the unification of the country is concerned, of duplicity and irresponsibility. It may have won its short-term awards but now the day of reckoning has come.³²

Corish was right to condemn the behaviour of the three former Fianna Fáil ministers. Their actions were completely irresponsible and had these three ministers succeeded to implement their plan in full, this would unquestionably have led to the fuelling of even more bloodshed in Northern Ireland. Three weeks later, Haughey and Blaney faced criminal charges. These men were later acquitted – the accusations against Blaney were dropped in July 1970 and Haughey was found innocent in October 1970. Nonetheless, the Arms Crisis had a destabilising effect on the nineteenth Dáil. It was also a major factor in Brendan Corish's decision to reverse his stance on Labour's involvement in coalition. The crisis highlighted that Fianna Fáil was in power for far too long, or as Justin Keating so eloquently put it: 'they were....rotting like a fish from the top down.'³³ The Labour Party found itself in a situation parallel to that of 1948 - a change of government in Ireland was critical. Indeed, the I.L.P. had to participate in another coalition with Fine Gael in order to send Fianna Fáil to the opposition benches.

³⁰ Daly, Paul, *Creating Ireland: The words and events that shaped us* (Dublin, 2008), p. 150.

³¹ *Dáil Debate*, volume 246, column 652, 7 May 1970.

³² *Ibid.*, column 652-3, 7 May 1970.

³³ Justin Keating in Halligan, Brendan (ed.), *The Brendan Corish Seminar Proceedings* (Dublin, 2006), p. 24.

Similar to the varying shades of socialism within the Labour Party, there were also different degrees of republicanism where the likes of Dr Conor Cruise O'Brien and Dr David Thornley symbolised both polar ends on the nationalist spectrum. Thornley was a socialist with nationalist sympathies, whereas one can say that the radical O'Brien's viewpoint was contrary to that of the traditional republican. With the latter's prior involvement with the U.N., O'Brien's credentials certainly suggested that he would make a most capable foreign affairs spokesman for Labour. As spokesman, O'Brien proved to be Labour's most stringent critic on the role of republican paramilitaries in Northern Ireland and his hostility towards the Provisional I.R.A. grew as the violence increased. In fact, the same O'Brien later became a member of the United Kingdom Unionist Party in 1996, which, if anything, was a clear signal of how he perceived the union between Northern Ireland and England. It was also the manner in which he expressed his particular viewpoint on Northern Ireland affairs that caused friction and disunity within the ranks of the Labour Party. O'Brien came across as arrogant and self-righteous when debating the Northern Ireland issue and often clashed with John Hume of the S.D.L.P. O'Brien was unyielding in his opinion and ultimately this method of defending his position contributed to his political downfall in the general election of 1977.

Brendan Corish was severely criticised for the loyalty he showed to Dr Conor Cruise O'Brien and his sense of nationalism was questioned. Naturally, the Labour leader wished to see the discrimination of northern Catholics put to an end. He also wanted P.R. restored and a stop put to gerrymandering in the six counties. In keeping with the traditional nationalist viewpoint, Corish desired the reunification of Ireland but by peaceful means, whereas O'Brien was against any form of nationalist standpoint in Northern Ireland. Brendan Corish's perspective on nationalism moderated over time. In his twenties, Corish was very republican and during the 1940s, he had vociferously objected to the partition of the country.³⁴ He was after all a pacifist, like his father before him. Richard Corish's non-participation in both the Irish War of Independence and Irish Civil War taught his son the value of a peaceful approach. In fact, in the eyes of Brendan Corish, his father's lack of militancy did not make him any less a republican. Speaking at the annual conference of the Labour Party in Galway in February 1971, Brendan Corish said: 'the unity Labour wants and is working for, is a voluntary unity of working people, not an enforced territorial unity....There can be no

³⁴ Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Desmond Corish, Wexford, 17 Sept. 2009.

progress towards unity by resorting to force of any kind or by encouraging force through the use of violent language.’³⁵ Corish promoted real change when he said: ‘we must, as a central part of a realistic policy on the north, set about putting our own house in order....Labour recognises that while social welfare, housing, education and health services remain inferior in the Republic, it is futile to call for the unification of the country.’³⁶ He continued: ‘in the Republic we must oppose the same evils of bigotry and intolerance as we oppose in the north....An enterprise as magnificent and as noble as the unification of Ireland demands the highest moral courage and transparent honesty of purpose. Let us show both.’³⁷

Internment without trial was introduced on 9 August 1971 by the unionist prime minister, Brian Faulkner. When it transpired that those interned were predominately Catholic, this led to a further escalation of violence in the north and an increase in I.R.A. recruitment. In fact, on the very first day of internment, twelve people were killed including two women and 300 alleged I.R.A. supporters were also arrested.³⁸ Corish abhorred internment without trial. He believed that ‘it had caused the complete alienation of the two communities.’³⁹ He said: ‘that feeling of alienation must be brought to an end and the quicker the better. It cannot be done if the British government appears to give licence to the unionist government to do as it wishes in the security field.’⁴⁰ Corish asked: ‘will there be reconciliation in a situation where police and military interrogators brutalise detainees? On the contrary, there will be hatred and distrust and a solution will be postponed.’⁴¹ Of course, Brendan Corish was fully aware of the brutality of the R.U.C. and the British army towards nationalists in custody in Northern Ireland. Included in his private papers on Northern Ireland are statements from detainees who were arrested, questioned and maltreated, as well as signed letters to confirm the accuracy of these accounts.⁴² These statements described how individuals

³⁵ Press Release issued on behalf of the Labour Party, 27 Feb. 1971. Mr Brendan Corish, leader of the Labour Party, speaking at the 1971 Labour Party Annual Conference, Seapoint Ballroom, Salthill, County Galway, 27 Feb. 1971 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 3, Press Releases – Brendan Corish, p. 5).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

³⁸ *Irish Times*, 10 Aug. 1971.

³⁹ Press Release issued on behalf of the Labour Party, 7 Nov. 1971. Mr Brendan Corish, leader of the Labour Party, speaking to the Wexford Area Council, Ballycogley, County Wexford, 7 Nov. 1971 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 3, Press Releases – Brendan Corish, p. 2).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Fr Denis Faul and Fr Raymond Murray to Brendan Corish, enclosing copy statements containing allegations of brutality by British army and R.U.C. personnel, 31 Jan. 1972 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, Northern Ireland). See also Letter from Campaign for Social Justice, 14 Jan. 1972

were beaten, kicked down the stairs, flung against the wall, threatened with a gun to the head, were framed for murder, were struck for not singing the English anthem, how the electric shock treatment was used and also how British army medical doctors acted unethically during such interrogations.

The divergence of opinion among southern Labourites regarding the Troubles in the six counties emphasised for Corish the necessity of developing a definitive, coherent party policy on Northern Ireland. The statements issued by O'Brien on Northern Ireland affairs contrasted greatly with those released by such Labour members as Dr David Thornley, Stephen Coughlan, Dan Spring, Seán Treacy and John O'Donovan. On 13 July 1971, Thornley wrote of his disapproval of O'Brien to Brendan Corish, after the northern spokesman stated in the *Irish Times* that 'the "extreme position" of "the establishment of a united republic" would "have to be abandoned."'”⁴³ Thornley believed that: 'this line predictably gets us the approval of a gentleman in Carrickmines....Big deal. The sooner some people realise the utter irrelevance to us of the *Irish Times* and its readership, the better will grow our chances of preserving, say fifteen seats in 1973....I think we have all lost what little political savvy we ever had.'⁴⁴ The main debate within Labour concerning the situation in Northern Ireland centred on whether or not the party should have condemned I.R.A. violence, the use of the political prisoner term for I.R.A. detainees and the suitability of Dr Conor Cruise O'Brien as Labour northern spokesman. In order to demonstrate that the I.L.P. was a respectable political party, it was imperative that Labour members renounced violence and there was no ambiguity over the means by which to secure a united Ireland. However, there were some within the Labour Party who felt the I.R.A.'s campaign of violence against British and unionist oppression was justified. Hence, they did not consider those I.R.A. prisoners as ordinary criminals. In their opinion, had not Labour's own James Connolly used a similar form of military violence against the British in 1916? As Thornley put it: 'when Connolly went into the G.P.O. he sought to coerce, physically, not merely the Ulster unionists but about one third of the population. Was he wrong? Everyone of our *Árd Fheiseanna* takes place under huge blow-ups of his picture. Is this consistent with a revision to the

(I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, Northern Ireland), Letter and statement issued by teachers of school-children from the Bogside and Creggan areas of Derry, 9 Dec. 1971 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, Northern Ireland) and Fr Brian Mac Bradaigh to Jack Lynch, re: signed statements on brutality, 22 Aug. 1971 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, Northern Ireland).

⁴³ Dr David Thornley to Brendan Corish, 13 July 1971 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, Northern Ireland).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

policy of Redmond?’⁴⁵ Republican Labour TDs feared that a diluting of the party’s nationalism would result in a loss of support from voters. The historian, Michael Gallagher includes in his work the findings of ‘a survey carried out by Irish Marketing Surveys in May 1970, [which] suggests that Labour supporters were more republican than supporters of the other two main parties, while only a minority favoured the most militant options offered in the questionnaire.’⁴⁶ Gallagher also points out that the Northern Ireland issue and the differing positions taken by O’Brien, Thornley and Treacy had little impact on the 1973 general election results.⁴⁷ There were numerous attempts by O’Brien’s opponents to oust him as northern spokesman. In the end, these motions were either dropped or defeated. O’Brien held on to the northern portfolio with Corish’s support because of his non-violent approach.

On the other side of the argument, there were those within Labour who acknowledged the equal entitlement of both nationalists and unionists to co-exist on the island of Ireland. One can say that the particular stance taken by Brendan Corish on the Northern Ireland issue fell into this category. Certainly, Corish did not want to physically coerce the unionist majority in the north into a united Ireland. Instead, he wished for relations between north and south to vastly improve. He also desired that the Republic of Ireland would become more liberal and appealing to Ulster unionists, so that these same people would feel enticed to enter a thirty-two county socialist republic peacefully. However, with the likes of the Reverend Ian Paisley and his fellow extreme unionists insisting on membership of the Commonwealth instead of the Republic of Ireland, there was no prospect of the country reunifying in the short term. No fully acceptable and workable solution was found to the age-old ‘Irish question’ during this period.

‘1972 would prove to be the bloodiest of the Troubles,’ Paul Daly correctly wrote as 467 people were killed in that year alone.⁴⁸ Less than a fortnight before Christmas 1971, three members of the Official I.R.A. murdered the Northern Ireland Senator, John Barnhill, in Strabane, County Tyrone and his killers later fled south across the border. The Labour Party was divided over the assassination of senator Barnhill. At the time, Michael O’Leary was acting as deputy spokesman for the absent O’Brien. O’Leary said ‘that an onus rested on the Taoiseach to urge the Attorney-

⁴⁵ Dr David Thornley to Brendan Corish, 13 July 1971 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, Northern Ireland).

⁴⁶ Gallagher, Michael, *The Irish Labour Party in transition, 1957-82* (Dublin, 1982), p.142.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.151.

⁴⁸ Daly, Paul, *Creating Ireland: The words and events that shaped us* (Dublin, 2008), p. 153.

General to bring the officers and members of the I.R.A. executive before the courts as accessories to the crime' and also 'to take similar action against "a rival faction of the same organisation."'”⁴⁹ Thornley's statement in the Dáil contrasted greatly to that of O'Leary. Seán Treacy, the Labour TD for Tipperary South was absent from these heated Dáil proceedings and sent the following urgent telegram to Corish from Clonmel, County Tipperary on 15 December 1971: 'dump O'Brien and O'Leary fast. Only hope of saving party from national disgrace and political annihilation. What price internment and repression now?'⁵⁰ In the end, neither Dr Conor Cruise O'Brien nor Michael O'Leary was dropped by Corish. Labour's Barry Desmond also felt it necessary to write to O'Brien on New Year's Eve, 1971 regarding the public's reaction to Labour's divided opinion on Northern Ireland and a copy of this letter was sent a day later to Brendan Corish.⁵¹ Desmond wrote:

The reaction during the month of December has been the worst I ever recall. Your [O'Brien's] absence from the country and Dáil, Thornley's lunacy, O'Leary's over reaction....Treacy's outburst, O'Connell's attempt to jump on the bandwagon of dissention, all combined to set the tone for a public opinion towards us which is now a mixture of dismissive contempt and cynical concern.⁵²

Desmond included in his letter 'a number of pitfalls which I strongly feel must be avoided like the plague by you [O'Brien] if a further erosion of our position is not to occur.'⁵³ He suggested:

The broad general principles of our policy must be stressed and explained to the electorate....The rank and file electorate simply does not understand a great deal of the intellectual analyses you [O'Brien] have been elaborating on in recent months....also the spate of letters to the *Irish Times* which prove an interesting and enlightening exercise, but which all detract and confuse the getting across to the electorate, north and south, of Labour's general policy.⁵⁴

Desmond added: 'it is repeatedly stated to me that we rush headlong over one another to condemn the I.R.A. murders....but are totally silent when British troops commit excesses....While I fully appreciate the national bias in the Republic on such questions,

⁴⁹ *Irish Times*, 14 Dec. 1971.

⁵⁰ Seán Treacy to Brendan Corish, 15 Dec. 1971 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, Northern Ireland).

⁵¹ Barry Desmond to Brendan Corish, 1 Jan. 1972 and attached copy of Barry Desmond to Dr Conor Cruise O'Brien, 31 Dec. 1971 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, Northern Ireland).

⁵² Barry Desmond to Dr Conor Cruise O'Brien, 31 Dec. 1971 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, Northern Ireland, p. 1).

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

I feel that our weight of condemnation has now become unbalanced.’⁵⁵ Indeed, the chain of events, which Desmond wrote about, publicly highlighted the discrepancies and disunity amongst Labour Party TDs over the northern issue and the role of the I.R.A.

After Labour’s disastrous split in the 1940s, Brendan Corish feared that the I.L.P. would divide over the northern issue this time and so he made preparations for a suitable northern party policy. On 22 September 1971, Corish formally requested the creation of a joint Northern Committee at a joint meeting of both the Administrative Council and Parliamentary Labour Party,⁵⁶ Roddy Connolly, Thornley, Treacy and O’Brien were all included so that a complete representation of the various strands of opinion existed on the board. The Labour leader, Brendan Corish was naturally also present. Corish reached an earlier agreement with the leader of the S.D.L.P., Gerry Fitt, on a six-point principle statement on 24 August 1971. Six months later, Labour’s Annual Conference in Wexford eventually adopted the party’s Northern Policy Statement on 26 February 1972. Its first point declared that: ‘the establishment of an all-Ireland socialist republic is the fundamental objective of the Labour Party. National unity is, therefore, a basic objective of the party. As stated in the party constitution, the Labour Party affirms that the national territory consists of the whole island of Ireland, its islands and territorial seas....’⁵⁷ It also stated that the union sought by Labour was voluntary and thus, violence was explicitly renounced.⁵⁸ The statement rejected violence, but contained the following principle: ‘....the Labour Party is unconditionally opposed to the built-in official violence practised by the unionist government and to the denial of the civil, legal and political rights of the minority....and recognises that people have a right to physically resist the maintenance of partition by these methods.’⁵⁹ This policy recognised the particular involvement of past and present British governments in the current crisis in Northern Ireland, as well as demanding the urgent end to internment without trial and ‘the withdrawal of the British troops as soon as a political solution permits.’⁶⁰ Certainly, Brendan Corish’s participation in Labour’s Northern Committee was stamped across the party’s policy document. His influence was seen particularly in

⁵⁵ Barry Desmond to Dr Conor Cruise O’Brien, 31 Dec. 1971 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, Northern Ireland, p. 1).

⁵⁶ Annual Report of the Labour Party, 1971 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 3, Labour Party Annual Reports 1967-79, pp. 29-30).

⁵⁷ The Labour Party Northern Policy Statement, adopted by Annual Conference, 26 Feb. 1972 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, Northern Ireland, p. 2).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

the statement's rejection of violence and also through the principle to establish a united Ireland by peaceful means. This policy helped unify the vast majority of Labour opinion on the Northern Ireland Troubles. It was also important from the perspective of Labour's development as a respectable political party as the I.L.P. finally renounced violence in public. Despite Thornley's abrupt resignation from the Northern Committee on 7 December 1971 following the publication of yet another controversial article by O'Brien in the *Irish Independent* this time, the development of a major rift in the party was successfully averted.

Less than a month before Labour's 1972 Annual Conference was held in Wexford, thirteen civil rights demonstrators were shot dead by British paratroopers in the city of Derry on 30 January 1972.⁶¹ Nationalist opinion was further hardened by Bloody Sunday and support for the I.R.A. grew. This was evident in the burning of the British embassy in Merrion Square, Dublin three days later. In his speech to the Labour delegates, Corish again condemned all forms of violence in Northern Ireland. He declared that the Irish constitution needed redrafting and also called for 'the immediate withdrawal of troops from minority areas....the ending of internment....the establishment of a commission....[and] the announcing of a date for the total withdrawal of British troops from the north, so as to facilitate early negotiations between the representatives of all Irish communities.'⁶² Corish's call for a re-examination of the Irish constitution in order to make Irish unity more amenable to unionists was highly problematic. There were traditionalists who felt that if constitutional changes were made without any prior assurances from the unionists in place, Ireland would become more secularised like Britain. Furthermore, a redrafting of the Irish constitution would still not guarantee the reunification of the country. However, Corish's request was worthy of praise as it displayed a sincere effort on his part to bring about a peaceful solution to the northern violence.

Labour's northern policy unleashed a new sense of unity for most of the party but despite this, further issues and incidents of a controversial nature regarding Labour and the north occurred. The attempts by Labour's Dr John O'Connell to organise talks between the British Labour Party leader, Harold Wilson and the Provisional I.R.A. in January, March and July 1972 created huge controversy both within and outside the party. As a result of this particular incident, a Labour Disciplinary Special Committee

⁶¹ *Irish Times*, 31 Jan. 1972.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 28 Feb. 1972. Mr Brendan Corish, leader of the Labour Party, speaking at the 1972 Labour Party Annual Conference, Wexford, as reported in the *Irish Times*.

was established. Of course, O'Connell's plan in bringing opposing sides in the Northern Ireland conflict together in direct dialogue, with the inclusion of paramilitary organisations was essential in the long term. It proved to be a crucial element in the Good Friday Agreement of 10 April 1998 and in the eventual success of power sharing between Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party from 2007 onwards. Stormont was suspended by the end of March 1972 and Northern Ireland was placed under direct rule from Britain once again. The six counties and the knock-on effects of the Troubles remained a critical feature in southern politics and overshadowed Corish's period in government, culminating in the doomed 1973 Sunningdale Agreement.

The nineteenth Dáil was also dominated by another Irish bid to enter the EEC. After Ireland's earlier unsuccessful attempt to join during the 1960s, the country eventually became a full member on 1 January 1973. In the referendum held on 10 May 1972, Fine Gael supported the Fianna Fáil led proposal. It is worth noting that Ireland's EEC entry was described by Fine Gael's Dr Garret FitzGerald in hindsight as 'the ultimate justification for Irish independence.'⁶³ 'For it was through accession in 1972,' he wrote 'that the Irish state finally completed the process of separating itself economically, as well as politically from Great Britain.'⁶⁴ The argument made by the former Taoiseach is interesting and debate provoking, although it cannot be said that Brendan Corish shared a similar point of view in the 1970s. Moreover, as a nation which tried for so long to exit the Commonwealth, it is intriguing to learn why the majority of Irish people were so enthusiastic about entering the Common Market, with obvious differences aside. On the pro-entry side were the government, Fine Gael, Irish farmers and the domestic business sector. On the opposing side in the referendum were Labour, the I.C.T.U., the Irish Communist Party, both Official and Provisional wings of Sinn Féin and the Common Market Defence Campaign, which had its headquarters located in Belgrave Road, Dublin. Within the Labour Party itself, mixed opinions regarding Irish entry existed, as Dr Conor Cruise O'Brien and Barry Desmond were both in favour. In a letter to Brendan Corish on 29 November 1971, Barry Desmond recommended that Labour's best strategy was to show their 'opposition to the negotiated terms and to the appalling lack of preparation on the part of the government.'⁶⁵ Desmond added: 'I greatly fear the emergence of a situation in which

⁶³ FitzGerald, Garret, *Ireland in the World - Further Reflections* (Dublin, 2006), p. 23.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Barry Desmond to Brendan Corish, 29 Nov. 1971, with attached memo for parliamentary party meeting regarding thoughts on strategy for Common Market campaign by Barry Desmond, 24 Nov. 1971 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, EEC referendum campaign, p. 3).

the party might campaign on a “Vote No – EEC No” line, which would appear to oppose membership on principle. Many thinking members of the party do not believe in such a line.’⁶⁶ The appointment of Labour’s EEC spokesman went to Justin Keating, who was against Ireland’s entry.

In his commentary on the formal handing over of Brendan Corish’s private papers to the I.L.H.S. on 11 March 2006, Brendan Halligan correctly stated that since Labour provided the main dissenting voice on EEC membership, Corish’s arguments on this subject in question were all the more interesting from a historical point of view.⁶⁷ In Corish’s file on the EEC referendum, one can quite easily see the exact position the Labour leader took and the key points his opposition centred on.⁶⁸ First, Corish was unimpressed by the conditions negotiated by the Irish government and by the Minister for External Affairs, Dr Paddy Hillery in particular. Corish believed that ‘trade union officers would have done better’ and compared the Treaty of Accession of January 1972 to having signed a ‘blank cheque.’⁶⁹ He feared that membership of the EEC would result in a loss of Irish sovereignty, since Brussels would replace Dáil Éireann as the new decision making epicentre.⁷⁰ There was also much debate over the extent of a predicted price increase, which inevitably came about with EEC membership. Prices in the six existing member countries were twenty-two per cent higher than those in Ireland at the time – a clear reversal of the situation in the 2000s.⁷¹ By joining the EEC, Ireland’s turnover tax was to be replaced by a value added tax. The government estimated that the cost of living in Ireland would be affected by one penny extra each year for a period of five years on every one pound normally spent plus inflation.⁷² The Common Market Defence Campaign calculated that food prices for the average household would increase by £3.50 per week.⁷³ Corish and his party believed that the government underestimated and instead, predicted that prices would rise by more than

⁶⁶ Memo for parliamentary party meeting regarding thoughts on strategy for Common Market campaign by Barry Desmond, 24 Nov. 1971 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, EEC referendum campaign, p. 3).

⁶⁷ Brendan Halligan, ‘Commentary on the Brendan Corish papers’ in Halligan, Brendan (ed.), *The Brendan Corish Seminar Proceedings* (Dublin, 2006), p. 5.

⁶⁸ EEC referendum, 1972 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, EEC referendum, 1972).

⁶⁹ Handwritten note by Brendan Corish on EEC membership (Labour and unions versus big business, I.F.A. and I.C.S.M.A.), undated (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, EEC referendum, 1972, pp. 1-2).

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁷¹ Common Market Referendum – Fact Book issued on behalf of the Labour Party head office for Labour Party members, Apr. 1972 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, EEC referendum, 1972, p. 3).

⁷² *Ibid.* See also government white paper on EEC.

⁷³ *The Common Market and You*, pamphlet issued by the Common Market Defence Campaign, undated (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, EEC referendum, 1972, p. 1).

twenty pence per pound over five years.⁷⁴ In addition, since farmers were promised more money in return for their produce, this would invariably result in a higher cost for consumers in the end. Fianna Fáil also frequently highlighted the fact that with membership of the EEC, Ireland would have guaranteed prices and access to a market of 250 million potential customers.⁷⁵ In contrast, Corish feared that small Irish industries would be forced with closure as they would be unable to compete with larger, more efficient and profitable European companies. In the long term, he believed that this would result in a rise in Irish unemployment. Indeed, Brendan Corish blamed the Anglo-Irish Free Trade Agreement of 1965 for the loss of 21,000 jobs in Ireland and predicted that EEC membership would cost 35,000 jobs.⁷⁶ In 1970, imported goods accounted for twenty per cent of home consumption - an increase of seven per cent from ten years earlier.⁷⁷ If Ireland joined the EEC, it was felt that this figure would rise even further and at a far greater pace. Corish was also not completely enthused with the rate of progress within the EEC, as the rate of unemployment between 1963 to 1969 in 'France [was] up by thirty-one per cent, Italy by thirty-two per cent, Netherlands by eighty-five per cent [and] Belgium by forty-two per cent,' which equalled 2.25 million across the entire six member countries.⁷⁸ In 1971, economic growth averaged around three per cent within the EEC.⁷⁹ Finally, Brendan Corish was concerned over Irish neutrality, the level of influence the country would have within the Council of Ministers, its number of commissioners and European Parliament members, the future of Irish farming, in particular the small and medium sized farmers, the long term viability of Ireland's fishing communities and also by the capitalist make-up of the community itself.⁸⁰

⁷⁴ Common Market Referendum – Fact Book, issued on behalf of the Labour Party head office for Labour Party members, Apr. 1972 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, EEC referendum, 1972, p. 4).

⁷⁵ Remarks made by Dr P.J. Hillery, Minister for Foreign Affairs, at a meeting of the Irish Association of University Graduates, Galway, 29 May 1971 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, EEC referendum, 1972, p. 3).

⁷⁶ Press release issued on behalf of the Labour Party, 28 Apr. 1972. Mr Brendan Corish, leader of the Labour Party, speaking at a Labour Party meeting, Waterford, 28 Apr. 1972 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, EEC referendum, 1972, p. 2).

⁷⁷ Handwritten note by Brendan Corish on EEC membership (Labour and unions versus big business, I.F.A. and I.C.S.M.A.), undated (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, EEC referendum, 1972, p. 5).

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Common Market Referendum – Fact Book, issued on behalf of the Labour Party head office for Labour Party members, Apr. 1972 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, EEC referendum, 1972, p. 6).

⁸⁰ Handwritten note by Brendan Corish on EEC membership (Labour and unions versus big business, I.F.A. and I.C.S.M.A.), undated (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, EEC referendum, 1972, pp. 6, 12-3, 15). See also Handwritten note by Brendan Corish on interview in Brussels regarding

Associate membership of the EEC was proposed by Corish in place of full-scale participation by Ireland. His preference for the former was derived from the underdeveloped nature of Ireland's economy. In contrast, the West German and Dutch economies were, respectively, sixty and ten times larger than their Irish counterpart at the time.⁸¹ The Labour Party believed that associate membership would, most importantly, permit the Irish government to develop the nation's economy as it so wished and still allow for the unrestricted exportation of Irish industrial products to the EEC.⁸² Associate membership was, however, not negotiated for by an Irish delegation; despite the fact that article 238 of the Rome treaty stipulated such an agreement. Technically associate membership was an available option for the Irish government but it was not a realistic choice since Ireland was so closely tied to the British economy at the time. It would also be idle to speculate the effect associate membership would have had on Ireland, had the government chosen to follow that particular route. Certainly, Ireland would have become a full member of the EEC eventually, irrespective of having, or having not entered any prior association pact with the countries of the Common Market. For example, Greece signed an association agreement on 9 July 1961 and it became the tenth member of the EEC on 1 January 1981.

The referendum on joining the EEC saw Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael campaign for a common goal. This referendum finally provided Brendan Corish with the opportunity to present voters with an issue, where Labour was the main opposition. However, as a socialist party, the I.L.P. should clearly have represented the main opposition to both conservative parties on many issues down through the years. For such an important decision, the Labour leader called on the Irish electorate not to vote along the customary party lines but to vote according to their own consciences. He correctly felt that the referendum result would not only effect the present population but future generations.⁸³ In response to those who were branded 'traitors' and 'unpatriotic' for voting no, Corish replied that these people were 'not anti-Europe,' but were, in actual fact, 'pro-Irish.'⁸⁴

justification for not supporting EEC membership, undated (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, EEC referendum, 1972).

⁸¹ Handwritten note by Brendan Corish on EEC membership (Labour and unions versus big business, I.F.A. and I.C.S.M.A.), undated (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, EEC referendum, 1972, p. 7).

⁸² Common Market Referendum – Fact Book, issued on behalf of the Labour Party head office for Labour Party members, Apr. 1972 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, EEC referendum, 1972, p. 11).

⁸³ Handwritten note by Brendan Corish on EEC membership (Labour and unions versus big business, I.F.A. and I.C.S.M.A.), undated (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, EEC referendum, 1972, p. 1).

⁸⁴ Ibid.

The outcome of the referendum was an overriding vote in favour of Ireland entering the EEC - eighty-three per cent supported it nationally as opposed to seventeen per cent against.⁸⁵ In Wexford, eighty per cent of turnout was in favour of entry.⁸⁶ If one had equated these results as a measure of the electorate's support for the Labour Party, then it was hardly encouraging for Corish. In fact, it would have been far too simplistic to solely describe it as such as there were clearly other issues at stake. Indeed, the nation's future economic prosperity was the main concern among voters at the time. One must also acknowledge that a far healthier debate was encouraged because Labour provided the main challenge to those campaigning for a yes vote, which is, after all, essential in every democratic society. Had the situation arisen whereby all three of the main political parties favoured Irish entry, then certainly the same level of debate would never have been reached. The referendum result finally paved the way for Ireland's complete entry to the Common Market and while in government, Labour responded pro-actively to EEC participation. For Brendan Corish, the result had one further repercussion on both his party and political career. Niamh Puirseil explained the exciting development that the result produced, when she wrote: 'it had resolved an issue, which had represented the most significant policy cleavage between Labour and Fine Gael in recent years. An important stumbling block on the way to coalition had been removed.'⁸⁷

The reversal of Brendan Corish's anti-coalition stance was certainly based on a strong sense of pragmatism, which the Labour leader possessed. Having maintained his party's independence for more than a decade without acquiring the much sought after Dáil majority, or a realignment of Irish politics, Corish knew that a new direction was needed once again for Labour. He was not afraid to change his mind but knew full well of the personal recriminations he faced in doing so. Fianna Fáil's 1969 red-smear campaign and the government's mishandling of the Arms Crisis – where for a time it appeared that the country was on the verge of another civil war - left him with little doubt over what needed to be done.⁸⁸ Furthermore, the result of the general election contest of 1969 served as both a 'knock and jolt' for Brendan Corish.⁸⁹ His unbroken spell of sixteen continuous years out of government reinforced the idea that it was

⁸⁵ Annual Report of the Labour Party, 1972-3 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 3, Labour Party Annual Reports 1967-79, p. 13).

⁸⁶ *Irish Times*, 12 May 1972.

⁸⁷ Puirseil, Niamh, *The Irish Labour Party, 1922-73* (Dublin, 2007), p. 301.

⁸⁸ Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Brendan Howlin TD, Wexford, 14 Sept. 2009.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

unhealthy for any party to remain so long in power as ‘democracies became bureaucracies.’⁹⁰ It was also ‘corrupting, as the separation of the civil service and politics was eroded’ because career appointments and promotions were associated with support and membership of a certain elite party.⁹¹ Continual opposition was also not productive from the viewpoint of any political party because one was confined to debating rather than introducing key reforms.⁹² No doubt, Brendan Corish learned this valuable lesson earlier but his negative experiences in the first and second Inter-Party Governments left him with a desire to explore other avenues, namely the possibility of an I.L.P. majority or a majority Labour coalition. In the end, he fully realised ‘that opposition is largely sterile and negative. In a democratic system the only justification for opposition is that it is a period either of political recuperation or preparation for power. It should never be a permanent state of existence.’⁹³ In addition, the sudden death of Fine Gael’s Gerard Sweetman occurred during the course of the nineteenth Dáil. It is no great secret that Corish’s reluctance to enter another coalition with Fine Gael was also partly based on Sweetman’s right-wing conservativeness. After the shrouding in disappointment of the second Inter-Party Government, ‘Brendan Corish, for one, swore he would never again serve in a government in which he [Sweetman] was present.’⁹⁴ The overall reason Brendan Corish gave for reversing Labour’s coalition stance while remaining on as party leader was offered in the following explanation. He said:

....as long as my informed assessment of the political situation suggested to me in the context of 1969 that coalition was wrong, then, in conscience, I was bound to retire to the backbenches. In drastically changed circumstances, when in my judgement it is right for the party to negotiate for participation in government and to adopt this [electoral strategy reversal] policy, I found no reason to retire to the backbenches.⁹⁵

Corish’s earlier reluctance to enter a coalition in 1969 reflected his honest opinion at that given time and his support for Labour’s involvement in 1970 again represented his

⁹⁰ Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Desmond Corish, Wexford, 17 Sept. 2009. See also interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Brendan Howlin TD, Wexford, 14 Sept. 2009.

⁹¹ Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Brendan Howlin TD, Wexford, 14 Sept. 2009. See also interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Desmond Corish, Wexford, 17 Sept. 2009.

⁹² Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Brendan Howlin TD, Wexford, 14 Sept. 2009.

⁹³ Mr Brendan Corish, Tánaiste, Minister for Health and Social Welfare and leader of the Labour Party, speaking at the 1974 Labour Party Annual Conference, Leisureland, Salthill, County Galway, 19 Oct. 1974 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, collected speeches 1973-7, p. 27).

⁹⁴ Puirseíl, Niamh, *The Irish Labour Party, 1922-73* (Dublin, 2007), p. 203.

⁹⁵ *Irish Times*, 14 Dec. 1970. Mr Brendan Corish, leader of the Labour Party, speaking at a press conference following the Labour Party’s special conference, Cork, 13 Dec. 1970, as reported in the *Irish Times*.

sincere belief at that particular moment. It is worthwhile questioning whether or not Brendan Corish would have remained opposed to coalition had circumstances remained unchanged in the 1970s. It does appear unlikely that his resistance would have been maintained indefinitely. In any case, the political climate is in constant transformation. From one decade to another, both obstacles and opportunities confront politicians and it is of course the manner in which these men and women react that is ultimately of most importance.

The two by-elections held on 14 April 1970 in Kildare and Longford-Westmeath were the turning point along the protracted road to coalition. Both Justin Keating and Dr David Thornley were appointed Director of Elections for the I.L.P. in Kildare and Longford-Westmeath respectively. Labour asked its supporters to give their second preference votes to Fine Gael and in turn, Cosgrave's party issued a similar appeal to its followers prior to the two by-elections. Fine Gael eventually won both seats and the voting transfer pact assisted the party along its path to victory. Labour also performed quite well. In Kildare, Joe Bermingham increased his share of first preference votes for Labour by 3,212 or eighteen per cent from his previous result in the 1969 general election.⁹⁶ Kildare was of course the old stronghold of William Norton, the former party leader, so it was important for Labour to obtain a favourable result there. Bermingham's vote was also encouraging from the perspective of Labour acquiring a seat in the next general election. In Longford-Westmeath, the party's vote only dropped a small fraction - 10.5 per cent to 9.2 per cent.⁹⁷ In contrast, Labour failed to retain its seat in the Dublin South-West by-election on 4 March 1970. The party displayed a disunited front when Matt Merrigan, an anti-coalition Labour candidate ran against Cora Dunne, the wife of the former Labour TD, Seán Dunne. Jack Lynch's party was able to capitalise on the split within Labour's ranks and in the end, Seán Sherwin of Fianna Fáil was elected.

On 13 December 1970, Labour's electoral strategy went up for debate at a specially convened conference in City Hall, Cork. As Brendan Corish entered the building, he was met by a group of young anti-coalition socialists with placards. These same activists 'succeeded in embarrassing Dr David Thornley by generally baiting him and suggesting that he should change his slightly pink shirt for a blue one.'⁹⁸ There were also three rows of stewards ensuring that access was given only to the 858

⁹⁶ Walker, Brian M. (ed.), *Parliamentary Election Results in Ireland, 1918-92* (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin and Queen's University Belfast, 1992), pp. 216, 220.

⁹⁷ Annual Report of the Labour Party, 1970 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 3, Labour Party Annual Reports 1967-79, p. 4).

⁹⁸ *Irish Times*, 14 Dec. 1970.

delegates with cards.⁹⁹ With so much at stake for the party, one could easily have described the air within the hall as tense and hostile. Furthermore, there were forty-three amendments up for discussion - a sizeable workload for delegates attending any ordinary conference.¹⁰⁰ In his leader's address, Corish delivered his speech to his fellow delegates not from an elevated platform, but instead, proposed the change in strategy directly from the floor. This was hugely symbolic as it displayed Corish's proletariat thinking – he was at one with his audience. As a key witness to the event, Labour's general secretary at the time, Brendan Halligan, later described it as 'a psychological masterpiece,' when he explained that 'on the floor of [the] conference he [Corish] fought for and won the party.'¹⁰¹ During his speech, Corish 'emphasised that the resolution was not an instruction to enter coalition. Labour would not enter government at any price. It would only do so if it could put its policies into action.'¹⁰² Furthermore, he promised that coalition negotiations would only commence after a general election and that Labour would not campaign with its coalition partner. Donal Musgrave, a reporter with the *Irish Times*, depicted the dramatic scene that ensued: 'when he [Corish] reached the point of justifying his present position and used the phrase "in conscience," Dr Browne came to his feet shouting "shame, shame, you are a humbug."' ¹⁰³ Indeed, the working relationship that existed between both Corish and Browne could easily have been likened to that of a roller coaster ride. They were never particularly close but nonetheless there were times when Browne held the Labour leader in high regard. However, by December 1970 their working relationship had clearly soured as Browne attacked Corish both in public and private. Dr Noel Browne also attracted negative publicity for the party over controversial remarks he made regarding the Irish Catholic Church, which included one such speech given in Tramore, County Waterford on 23 April 1971, where the influence of the Catholic Church on Irish political organisations was compared to the control of the Orange Order on unionist political parties.¹⁰⁴ His dislike for the Catholic Church could also be viewed as a slight on Brendan Corish's strong Christian beliefs. Browne's intentions to improve society were well meaning, however it was often the manner in which he went about to achieve

⁹⁹ Annual Report of the Labour Party, 1970 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 3, Labour Party Annual Reports 1967-79, p. 15).

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Halligan, Brendan (ed.), *The Brendan Corish Seminar Proceedings* (Dublin, 2006), p. 21.

¹⁰² Annual Report of the Labour Party, 1970 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 3, Labour Party Annual Reports 1967-79, p. 15).

¹⁰³ *Irish Times*, 14 Dec. 1970.

¹⁰⁴ *Irish Times*, 24 Apr. 1971. Dr Noel Browne TD, speaking at a Labour Party dinner, Tramore, County Waterford, 23 Apr. 1971, as reported in the *Irish Times*.

these improvements that ultimately hindered his final efforts. Certainly, numerous colleagues found him most difficult to work with. Furthermore, Labour's Dr John O'Connell also attempted to undermine Corish's authority. Michael Mills, a political correspondent with the *Irish Press* at that time, recalled how 'the two medical doctors, Browne and O'Connell, neither of whom had any regard for the leadership and ran their own individual campaigns.'¹⁰⁵ Mills explained that when Brendan Corish became Tánaiste, as well as Minister for Health and Social Welfare in 1973:

O'Connell especially gave Corish a very difficult time putting down questions to him daily in the Dáil and following up with supplementary complex medical matters which left Brendan bewildered and frustrated. The stress affected him badly and he sought the advice of his friends who urged him to try to tolerate the pressure, as O'Connell would eventually grow tired of the exercise.¹⁰⁶

It is important to point out that Brendan Corish was extremely well liked by his party colleagues overall and as John Horgan accurately explained: 'only the most extreme of his internal critics – and being the Labour Party, there was never any shortage of them – ever made the mistake of attacking him [Corish] personally and if they did, the party as a whole would turn on them like the wrath of God.'¹⁰⁷

Before the all-important vote on Corish's proposed electoral strategy motion, Dr Noel Browne staged a walkout followed by a large number of supporters. This particular walkout was somewhat reminiscent to that of de Valera, which preceded the election of Arthur Griffith as president of the new provisional government on 10 January 1922, as the same sheer sense of emotion was displayed on both occasions. In fact, Dr Noel Browne viewed Corish's statement 'as the greatest political turnabout since Mr de Valera went back into Leinster House.'¹⁰⁸ In the end, however, the Administration Council's resolution was adopted by a majority of 192 votes – 396 in favour as opposed to 204 against.¹⁰⁹ Had Dr Noel Browne and his followers remained on to vote, the result inevitably would have been far closer.

Labour's decision to alter its electoral strategy could also be viewed as a vote of confidence in its party leader. Brendan Corish did in fact broach this very subject in an interview with the press following Labour's special conference. He told reporters that

¹⁰⁵ Michael Mills in Halligan, Brendan (ed.), *The Brendan Corish Seminar Proceedings* (Dublin, 2006), p. 15.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ John Horgan, 'Brendan Corish: An Appreciation' in Halligan, Brendan (ed.), *The Brendan Corish Seminar Proceedings* (Dublin, 2006), p. 50.

¹⁰⁸ *Irish Times*, 14 Dec. 1970.

¹⁰⁹ Annual Report of the Labour Party, 1970 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 3, Labour Party Annual Reports 1967-79, p. 16).

the result was also ‘a vote for or against the leadership of the party’ and later referred to the outcome as ‘an overwhelming vote of confidence in me.’¹¹⁰ At that particular point in time, it appeared that the division witnessed at the 1970 special conference over the coalition question could have led to a split within the I.L.P. Certainly, the coalition issue was a cause of real concern for Corish. Labour’s Michael O’Leary believed that Brendan Corish ‘was never happier in the time I [O’Leary] knew him than in the heady years leading up to the election of 1969 when the task to hand was the creation of a virtually new party for a new world before he was taken in the toils of the rancorous controversy over coalition.’¹¹¹ O’Leary explained that ‘the atmosphere of personal recrimination associated with the coalition debate within the party, which continued through the 1970s depressed him.’¹¹² While there was a small minority within Labour who disagreed with Brendan Corish, there was certainly a majority of fellow members who greatly esteemed him. In fact, the sense of loyalty and trust Corish displayed helped Labour avoid another unfortunate split similar to that, which saw the formation of the breakaway National Labour Party in 1944. Labour’s Justin Keating believed that ‘nobody else, unless they were as loved and trusted as he [Corish] was by the party, could have changed the party’s policy. That was Brendan’s achievement – one of many....it was the love and trust the party had for Brendan that made the change possible.’¹¹³ John Horgan also expressed a similar sentiment when he wrote: ‘it is difficult to think of any other leader who could have survived the spectacular reversal of party policy on coalition in 1970, or who could have taken office in a coalition government after having promised to support coalition only from the back benches.’¹¹⁴ Horgan added: ‘in Corish’s Labour Party, this provoked grumbles and indeed opposition. In the same party led by anyone else, it would have provoked outright rebellion and probably a split.’¹¹⁵ History showed that factionalism within Labour remained a prevalent theme since its formation. It can also be said that Labour’s split in 1944 was over a far more trivial issue compared to the reversal of electoral strategy in 1970. Of course, there were several party members - particularly from the rural

¹¹⁰ *Irish Times*, 14 Dec. 1970. Mr Brendan Corish, leader of the Labour Party, speaking at a press conference following the Labour Party’s special conference, Cork, 13 Dec. 1970, as reported in the *Irish Times*.

¹¹¹ Michael O’Leary, ‘An appreciation by the former Labour Party leader, Michael O’Leary’ in Halligan, Brendan (ed.), *The Brendan Corish Seminar Proceedings* (Dublin, 2006), p. 56.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ Michael Mills in Halligan, Brendan (ed.), *The Brendan Corish Seminar Proceedings* (Dublin, 2006), p. 24.

¹¹⁴ Horgan, John, *Labour: The Price of Power* (Dublin, 1986), p. 31.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

constituencies - who always favoured a coalition with Fine Gael. There were also some Labourites who had grown tired of opposition or who, like Brendan Corish, had altered their opinions in respect to coalition as a result of their party's performance in the 1960s and also from the change in political circumstances of the 1970s, which they were confronted with. Hence, it can be said that Brendan Corish, as leader of the party, had a major positive influence overall on Labour's decision to alter its position on coalition involvement. As Brendan Howlin explained: 'it was Corish's force of will, his articulation of the argument,' which ultimately helped Labour reverse its electoral strategy.¹¹⁶ Corish also managed to keep the majority of party members onside during the debate. In fact, his support demonstrated a great degree of maturity and pragmatism, which the situation called for.

With Labour's new electoral strategy in place and the threat of a general election looming over both government and opposition, one would think that Corish and his party would have set about quickly to prepare for a new coalition. As it transpired however, there was no real advance made until 1972. At a Labour Party meeting in Inchicore, County Dublin on 13 June 1972, Corish said that 'an alternative government to Fianna Fáil is needed....My political judgement, based on the realities of today's politics and those of tomorrow, is that we must clearly indicate to the electorate that Labour is willing to share in the formation of an alternative government to Fianna Fáil in the next general election.'¹¹⁷ In the words of a pragmatist, Corish acknowledged that Labour 'cannot expect to get all our policies into operation in a coalition government. To expect this would be unrealistic. But we could put many of our basic policies into practice and this would be a better thing for our country now than to wait until the Labour Party had a majority in Dáil Éireann.'¹¹⁸ He added: 'in politics there is no such thing as a certainty. There is no certainty that an alternative government would be overwhelmingly supported by the electorate in the next general election but it would be an act of irresponsibility not to give the public such a choice.'¹¹⁹ Clearly, Corish learned from past experience and in particular from involvement in the second Inter-Party Government that coalitions involved compromises. When he negotiated a new government programme for the I.L.P. with Fine Gael, Corish felt the benefit of these

¹¹⁶ Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Brendan Howlin TD, Wexford, 14 Sept. 2009.

¹¹⁷ Press release issued on behalf of the Labour Party, 13 June 1972. Mr Brendan Corish, leader of the Labour Party, speaking at a Labour Party meeting, Inchicore, County Dublin, 13 June 1972 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, Formation of 1973-7 government, pp. 1-2).

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

difficult lessons. The fact that new party policies were developed during the 1960s also aided him in this task. On 28 June 1972, Brendan Corish requested each Labour spokesman to prepare a policy relating to his relative department. He intended to include these policies in Labour's programme for coalition. Barry Desmond advised Corish that the coalition programme 'should be a joint statement of a governmental programme.'¹²⁰ He added: 'the joint statement would be, in effect, a statement of intent and not a statement of methods. I think that distinction is vital.'¹²¹ Desmond warned:

The problem with our party is that we're strong on principle but weak on policy. I am afraid that if we get into government, our ministers will make up policy as they go along and that our party will have no guidelines by which to monitor Fine Gael performance. Therefore we must go into minute detail in all areas of government – none of this 'ten points on the back of an envelope' stuff. That's no way to run a country, although some of our colleagues think it sufficient.¹²²

In October 1972, Corish accepted Cosgrave's invitation to a discussion on the prospects of forming a coalition government. Naturally, there were significant policy differences between both Labour and Fine Gael. In a highly confidential memorandum on coalition negotiations issued by Labour's general secretary, Brendan Halligan, on 29 January 1973, 'prices, pay and profits, building land, [the] north, I.R.A., R.T.É. [and] control of credit' were described as 'areas where dissension could arise between the two parties.'¹²³ Included in this list was the Offences Against the State (Amendment) Bill introduced by the government in November 1972, where greater authority was given to the Garda Síochána in charging individuals with membership of an unlawful organisation. Brendan Corish and his party strenuously opposed this piece of legislation and the Fianna Fáil government responded by accusing the I.L.P. of being pro-I.R.A. In contrast, some members of Fine Gael supported Fianna Fáil's offences Bill, including its party leader, Liam Cosgrave. In a speech to the Dáil on 29 November 1972, Corish disclosed that pickets were placed on his house during this period of heightened tension and that intimidating telephone calls were made to his home. In his opinion, the new Bill contributed to 'lowering the standard of justice' and he believed that 'the democratic institutions should not be damaged in the name of the preservation of democracy.'¹²⁴ Corish also acknowledged that:

¹²⁰ Brendan Halligan to Brendan Corish on electoral strategy, 28 June 1972 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, Formation of 1973-7 government, p. 1).

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹²³ Memorandum on Coalition Negotiations issued by the Labour Party, 29 Jan. 1973 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, Formation of 1973-7 government, p. 2).

¹²⁴ *Dáil Debate*, volume 264, column 384, 29 Nov. 1972.

Whatever steps the government take or any government take, we will support what we consider to be the proper steps in accordance with the rule of law, but we oppose laws, which we believe to be oppressive....We will continue to walk the narrow path between attacks on democracy by the government or by illegal organisations. This we have done for the past fifty years.¹²⁵

As the Bill was debated for the third night in Dáil Éireann, two car bombs exploded at Liberty Hall and Sackville Place, Dublin killing two people and injuring 127.¹²⁶ The terror and mayhem, which tragically became all too prevalent in Northern Ireland was witnessed at first hand on the streets of the capital city. The explosions also acted as guarantor to the government's Bill. It became law, despite Corish's announcement that Labour would 'not be stampeded into voting for it because atrocities....were no excuse for bad law.'¹²⁷ On 14 December 1972, the nineteenth Dáil retired for Christmas, during which parliament was dissolved and the date of the next general election was settled for 28 February 1973.

Brendan Halligan stated in the memorandum on coalition negotiations that: 'above all else, the task of the first coalition must be to elect the second one.'¹²⁸ Labour's general secretary warned: 'a coalition will not just happen as in 1948; it will have to be made happen....[The coalition] must be a real solid alternative personified by the two leaders working together and backed up by various projects of joint action at parliamentary party level.'¹²⁹ In both the first and second Inter-Party Governments, Fine Gael held responsibility for the Department of Finance and therefore, had control over government expenditure. As a result of this, Brendan Halligan believed that 'it would seem essential that the Labour Party should secure the Department of Finance.'¹³⁰ It was thought within the I.L.P., that if Labour had a hold on the government's purse strings, the party could ensure that the state's finances would be distributed justly among the various sections of Irish society and that the financial policy of the coalition would remain favourable to the poor. Finally, Halligan proposed that Labour should 'go for Lynch and destroy as far as possible his image as "Honest Jack"....He [Lynch] must be drawn out into the political battle and pulled down from his Olympian height.'¹³¹ In what reads like an extract from Machiavelli's *The Prince*, Halligan wrote that Fianna

¹²⁵ *Dáil Debate*, volume 264, column 389-90, 29 Nov. 1972.

¹²⁶ *Irish Times*, 2 Dec. 1972.

¹²⁷ *Dáil Debate*, volume 264, column 865-6, 1 Dec. 1972.

¹²⁸ Memorandum on Coalition Negotiations issued by the Labour Party, 29 Jan. 1973 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, Formation of 1973-7 government, p. 2).

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.3.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

Fáil's 'strength lies in the public image of the Taoiseach but the danger of such an attack is that once his image is called into question, the whole party suffers as a result. For that reason the attack must be concentrated on Lynch and almost on him alone.'¹³² Certainly, Jack Lynch had a very positive public image at the time, which no doubt contributed to Fianna Fáil's high level of support and hence one can understand the reason behind Halligan's proposed electoral strategy.

On 1 December 1972, Labour issued its plan of action for the imminent general election. Again, Corish and his party learned a great deal from the previous general election of June 1969 and this was none more so evident than in the selection of candidates. The plan of action recommended that: 'all branches will be informed that the number of candidates to be chosen is a matter at the discretion of the selection conferences. Advice should be given against adopting ridiculous positions, that is, three candidates for three seats.'¹³³ Labour fielded only fifty-five nominees to contest the general election in 1973 - forty-four less than the total number four years earlier.¹³⁴ The memorandum also included the following words of warning:

...whatever possibility exists [in getting Labour's message across] will be destroyed by individual manifestos, stunts, stroke pulling, threats of non-support for coalition by candidates, branches and unions. Either there is rigid control on individual outbursts, interpretations, demands and conditions or there is no hope because the people want a government, not a medley of conflicting voices.¹³⁵

The 1969 general election saw a significant number of Labour candidates front separate campaigns, which at times conflicted with messages from Corish and head office. In the 1973 general election, Labour's nominees had to ensure that some degree of uniformity between party members and their respective campaigns existed. Finally, the memorandum strongly advised that: 'there should be a clear-cut unambiguous statement on coalition. It must be simple and straight. Otherwise Fianna Fáil will hammer the two opposition parties into the ground on "no alternative."¹³⁶ Fianna Fáil had completely exploited Labour's weaknesses in 1969 and the I.L.P. felt that Lynch's party would act

¹³² Memorandum on Coalition Negotiations issued by the Labour Party, 29 Jan. 1973 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, Formation of 1973-7 government, p. 4). See also Machiavelli, Niccolò, *The Prince* (6th ed., London, 2003).

¹³³ General election December 1972 – Plan of action, 1 Dec. 1972 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, Formation of 1973-7 government, p. 1).

¹³⁴ Annual Report of the Labour Party, 1972-3 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 3, Labour Party Annual Reports 1967-79, p. 30).

¹³⁵ General election December 1972 – Plan of action, 1 Dec. 1972 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, Formation of 1973-7 government, p. 2).

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

in a similar manner in 1973 in an attempt to undermine the effectiveness and cooperative effort between the two coalition parties.

The announcement of the general election date by Jack Lynch on 5 February 1973 gave a much-needed stimulus to the coalition talks between Labour and Fine Gael. In fact, Brendan Corish and Liam Cosgrave signed a Statement of Intent two days later.¹³⁷ This statement declared ‘that in the present climate of national crisis, both political and economic, it is necessary to give the people a clear democratic choice between the outgoing government and an entirely new government committed to democratic processes, economic development and social reforms.’¹³⁸ It specified that: ‘in these circumstances the only guarantee of strong, stable government capable of dealing with the nation’s problems is a National Coalition government.’¹³⁹ Most important for Corish, socially progressive policies were listed in the statement. These aims included a ‘strict price control,’ VAT was to be taken off food products, old age pensions were to be paid out at an earlier age without recipients having to undergo an initial means test, a housing emergency was to be declared, a reclamation programme for land was to commence and also new legislation was to be passed in order to improve the lives of widows, orphans, deserted wives as well as physically and mentally handicapped people.’¹⁴⁰ A second television station was even promised by the coalition parties, perhaps in an attempt to appeal to the widest spectrum of voters possible.¹⁴¹ Last, the Statement of Intent declared that: ‘the two parties recognise that these policy priorities constitute the basis of the legislative programme of the coalition government and that the implementation of these proposals will transform Ireland into a modern progressive society based on social justice.’¹⁴² Labour’s party chairman, Roddy Connolly, moved the resolution endorsing the Statement of Intent and it was carried by twenty-two votes in favour within the Administrative Council versus one against.¹⁴³ One might say that Corish and his accompanying delegates were a little presumptuous in negotiating a coalition with Fine Gael without having first consulted the party’s Administrative Council. Of course, this was stipulated at Labour’s special conference in Cork’s City Hall in December 1970. In their defence, one can reply that their motives

¹³⁷ Statement of Intent, 7 Feb. 1973 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, Formation of 1973-7 government).

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 1-3.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ Annual Report of the Labour Party, 1972-3 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 3, Labour Party Annual Reports 1967-79, p. 27).

were genuine and that the net result was the same, irrespective of having, or not having first arranged a discussion with the Administrative Council before the commencement of any negotiations with Fine Gael.

The term 'National Coalition' was in itself quite revealing. The choice of this particular name was a clear signal that from the very outset, the government parties intended to differentiate the 1973 coalition from the two earlier inter-party governments. The first and second Inter-Party Governments did not end spectacularly well from the viewpoint of its participants. Thus, the choice of 'National Coalition' by Labour and Fine Gael 'implied that the projected government was not in any way a successor to the inter-party governments of the 1950s.'¹⁴⁴ In any case, there were fewer parties involved in the 1973 coalition as opposed to that in 1948 and again in 1954. Hence the reason why the term third Inter-Party Government was not used. The name 'People's Coalition' was also abandoned because of the socialist overtones it implied did not appeal to Fine Gael conservatives.¹⁴⁵

In an attempt to maintain party discipline, which in the past caused Corish some serious headaches, nominees were first requested to sign a party pledge before their ratification as a Labour candidate in the 1973 general election. Having signed the party pledge, each Labour candidate agreed 'to campaign in the 1973 general election in support of the Statement of Intent on the formation of a National Coalition government' and promised not to 'identify myself with or promote the candidature of any person not endorsed by the Administrative Council.'¹⁴⁶ To avoid any further dissension in the new Dáil term, successful candidates would have to relinquish their 'seat in the Oireachtas at any time if and when requested to do so by the Administrative Council.'¹⁴⁷ Both Dr David Thornley and Dr Noel Browne refused to add their signatures to the pledge, although the former eventually relented and signed. Browne, on the other hand, remained steadfast opposed to it. The pledge was the final straw for the Dublin South-East TD. His relationship with Corish had evidently hit rock bottom. Browne did not run as an I.L.P. candidate in the general election of 1973, although he managed to win Owen Sheehy Skeffington's former Trinity College seat in Seanad Éireann, which he held until 1977. In fact, Dr Noel Browne never ran as an I.L.P. candidate in another general election to Dáil Éireann. Instead, he contested a seat in the Irish parliament

¹⁴⁴ Gallagher, Michael, *The Irish Labour Party in transition, 1957-82* (Dublin, 1982), p. 191.

¹⁴⁵ Daly, Paul, *Creating Ireland: The words and events that shaped us* (Dublin, 2008), p. 161.

¹⁴⁶ Annual Report of the Labour Party, 1972-3 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 3, Labour Party Annual Reports 1967-79, p. 31).

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

under the banners of Independent Labour in 1977 and the Socialist Labour Party in 1981 before his retirement from politics less than a year later. One can understand why Brendan Corish did not lament Browne's absence from the twentieth Dáil. His verbal attacks on the Labour leader were entirely inappropriate and disrespectful. Unquestionably, Browne's presence gave greater credibility to Labour's socialism during the 1960s. However, his dissension ultimately generated more controversy than favourable publicity for the party. Furthermore, Browne's presence as a TD for Labour in Leinster House would certainly have proven too great a liability to the prospects of Corish and his colleagues forming an effective, coherent partnership with Fine Gael in 1973.

Labour chose 'There is an alternative' as its general election campaign theme.¹⁴⁸ Niamh Puirseil correctly wrote how 'the 1973 campaign could not have been more different from the election of 1969, although there was more of a likelihood of entering government, there was none of the same excitement as the last time around.'¹⁴⁹ Election funds were at a minimum because of the expensive campaign led by the party four years earlier and also after the EEC referendum in 1972. Ultimately, this shortage of money dictated Labour's low-key 1973 general election campaign compared to that of 1969. Instead of aiming for a Dáil majority, the objective of the I.L.P. was to hold on to its present number of seats and if possible to reclaim some of those lost in the previous general election. In so cruelly a fashion, 1969 made Brendan Corish fully alert to the unfortunate realities of Irish politics. In fact, there was a far more realistic approach adopted by Corish and his party regarding the contesting of seats in 1973. This was evident in the smaller number of candidates up for election. For his part, Brendan Corish as Labour leader toured extensively the Munster counties of Waterford, Cork, Kerry and Tipperary and also visited Dublin, Kildare and Wicklow in Leinster, as well as his home constituency of Wexford. Brendan Corish's son, Richard Corish, remembers canvassing with his father during this period.¹⁵⁰ Richard Corish recalled that 'on many occasions, when I should have been at lectures or in study, I accompanied my father, as party leader, on trips around the country. The memories of successes (and the odd failure) in by-elections, P.R. campaigns, general elections, conferences, et cetera

¹⁴⁸ Annual Report of the Labour Party, 1972-3 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 3, Labour Party Annual Reports 1967-79, p. 31).

¹⁴⁹ Puirseil, Niamh, *The Irish Labour Party, 1922-73* (Dublin, 2007), p. 306.

¹⁵⁰ Richard Corish, 'The formal hand-over of the Corish papers' in Halligan, Brendan, (ed.), *The Brendan Corish Seminar Proceedings* (Dublin, 2006), p. 8.

still endure.’¹⁵¹ He added that ‘these achievements were tempered by the dark days of bombings, assassinations and social strife throughout Ireland. Nevertheless, the Labour Party remained steadfast in focusing on its priorities and in striving to steer a path through conflict and change.... These were indeed historic times.’¹⁵²

A week before the general election was held; Jack Lynch stated his intention to abolish rates if elected, which marked a clear turnaround in Fianna Fáil policy. Economic issues naturally dominated the election debates, which the coalition’s Statement of Intent earlier addressed. In addition, Labour’s opponents in the 1973 general election campaign not only comprised of Fianna Fáil but also the party’s anti-coalitionists including the Liaison Committee of the Labour Left. However, unlike 1969, Labour had the support of a strong ally – Fine Gael - and together, they proved a formidable team. On the eve of polling day, Brendan Corish told voters that the National Coalition had ‘social and economic policies superior to anything of our opponents. We have better all-round talent. We have a social philosophy, where the others have only opportunism and you have an alternative. A real alternative.’¹⁵³ Having returned Fianna Fáil to power for so many years, it was impossible to predict in advance of polling day whether or not voters were fully prepared to risk electing an alternative government in 1973.

After spending sixteen unbroken years on the opposition benches, Labour found itself in government with Fine Gael and Brendan Corish elevated to the rank of Tánaiste – the highest office in the state he held during his long, distinguished political career. The Labour Party increased its representation in Leinster House by one and returned to the Dáil chamber with nineteen deputies.¹⁵⁴ It is possible that Corish’s party would have made further gains had Lynch delayed the general election date to allow for first-time voters over the age of eighteen to exercise their democratic right to vote. In fact, it is well known that traditionally, young voters tend to be far more liberal than those in older age brackets. Labour’s coalition partner, Fine Gael, won three additional seats, which brought its net total to fifty-four.¹⁵⁵ Fianna Fáil lost six seats, which left the party

¹⁵¹ Richard Corish, ‘The formal hand-over of the Corish papers’ in Halligan, Brendan, (ed.), *The Brendan Corish Seminar Proceedings* (Dublin, 2006), p. 8.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ *Irish Times*, 27 Feb. 1973. Message from Mr Brendan Corish, leader of the Labour Party to voters at the request of the *Irish Times*.

¹⁵⁴ Annual Report of the Labour Party, 1972-3 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 3, Labour Party Annual Reports 1967-79, p. 32).

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

with sixty-nine TDs.¹⁵⁶ Both Independents sided with Fianna Fáil but the National Coalition acquired a Dáil majority of two – seventy-two as opposed to seventy - and Corish's nomination of Liam Cosgrave as Taoiseach was successfully passed.¹⁵⁷ Corish's personal tally was quite impressive – elected on the first count with 7,863 first preference votes or 20.8 per cent of the total poll.¹⁵⁸ Once again, Brendan Corish held on to the first seat. His results in 1973 represented an increase of 924 first preference votes or an additional 2.3 per cent on his 1969 result.¹⁵⁹ The state of the parties remained unchanged in Wexford, although the order in which they were voted in altered slightly from 1969. Both Seán Browne and Lorcan Allen were re-elected for Fianna Fáil when they won the second and third seats respectively.¹⁶⁰ Fine Gael claimed the second seat four years earlier but John Esmonde - the political successor to Sir Anthony Esmonde – only won the final seat in 1973.¹⁶¹ Nationally, the transfer pact between Labour and Fine Gael helped the former to win seats at the expense of Fianna Fáil in the constituencies of Kildare, Waterford and Tipperary.¹⁶² Likewise, Cosgrave's party also benefited from this deal and in particular, it helped Fine Gael candidates coast to victory in Sligo-Leitrim, Longford-Westmeath and Laois-Offaly.¹⁶³ For those who advocated the merits of coalition in the I.L.P., they were rewarded for their courage by the very fact that a halt was put to Labour's downward trend. Instead, the presence of the Labour Party in Dáil Éireann grew. Furthermore, Fianna Fáil's extended spell in government was finally broken.

Brendan Corish accepted the Taoiseach's offer of five ministries. It was the Parliamentary Labour Party, itself, which assigned certain members with ministries in both the first and second Inter-Party Governments. However, in 1973, it was up to the discretion of the party leader, Brendan Corish, to decide which of his colleagues to promote. In Corish's private papers, one can see how the allocation of ministries came about from the various permutations the Wexford TD contemplated.¹⁶⁴ James Tully was

¹⁵⁶ Annual Report of the Labour Party, 1972-3 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 3, Labour Party Annual Reports 1967-79, p. 32). Fianna Fáil's sixty-nine TDs included the outgoing Ceannt Comhairle, Cormac Breslin who was automatically returned.

¹⁵⁷ *Dáil Debate*, volume 265, column 18, 14 Mar. 1973.

¹⁵⁸ Walker, Brian M. (ed.), *Parliamentary Election Results in Ireland, 1918-92* (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin and Queen's University Belfast, 1992), p. 227.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 219, 227.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 219, 227.

¹⁶² Annual Report of the Labour Party, 1972-3 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 3, Labour Party Annual Reports 1967-79, p. 32).

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ Handwritten notes/drafts on allocation of ministerial portfolios by Brendan Corish, undated (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, Formation of 1973-7 government).

considered as Minister for Local Government, while Justin Keating's name appeared beside the Departments of Agriculture or Industry and Commerce.¹⁶⁵ Michael O'Leary was mentioned in reference to the Departments of Labour or Posts and Telegraphs, while Dr Conor Cruise O'Brien was thought suitable as Minister of Foreign Affairs, Industry and Commerce or Posts and Telegraphs.¹⁶⁶ In his notes, Corish even created several new departments such as culture and environment, as well as Irish affairs.¹⁶⁷ He proposed that this latter department would have influence in the Council of Ireland but would differ from foreign affairs. Corish also renamed several existing departments such as finance and public service, housing and construction and finally public utilities, which would see a merger of both Departments of Posts and Telegraphs and Transport and Power.¹⁶⁸

Corish and his party received the Departments of Health, Social Welfare, Local Government, Labour, Posts and Telegraphs and Industry and Commerce. Brendan Corish believed that Dr Garret FitzGerald would be entrusted with the control of finance.¹⁶⁹ In the end, however, the management of this department went to Richie Ryan and FitzGerald was put in charge of foreign affairs. Professor Justin Keating remembered how Corish often recalled the way in which the 1973 cabinet was formed. Keating said:

he [Corish] called Michael O'Leary first. Michael immediately agreed to serve and the call ended without Brendan telling him what his department was to be. In the case of Conor Cruise O'Brien, in reply to the question: 'are you willing to serve in the new cabinet?' Conor answered 'yes,' but then promptly asked 'what am I getting?' ...When the phone call came to me [Keating], Brendan said 'are you willing to serve?' and as he [Corish] told it, I paused and then said 'as what?'¹⁷⁰

As Tánaiste, Brendan Corish was asked to fill in for Cosgrave as leader of the National Coalition while the Taoiseach was away on business. He also had to 'ensure that the Labour Party was heard while in government.'¹⁷¹ Corish had a very 'able team behind him including Brendan Halligan and the economist, Flor O' Mahoney and both

¹⁶⁵ Handwritten notes/drafts on allocation of ministerial portfolios by Brendan Corish, undated (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, Formation of 1973-7 government).

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Justin Keating in Halligan, Brendan (ed.), *The Brendan Corish Seminar Proceedings* (Dublin, 2006), p. 24.

¹⁷¹ Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Brendan Howlin TD, Wexford, 14 Sept. 2009.

men provided him with great back up support' while in power.¹⁷² Furthermore, as well as becoming deputy prime minister, Corish also accepted responsibility for leading the Departments of Health and Social Welfare in the twentieth Dáil, which were in fact two separate departments. Naturally, he gained invaluable experience from his years spent as Minister for Social Welfare in the second Inter-Party Government. Corish's genuine interest in the plight of the working class - which he inherited from his father, Richard Corish - remained. As Brendan Corish's eldest son, Richard Corish, explained: 'he [Brendan Corish] was passionately motivated by what he saw in the world around him and was driven by a strong sense of equality, social justice and democracy for all.'¹⁷³ James Tully became Minister for Local Government and Justin Keating was given the industry and commerce portfolio. Michael O'Leary was disappointed with the offer to become Minister for Labour but accepted. Dr Conor Cruise O'Brien took charge of the Department of Posts and Telegraphs and was also given responsibility for the Government Information Service. As Michael Gallagher aptly explained that this 'was probably a case of picking a ministry for a man, rather than a man for a ministry.'¹⁷⁴ O'Brien had also previously served under Liam Cosgrave as a civil servant in the Department of Foreign Affairs during the second Inter-Party Government years. These Labour deputies were joined around the cabinet table by the following list of Fine Gael ministers: Paddy Donegan, Richie Ryan, Mark Clinton, Tom O'Donnell, Tom Fitzpatrick, Dr Garret FitzGerald, Peter Barry, Richard Burke and Patrick Cooney. These nine individuals were each allocated the subsequent departments: defence, finance, agriculture and fisheries, the gaeltacht, lands, foreign affairs, transport and power, education and justice respectively. Labour's Frank Cluskey and Michael Pat Murphy became parliamentary secretaries to the Minister for Social Welfare and the Minister for Agriculture and Fisheries. Naturally, there were some Labourites - particularly Dan Spring and Dr David Thornley - who were left disappointed by Corish's decision to exclude them from the cabinet table.

As Brendan Corish received his seal of office from President Éamon de Valera in Áras an Uachtaráin on 14 March 1973, no doubt his mind must have wandered back to memories of his own father – the man who inspired him to enter politics twenty-eight years earlier. The length of Corish's political career had by 1973 exceeded his father's

¹⁷² Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Brendan Howlin TD, Wexford, 14 Sept. 2009.

¹⁷³ Richard Corish, 'The formal hand-over of the Corish papers' in Halligan, Brendan, (ed.), *The Brendan Corish Seminar Proceedings* (Dublin, 2006), p. 9.

¹⁷⁴ Gallagher, Michael, *The Irish Labour Party in transition, 1957-82* (Dublin, 1982), p. 195.

by four years. The prominent ranks attained by Brendan Corish in politics had also surpassed that of his antecessor as he was Tánaiste and minister of two departments in the National Coalition. Corish was certain that by the end of his tenure in government; significant progress would be made in the everyday lives of the Irish people. It was for this very reason - and also to maintain the Corish legacy - that he originally felt motivated to run in the 1945 by-election. He was also convinced that the quality of Labour ministers at his disposal in 1973 was far greater than those who helped form the cabinet of the second Inter-Party Government. Therefore, he was determined that the immense disappointment he felt in 1957 would not resurface again when the National Coalition's term in power was complete.

Brendan Corish worked extremely well in government with Liam Cosgrave, despite the fact that these two men often disagreed during the 1960s. Both the Taoiseach and Tánaiste served as parliamentary secretaries in the first Inter-Party Government and were ministers in the coalition that followed three years later. Therefore, both experienced power prior to 1973 and were fully accustomed to the workings of cabinet. They were very practical politicians, while the superficial trimmings and allusions of power motivated neither. Corish and Cosgrave were very religious. They showed great trust and respect for each other. They also shared a mutual interest in horseracing. Furthermore, Brendan Corish's wife, Phyllis Corish, got on very well with Cosgrave and the latter often called to see her at the family home in Wexford after Corish's death in 1990.¹⁷⁵ Cosgrave later paid Brendan Corish the following kind posthumous tribute: 'agreeable and easy to work with, he [Corish] was honest and courageous in all that he undertook in public life and he never looked for anything for himself....Above all, he was a man in whom one could always place absolute trust. We worked harmoniously together in difficult times.'¹⁷⁶

One of Brendan Corish's earliest tasks as the new Minister for Health was to attend to the concerns of Irish thalidomide sufferers. A German firm, by the name of Chemie Grunenthal produced the thalidomide drug and it first came on the Irish market in 1959. The drug was recommended to pregnant women as a method by which morning sickness could be eased during pregnancy. However, this drug caused serious damage to the foetus and in many cases, resulted in the physical deformity of the newborn baby. Thalidomide was officially removed from the Irish market in 1961 but

¹⁷⁵ Collins, Stephen, *The Cosgrave Legacy* (Dublin, 1996), p. 154.

¹⁷⁶ Liam Cosgrave, 'A man concerned with social issues. An appreciation by the former Taoiseach, Liam Cosgrave' in Halligan, Brendan (ed.), *The Brendan Corish Seminar Proceedings* (Dublin, 2006), p. 51.

the state had in the intervening years failed to act in a compassionate and adequate manner towards these children and their parents. In the last days of the nineteenth Dáil, Corish urged Lynch's government to provide for these victims and their families. On 15 May 1973, Brendan Corish announced that the National Coalition intended to assist thalidomide sufferers financially.¹⁷⁷ He also promised that talks would take place between the government and parents, as well as claims for past related medical expenses would be examined sympathetically.¹⁷⁸ Five months later, the Irish Thalidomide Medical Board was set up by Corish following consultations with the parents' association. The task of this board 'was to establish the number of Irish thalidomide victims, to assess the degree of permanent incapacity in each case and to indicate the treatment and care which they required.'¹⁷⁹ A total of thirty-four children suffering from the effects of this drug were found in Ireland.¹⁸⁰ Finally, on 9 January 1975, the government's financial offer was disclosed - each child afflicted by thalidomide received 'four times the lump sum accruing from Germany and a monthly allowance for life equal to the present German one.'¹⁸¹ In effect, this meant that an average figure of £27,000 was paid to each victim from German and Irish sources.¹⁸² On 18 December 1974, Corish declared to his fellow deputies in Leinster House that: 'I am concerned to help these children to the greatest extent possible and this has been my concern since I took office.'¹⁸³ Indeed, the generous compensation package Corish oversaw was evidence of his genuine concern for these unfortunate children and their families.

In the first fourteen months after taking office, Brendan Corish made significant progress in the field of social welfare and an extra £88 million was spent on this department alone in the government's first two budgets.¹⁸⁴ This amount contrasted greatly to the figure of £67 million, which represented Fianna Fáil's total rise in social welfare expenditure during its sixteen-year long reign.¹⁸⁵ As well as increasing social welfare payments, unemployment benefits, pensions and allowances for old age pensioners, widows, children, deserted wives and prisoners' wives, unmarried mothers were also able to claim an allowance. Single women of fifty-eight years or older were

¹⁷⁷ *Irish Times*, 16 May 1973.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁹ *Dáil Debate*, volume 276, column 2361-2, 18 Dec. 1974.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, column 2362, 18 Dec. 1974.

¹⁸¹ *Irish Times*, 10 Jan. 1975.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

¹⁸³ *Dáil Debate*, volume 276, column 2363, 18 Dec. 1974.

¹⁸⁴ *The National Coalition at work March 1973 – May 1974*, May 1974 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, An Tánaiste 1973-7, p. 6).

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

entitled to a pension on condition they first passed a means test. Furthermore, the income of relatives living with a disabled person no longer affected the eligibility of those seeking disabled persons maintenance allowance. In fact, prior to Corish's control of social welfare, changes were not made since 1906 to the means tests for widows, deserted wives allowances and old age pensions.¹⁸⁶ As Minister for Social Welfare in the second Inter-Party Government, Corish regretted not lowering the eligibility age for old age pensions down to sixty-five for men and sixty for women. The age restriction for both sexes was previously set at seventy. Corish reduced this to sixty-nine in his first year in office and a new limit of sixty-eight years came into effect in July 1974.¹⁸⁷ Corish's Social Welfare Act, 1974, also put children's allowances in the name of the mother rather than the father.

There were also considerable improvements made in health in the same fourteen-month timeframe. New weekly financial limits were introduced as part of Brendan Corish's plan to standardise the eligibility for medical cards. This new measure brought the figure of Irish medical cardholders up to more than one million people.¹⁸⁸ Parents caring at home for a child with a severe physical or mental handicap were entitled to a monthly allowance for the very first time, which the government set at £25.¹⁸⁹ The limits on annual earnings, which entitled free maternity and hospital services were also extended by an extra £650 to £2,250 per year.¹⁹⁰ Thus, more people were allowed to avail of these particular benefits.

In 1974, Brendan Corish bore the brunt of the blame following the closure of the Fine Wool Fabrics industry in Wexford. The company was operating at a loss for some years and attempts were made to attract new ownership but unfortunately they were unsuccessful. The firm was shut down on 17 May 1974 and more than 350 people were made redundant including Brendan Corish's son, Philip Corish.¹⁹¹ With unemployment standing at around 800 in the town, there was dismay among the Wexford public at the loss of so many jobs.¹⁹² In reference to the closure of this company, Corish acknowledged that: 'everything was tried to save that industry....but my opponents activated a very successful campaign, despite the fact that some thirteen factories were

¹⁸⁶ *The National Coalition at work March 1973 – May 1974*, May 1974 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, An Tánaiste 1973-7, p. 7).

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁹¹ *Irish Times*, 11 Apr. 1974.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 23 July, 1974.

set up here [in Wexford] in the years following.’¹⁹³ He continued: ‘it appeared that if one industry closed it was Corish’s fault and if several were started up, the credit was due to the I.D.A.’¹⁹⁴ The incident was completely ‘exploited by Fianna Fáil at a local level,’ with Corish mistakenly held responsible for the firm’s closure.¹⁹⁵ During the period of the National Coalition, Brendan Corish played a significant role in attracting a great deal of industry to Wexford, including A.B.S. Pumps, which ‘employed more people than Fine Wool Fabrics.’¹⁹⁶ Nonetheless, Corish felt ‘much personal grief’ over the closure of the latter.¹⁹⁷

The National Coalition’s first year in power was certainly not uneventful as the government was soon forced to come to terms with an unexpected setback of considerable proportion. The coalition inherited an unemployment figure in excess of 70,000 from the previous government, which was almost three times the average rate of unemployment in the EEC.¹⁹⁸ When the coalition first took over, prices were increasing much more rapidly in Ireland than in any of the other European countries. Furthermore, after only a few short months in charge, the new government was faced with the damaging consequences of the Yom Kippur War, which saw Arab forces from Egypt and Syria pitted against Israel on 6 October 1973. The duration of the battle was very short – in fact, it lasted less than three weeks – but the fallout from this particular war proved a lot longer. In retaliation to Israel’s victory, which was aided by the provision of American arms, OPEC announced a substantial rise on oil prices and also declared an embargo on the supply of oil to nations that assisted the Jewish state and a total ban was placed on both the U.S. and Netherlands. Its effects on the economies of the industrialised western world were devastating and led Brendan Corish at the Labour Party Annual Conference in 1974 to remark: ‘not since the onset of the world war in 1939 has this state and its people been placed in such economic peril as by those

¹⁹³ Reprint of interview by *The People* reporter Mr Mervyn Moore with Mr Brendan Corish, Jan. 1983 in *The People*, 22 Feb. 1990.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁵ Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Brendan Howlin TD, Wexford, 14 Sept. 2009.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁷ Reprint of interview by *The People* reporter Mr Mervyn Moore with Mr Brendan Corish, Jan. 1983 in *The People*, 22 Feb. 1990.

¹⁹⁸ Labour’s record on employment - The Labour Party Dún Laoghaire constituency, general election brief no. 6, 1977 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, 1977 election campaign, p. 1). See also Mr Brendan Corish, Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Social Welfare, speaking at a meeting of the New Ross Branch of the Labour Party, New Ross, County Wexford, 1 May 1977 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, 1977 election campaign, p. 5).

dangers which now threaten us.’¹⁹⁹ He was certainly not over exaggerating. Ireland was in an extremely vulnerable position at the time as more than seventy per cent of the country’s main energy sources were imported from abroad.²⁰⁰ During the coalition’s term in office the price of oil increased fourfold. Naturally, this resulted with a rise in the Irish inflation rate. From 11.5 per cent in 1973, it grew to seventeen per cent in 1974 and nearly reached twenty-one per cent a year later.²⁰¹ Unemployment also increased in a similar upward progression. In April 1975, there were 90,000 people out of work and exactly a year later this figure grew to 108,000, which represented around 9.5 per cent of the Irish labour force.²⁰² The oil crisis directly impacted on Ireland’s output and on industrial production in particular. Its effects were most visible in 1975 as industrial output decreased by six per cent and exports for this sector also fell by around four per cent.²⁰³ Internationally, the G.N.P. of the O.E.C.D. countries grew by only 0.3 per cent from 1973 to 1974 and in 1975, it fell by 1.3 per cent.²⁰⁴ Furthermore, from a growth of twelve per cent in 1973, international trade increased by only five per cent in 1974 and this rate actually fell by four per cent a year later.²⁰⁵ Of course, there were other factors besides the international recession and oil crisis, which influenced Ireland’s economic performance during the National Coalition’s period in government. These included an increase in population, generous national wage agreements, a change in Irish society and economy, which was due to freer trade as a result of EEC membership, as well as the Anglo-Irish Free Trade Agreement.²⁰⁶

Brendan Corish learned from experience in the second Inter-Party Government how unfavourable economic conditions seriously jeopardised his best-laid plans to advance society. For the most part however, Corish managed very effectively to bring about new improvements while in office during the 1970s, despite the imposition of financial restrictions. In 1976, Richie Ryan as Minister for Finance suggested a cutback in social welfare expenditure, which included a reduction in food subsidies. Corish was horrified by the minister’s proposition and an emergency cabinet meeting was called. A year earlier, Brendan Corish successfully created a new supplementary welfare

¹⁹⁹ Mr Brendan Corish, Tánaiste, Minister for Health and Social Welfare and leader of the Labour Party, speaking at the 1974 Labour Party Annual Conference, Leisureland, Salthill, County Galway, 19 Oct. 1974 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, collected speeches 1973-7, p. 1).

²⁰⁰ Keogh, Dermot, *Twentieth Century Ireland* (Rev. ed., Dublin, 2005), p. 334.

²⁰¹ Economic and Social Development, 1976-80, Sept. 1976 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, An Tánaiste 1973-7, p. 8).

²⁰² *Ibid.*

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

allowances scheme; pay-related benefit was lengthened by 13.5 weeks and weekly social welfare payments were increased in April and again in October.²⁰⁷ Corish had also relaxed the means test for allowances and pensions, as well as decreasing the pension age again - from sixty-eight to sixty-seven years.²⁰⁸ In 1976, he certainly did not wish to regress. At a specially convened cabinet meeting, Corish announced to his fellow ministers and Taoiseach that if Ryan's new measure were implemented; then he and his fellow Labour deputies would resign from government in protest. In the end, Ryan yielded and this potentially explosive matter was resolved. One can understand the reasons why Corish adopted such a decisive stance on this specific issue. In the first and second Inter-Party Governments, he and his fellow Labour colleagues behaved almost complacent at times. In fact, the entire I.L.P. should have acted more forcefully in the past particularly when it was Labour itself, which helped Fine Gael assume power in 1948 and 1954. Indeed, although numerically challenged around the cabinet table, junior coalition partners tend to display a greater share of influence and power in government decision-making in proportion to their actual size. However, in the two earlier coalitions, Labour certainly failed to push through a sufficient number of socially progressive legislation while propping up both governments. Second, Corish's long spell on the opposition benches taught him that when the time came for Labour's involvement in government, he would most certainly not operate in an acquiescent manner towards his senior coalition partner. Furthermore, had not the National Coalition's Statement of Intent contained the following principle: 'the immediate economic aims of the new government will be to stabilise prices, halt redundancies and reduce unemployment....It is essential to control prices if these important economic aims are to be realised...The elimination of poverty and the ending of social injustice will be a major priority in the next government's programme?'²⁰⁹ The welfare of society was certainly an issue, which lay very close to the heart of Brendan Corish and his Labour Party. It was also the bedrock on which the National Coalition was built. Therefore, it is quite understandable why over a matter of such fundamental importance to Corish and his party colleagues, he felt compelled to put the very existence of that coalition government in peril.

²⁰⁷ The legislative work of the National Coalition government 1973-6, Jan. 1977 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, An Tánaiste 1973-7, pp. 40-41).

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

²⁰⁹ Statement of Intent, 7 Feb. 1973 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, Formation of 1973-7 government, pp. 1-2).

From the start of 1976 up until the dissolution of the twentieth Dáil on 25 May 1977, Corish continued to make headway in both health and social welfare reform. These improvements included a further rise in weekly social welfare payment rates, pay-related and unemployment benefits were lengthened by thirteen weeks, a limit of eighty-five per cent on net earnings prior to becoming unemployed was set as the amount of unemployment benefit and also the flat rates, which determined health contribution payments were increased.²¹⁰ From 1973 to 1977, the budget for Corish's Department of Social Welfare grew almost threefold - £92 million to £274 million.²¹¹ Government social welfare spending measured around 6.5 per cent of G.N.P. in 1973 to 1974 and this percentage grew to 10.5 per cent in 1976, with total social expenditure standing around 17.5 per cent of G.N.P.²¹² These statistics were all the more remarkable when one remembers the huge financial burden inflicted by the oil crisis on government revenue during the 1970s. Furthermore, one can also view these figures as a measure of both Corish's strong influence within the National Coalition and also the extent of his determination to succeed. While in power, Corish's social welfare payments increased in the range of 120 per cent to 128 per cent and child dependent allowances grew by an incredible 220 per cent.²¹³ The qualifying age for old age pensions was lowered from seventy to sixty-seven years and this was reduced further to sixty-six when in October 1977, a new age limit initiated by Corish came into effect.²¹⁴ Indeed, up to the time of writing, the qualifying age for receiving old age pensions in Ireland has remained fixed at sixty-six years. Means testing for pensioners was also eased by Corish and the number of people in receipt of pensions grew by twenty-four per cent.²¹⁵ Children's allowances were extended to include children from sixteen to eighteen years and by July 1974, allowances for deserted wives, unmarried mothers, wives of prisoners and single women over fifty-eight years were all in operation.²¹⁶ If one were to compare Corish's achievements in social welfare from the second Inter-Party Government years to the National Coalition period, then his accomplishments in this field from 1973 to 1977 clearly outweighed those derived during 1954 to 1957. Certainly, Corish's list of

²¹⁰ The legislative work of the National Coalition government 1973-6, Jan. 1977 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, An Tánaiste 1973-7, pp. 22, 40-41).

²¹¹ Michael Mills in Halligan, Brendan (ed.), *The Brendan Corish Seminar Proceedings* (Dublin, 2006), p. 14.

²¹² Labour's record in social welfare – The Labour Party Dún Laoghaire constituency, general election brief no. 1, 1977 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, 1977 election campaign, p. 1).

²¹³ *Ibid.*

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 1-3.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

achievements in this area completely rebutted Dr Noel Browne's personal observation of 'total stagnation and inaction on social welfare.'²¹⁷

As Minister for Health and Social Welfare, Brendan Corish was very careful and conscientious in all his tasks and duties. Professor Justin Keating viewed Corish as 'extremely meticulous and hardworking' as a minister.²¹⁸ Keating remembered Corish's 'very careful study of documents, including the files on parliamentary questions, which could be enormous.'²¹⁹ Liam Cosgrave was equally very impressed by Corish's work ethic as a minister. Cosgrave said that 'he [Corish] worked hard to promote significant improvements when he was Minister for Health and Social Welfare. He never used alleged defects in the system as an excuse for government or ministerial inaction to remedy a problem.'²²⁰ Cosgrave added that Corish 'had high standards, which did not allow him to indulge in the pursuit of anodyne headlines in the news media when the public need called for deeds rather than talk.'²²¹ In addition, Brendan Corish also got on particularly well with Frank Cluskey, the parliamentary secretary he appointed to social welfare. Cluskey was often invited by Corish to join the cabinet table while social welfare expenditure was up for discussion, which itself was a precedent. Frank Cluskey was of considerable help to Brendan Corish in the Department of Social Welfare and the Tánaiste held him in high regard. Corish's support of Cluskey as party leader nominee in July 1977 again underlined that high level of respect.

Corish's rate of success in social welfare exceeded that in health. Nonetheless, he was credited with making substantial progress in this field during the National Coalition years. In fact, the increase of 191 per cent in 1977 on public health expenditure from 1972 to 1973 was evidence of his progress.²²² Total expenditure on health services amounted to £332 million in 1977, which contrasted to a sum of £114.1 million from 1972 to 1973.²²³ In terms of G.N.P., public health expenditure measured 6.5 per cent in 1977, which was a rise of 1.7 per cent from 1972 to 1973.²²⁴ New hospitals were opened and the amount of social workers grew. The number of people

²¹⁷ Browne, Noel, *Against the Tide* (Dublin, 1986), p. 267.

²¹⁸ Justin Keating in Halligan, Brendan (ed.), *The Brendan Corish Seminar Proceedings* (Dublin, 2006), p. 25.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²²⁰ Liam Cosgrave, 'A man concerned with social issues. An appreciation by the former Taoiseach, Liam Cosgrave' in Halligan, Brendan (ed.), *The Brendan Corish Seminar Proceedings* (Dublin, 2006), p. 51.

²²¹ *Ibid.*

²²² Labour's record in health - The Labour Party Dún Laoghaire constituency, general election brief no. 2, 1977 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, 1977 election campaign, p. 1).

²²³ The National Coalition four years at work - Health, May 1977 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, Minister for Health 1973-7, p. 1).

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

entitled to free health care also increased from twenty-eight per cent in 1972 to 1973, to thirty-eight per cent of the entire population in 1977.²²⁵ Certainly, it can be said that Corish adopted a far more positive attitude to those with physical or mental handicaps than many of his predecessors. For example, those in receipt of Disabled Persons Maintenance Allowances were entitled to a free television license, as well as free travel and electricity allowances in 1977.²²⁶ From March 1973 to December 1976, 714 residential places were made available for the handicapped, 1,395 day-care and 300 training places were also provided.²²⁷ Corish was relatively inexperienced in the health portfolio, whereas he previously served as Minister for Social Welfare in the second Inter-Party Government. Consequently, he was quick to listen and accept advice from his departmental staff. However, Corish's management of the Department of Health did not run as smoothly as he initially hoped. Five months after entering government, Brendan Corish announced his intention to introduce universal free health care by April 1974. Both the Medical Union and Irish Medical Association were opposed to the introduction of this scheme and in the end, Corish as Minister for Health, was left with no option but to reluctantly abandon it. Corish's dealings with the two medical unions were strained at times to say the least. In comparison, he found the Irish Nurses Organisation far more agreeable to work with. Furthermore, in his hometown, Corish reversed the order from the FitzGerald Report of 1968, which recommended the downgrading of Wexford General Hospital. Therefore, an overall assessment of Brendan Corish in the Department of Health can be expressed as progressive.

There were other occurrences during the National Coalition's period in government besides Corish's management of health and social welfare, as well as the oil crisis and its effects. Six days after the coalition first came to power; Edward Heath's Conservative government in England published a white paper on Northern Ireland. Elections for the new assembly in the six counties were held following the signing of this Bill into law. A majority of those elected favoured a new solution. On 5 December 1973, an Irish delegation, which included Brendan Corish left for Sunningdale in Berkshire, England, to take part in tripartite talks in the hope of reaching a long awaited settlement in Northern Ireland. The starting date of the conference itself was historic as exactly fifty-two years earlier Arthur Griffith and Corish's childhood

²²⁵ Labour's record in health - The Labour Party Dún Laoghaire constituency, general election brief no. 2, 1977 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, 1977 election campaign, p. 1).

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

²²⁷ The National Coalition four years at work – Health, May 1977 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, Minister for Health 1973-7, p. 2).

hero, Michael Collins, signed the Anglo-Irish Treaty in London on 6 December 1921. Unfortunately, there is very little written on Brendan Corish's contribution in Sunningdale. His role in this particular chapter of Anglo-Irish history is also very poorly documented in his private collection of papers on Northern Ireland.²²⁸ A successful outcome was finally achieved on the evening of 9 December 1973 but Corish was forced to depart from the discussions earlier that day as his wife was feeling poorly back home in Wexford. Included in this agreement was the establishment of the Council of Ireland, with a Consultative Assembly and Council of Ministers, as well as the creation of a Northern Ireland Assembly with members elected by P.R. The Irish government accepted that unity would only come about through consent and in return, the British agreed that when the majority of Northern Ireland's inhabitants wished to exit the Commonwealth, then the government in London would support them.

In the immediate aftermath of the Sunningdale Agreement, Corish was justifiably proud of the government's record during the negotiations and confident that the settlement would finally bring about peace. Speaking in the Dáil on 14 December 1973, Corish declared: '...we can justifiably claim that a foundation has been laid for reconciliation, for peace and for unity.'²²⁹ He added: 'I believe history will decide that Sunningdale was one of the greatest achievements of this or any other government. The vision, imagination, generosity of spirit and dedicated hard work of our delegation made the agreement possible....'²³⁰ Brendan Corish was equally positive about the future prospects the Council of Ireland offered. In reference to the setting up of this body, he said: 'it was vital that it be established. Its establishment was dependent on the formation of a power-sharing executive in the north. As far as this side of the house is concerned, both were complementary to each other....'²³¹

Tragically, Brendan Corish's aspirations proved misguided. Less than five months after it was signed, the ill-fated Sunningdale Agreement completely collapsed on 28 May 1974 following a general strike organised by the Ulster Workers' Council. Corish always believed that fundamentally, the unity of Ireland lay in the unity of the working class. Ironically, by taking industrial action, Northern Ireland's proletariat unionists divided the working class and entire island of Ireland even further through the sheer force of its workers. Of course, there were other incidents, which contributed

²²⁸ Northern Ireland (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, Northern Ireland).

²²⁹ *Dáil Debate*, volume 269, column 2029, 14 Dec. 1973.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*

²³¹ *Ibid.*, column 2031, 14 Dec. 1973.

towards the agreement's downfall. They included a change of government in England on 28 February 1974 and the exceptionally strong representation of anti-agreement unionists in Westminster. The legal case taken by Fianna Fáil's Kevin Boland against the agreement and also the defence led by the Attorney General, Declan Costello, again contributed towards its ruin. Furthermore, one must not forget that in the 1970s there were many hard-line obdurate unionists opposed not only to the Council of Ireland idea, but also to any form of power sharing involving nationalists. These unionists believed that their own powerful position would be weakened as a result. Brendan Corish was deeply disappointed by the collapse of the Sunningdale Agreement. Certainly that accord was ahead of its time. Unfortunately another twenty-four years had to pass with thousands killed or maimed before a lasting, peaceful settlement was finally reached in Northern Ireland.

Despite the return of direct rule from London once again, the violence continued unabated in the six counties. Corish and the members of the National Coalition also faced incidents of violence and threats from paramilitaries in the Republic of Ireland. In autumn 1973, his security and that of his fellow cabinet ministers was stepped up following threats of kidnapping by militant republicans. Corish was given a motor escort with two armed detectives, one carrying a machine gun.²³² On 11 March 1974, the Fine Gael Senator, Billy Fox was shot dead by the Provisional I.R.A. close to the border. A little over two months later, thirty-three people were murdered in the Dublin and Monaghan bombings planted by loyalist terrorists on 17 May 1974.²³³ On 21 July 1976, the British Ambassador to Ireland, Christopher Ewart-Biggs was killed by the I.R.A. During this period, there were also hunger strikes; bank raids, kidnappings including that of a Dutch businessman, Dr Tiede Herrema in October 1975 and the murder of Garda Síochána members. A significant art robbery took place from Russborough House, County Wicklow and the I.R.A. also carried out a number of successful prison breaks. The National Coalition's reign certainly coincided with a phase of unrest, where at times the security of the nation itself was placed under immense pressure. The Corish family was also threatened during this particular period. Brendan Corish personally received a suspect package, pickets were placed on the family home in Wexford and his beloved Springer Spaniel was deliberately poisoned.²³⁴

²³² Collins, Stephen, *The Cosgrave Legacy* (Dublin, 1996), p. 180. See also interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Brendan Howlin TD, Wexford, 14 Sept. 2009.

²³³ Coogan, Tim Pat, *A Memoir* (London, 2008), p. 199.

²³⁴ Interviews by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Desmond Corish, Wexford, 1 Mar. 2008, 17 Sept. 2009.

Thus, an armed guard was stationed outside his home. The situation worsened when Brendan Corish's wife, Phyllis Corish, received anonymous telephone threats from people who knew the whereabouts of their two sons, Richard and Philip, who were studying in Dublin at the time.²³⁵ As a result of these calls, guards were forced to enter their accommodation in Dublin and the house was put under surveillance in case either was kidnapped. Brendan Corish's youngest son, Johnny Corish, had a plain-clothes garda follow him in Wexford.²³⁶ Brendan Corish understood the gravity of the situation perfectly as the life of his own father, Richard Corish, was threatened on occasions during the Irish War of Independence and Irish Civil War.

The response of the National Coalition to this upsurge in violence is important. While in opposition, Dr Conor Cruise O'Brien was a strong critic of section thirty-one of Fianna Fáil's broadcasting act. Yet, as Minister for Posts and Telegraphs in the National Coalition, he increased broadcasting restrictions and even attempted to introduce press censorship because he believed that the northern fighting would lead to civil war in the Republic of Ireland. Naturally, there were serious concerns raised over such basic issues as freedom of speech and freedom of the press by O'Brien's Broadcasting Authority (Amendment) Act, 1976. Corish and O'Brien had a mutual respect for one another at the time. No doubt, O'Brien's non-violent approach impressed Corish. However, Brendan Corish should have voiced his objection to O'Brien's Bill, which was anti-social and contravened Labour policy. At the 1975 Labour Party Annual Conference in Dublin, Corish paid the following tribute to his cabinet colleague: 'the whole country....owes a particular debt to Conor Cruise O'Brien who never hesitated to say the unpopular thing whenever it was necessary and who never ceased to warn of the dangers, which violence would create for the minority in the north.'²³⁷ At the same function a year later, Corish defended the measures introduced by his government. He said:

I so value the freedoms which are an integral part of our democratic way of life that I will support action in their defence whenever it is taken by the democratically elected government of the day....It is always painful to limit some rights in defence of life and freedom themselves, but it would be even

²³⁵ Interviews by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Desmond Corish, Wexford, 1 Mar. 2008, 17 Sept. 2009.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 17 Sept. 2009.

²³⁷ Mr Brendan Corish, Tánaiste, Minister for Health and Social Welfare and leader of the Labour Party, speaking at the 1975 Labour Party Annual Conference, Dún Laoghaire, County Dublin, 22 Nov. 1975 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, collected speeches 1973-7, p. 21).

more painful to permit power in this country to slide into hands, which are stained with the blood of innocent victims.²³⁸

The context of the time and Corish's view of nationalism are equally important in understanding why he supported O'Brien's Bill. In his defence, Corish and his fellow colleagues believed that the chaos, which gripped the Republic might easily have led to Ireland's drift into anarchy and civil war. As a result, they had to ensure that the structures of a democratically elected government were upheld. Professor Diarmaid Ferriter of University College Dublin explained the circumstances fittingly when he wrote: 'this was a situation that could not be divorced from the political context of the time.'²³⁹ The escalation of violence alarmed Corish and his government greatly, their lives were threatened and they did not know where this bloodshed would end. These new Bills were introduced in order to reinstate the coalition's power and authority, as well as to prevent civil war. Second, Brendan Corish never espoused militant republicanism, although he was an ardent nationalist and was very republican in his youth. However, he remained throughout his life completely opposed to the use of violence as a means to reunite the country. His perspective of nationalism moderated over time and his view of the I.R.A. at this stage of his life was of a group of 'armed criminals masquerading as patriots,' which needed to be suppressed.²⁴⁰ Indeed, by their very nature, republican paramilitaries denied their victims any form of civil liberties and they also showed a blatant disregard for the institutions of democracy. There was perhaps a certain degree of pragmatism involved in Corish's personal backing. After the fall and failures of the second Inter-Party Government, he was determined that the National Coalition would succeed and that the government would go out having served its full term. He also did not wish to see his party divided over this contentious issue.

Following the murder of the British Ambassador in July 1976, Liam Cosgrave declared a state of emergency. As Paul Daly pointed out, the Taoiseach first 'had to abolish the state of emergency which, incredibly, had remained in place since the outbreak of the Second World War.'²⁴¹ Liam Cosgrave was clearly his father's son. W.T. Cosgrave did not shy away from taking necessary measures in the face of

²³⁸ Mr Brendan Corish, Tánaiste, Minister for Health and Social Welfare and leader of the Labour Party, speaking at the 1976 Labour Party Annual Conference, Limerick, 19 Nov. 1976 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, collected speeches 1973-7, pp. 44-5).

²³⁹ Ferriter, Diarmaid, *The transformation of Ireland, 1900-2000* (London, 2004), p. 729.

²⁴⁰ Mr Brendan Corish, Tánaiste, Minister for Health and Social Welfare and leader of the Labour Party, speaking at the 1976 Labour Party Annual Conference, Limerick, 19 Nov. 1976 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, collected speeches 1973-7, p. 46).

²⁴¹ Daly, Paul, *Creating Ireland: The words and events that shaped us* (Dublin, 2008), p. 166.

enormous adversity from republicans early on in his political career. Liam Cosgrave and his cabinet also acted in a determined manner against republicans in the 1970s. Under the Emergency Powers Act, 1976, extraordinary powers were granted to the Gardaí including the authority to detain suspects for questioning for up to a week before having them released or charged. There were some reports at the time of heavy gangs within the guards, where physical force was used on detainees so as to extract confessions. Thus, why did Brendan Corish accept this Bill, which infringed on civil liberties and contravened Labour policy? Indeed, the same reasons, which were discussed in relation to O'Brien's legislation also apply here. These were: Corish's interpretation of nationalism and democracy, the coalition was attempting to secure the nation's safety, uphold democracy, avoid anarchy, civil war, as well as the demise of a government and Labour Party, suppress the I.R.A. and fundamentally, he wanted peace restored. A passage from Corish's address to delegates at the 1976 Labour Party Annual Conference in Limerick gives us a good insight into his frame of mind at this particular point in time. He said:

I treat with contempt the allegations of I.R.A. sympathisers and fellow travellers that there was any motivation other than the suppression of a murderous organisation behind the recent legislation. I know there were others who, in their legitimate vigilance for civil freedoms, did not wish the new powers to go strictly beyond what was necessary. They did not want a civilised society to coarsen itself when dealing with the uncivilised and neither did I, nor do I.²⁴²

Did the National Coalition over react in its response to the surge of violence in the 1970s? Certainly, there was a need for the government to take appropriate action and in its defence, it was deemed necessary at that particular point in time. Within Labour's parliamentary ranks, there was a measure of disquiet over the implementation of these new Bills. The exception was Dr Conor Cruise O'Brien who naturally favoured them. Of course, one must also not forget that Brendan Corish earlier criticised Fianna Fáil's Offences Against the State (Amendment) Bill in 1972 for being oppressive and undemocratic. Nonetheless, one cannot deny that the National Coalition successfully subdued the immediate threat posed by subversives to the Republic of Ireland.

Soon afterwards, the government was embroiled in even more controversy over the Emergency Powers Bill in a highly charged affair, which involved President Cearbhall Ó Dálaigh and the Minister for Defence, Paddy Donegan. De Valera's second

²⁴² Mr Brendan Corish, Tánaiste, Minister for Health and Social Welfare and leader of the Labour Party, speaking at the 1976 Labour Party Annual Conference, Limerick, 19 Nov. 1976 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, collected speeches 1973-7, p. 46).

term as president ended in 1973 and Erskine Childers was elected to replace him. Less than five months in office, the sudden death occurred on 17 November 1974 of Ireland's fourth president. Since another presidential election was undesirable to the government, a compromise candidate, Cearbhall Ó Dálaigh was chosen as successor to Childers. On 24 September 1976, the president referred the government's new Bill to the Supreme Court to test its constitutionality, which, under Ireland's 1937 constitution entitled Ó Dálaigh to do. Furthermore, during his legal career, Ó Dálaigh had risen up the ranks to Chief Justice and he had also represented Ireland on the European Court of Justice. Hence, his legal savvy was certainly never in doubt. On 18 October 1976, the fall out gained pace when, on a visit to Colum Barracks in Mullingar, County Westmeath, the Minister of Defence foolishly referred to the president as 'a thundering disgrace.'²⁴³ The incident completely snowballed afterwards. Paddy Donegan apologised for his remarks and his resignation was tendered to Cosgrave but the Taoiseach was unwilling to accept it. Ó Dálaigh felt entirely affronted by Donegan's comment and also by Cosgrave's apparent failure to grasp the seriousness of the situation. On 21 October 1976, Jack Lynch tabled a motion, which called for Donegan's resignation and a week later, a debate took place in the Dáil on government confidence. The coalition won both votes but the president resigned on 22 October 1976.

Brendan Corish had no personal involvement in this scandal but it had an indirect effect on him, as the coalition's position was seriously weakened. Donegan had shown a glaring disrespect for the office of president and his impropriety led to the resignation of Ó Dálaigh. Furthermore, it can also be said that a certain degree of stubbornness was displayed on the part of both Liam Cosgrave and Ó Dálaigh, as the former refused to sack his minister and the latter rejected an apology from the Taoiseach as well as the Minister for Defence. In a speech to the Dáil on 28 October 1976, Corish aired his opinion that this embarrassing and regrettable episode warranted neither the resignation of the president nor the minister.²⁴⁴ Incidentally, Corish told Brendan Halligan that this particular address was 'the most unhappy speech I have ever given.'²⁴⁵ Corish correctly regarded the opposition's behaviour as wholly opportunistic and he believed that Fianna Fáil's 'real issue' centred on 'defeating the government.'²⁴⁶ In regard to the conduct of both the president and Minister for Defence, he said: 'the

²⁴³ *Irish Times*, 19 Oct. 1976.

²⁴⁴ *Dáil Debate*, volume 293, column 590, 28 Oct. 1976.

²⁴⁵ Collins, Stephen, *The Cosgrave Legacy* (Dublin, 1996), p. 190.

²⁴⁶ *Dáil Debate*, volume 293, column 589, 28 Oct. 1976.

remarks constituted a breach of accepted behaviour but a breach, which could have been repaired by measures short of resignation....In political life, resignation is the most serious of all the options open to an office holder.²⁴⁷ Brendan Corish was quite right in thinking that this unfortunate affair did not justify the withdrawal of Labour support from government. Fianna Fáil exploited the entire incident in an attempt to make political capital but the National Coalition maintained the status quo.

The Donegan-Ó Dálaigh episode was not the only embarrassment for the coalition during the twentieth Dáil term. A political crisis emerged two years earlier when both the Taoiseach and his Minister for Education, Dick Burke, voted against a government proposal. On 4 July 1974, the Minister for Justice, Patrick Cooney, formally introduced the Control of Importation, Sale and Manufacture of Contraception Bill to the Dáil, following the ruling of the McGee case from the previous year. Cooney sought to legalise the importation and sale of contraceptives to married couples through the chemist. Fianna Fáil TDs were ordered to vote along the party line, which meant opposing the Bill. Both Labour and Fine Gael parliamentarians were granted a free vote each since the matter was deemed of personal conscience. The vote took place on 16 July 1974 and among the seven Fine Gael TDs to oppose the government's legislation were Liam Cosgrave and Dick Burke. Labour's Dan Spring also disagreed with its introduction and he stayed at home in Kerry for the vote. In the end, the Bill was defeated by seventy-five votes to sixty-one.²⁴⁸ Like his fellow ministers, it is probable that Brendan Corish was also kept in the dark over the Taoiseach's intention to vote no, despite their close working relationship. Naturally, there was much surprise within the Dáil over Cosgrave's behaviour. The National Coalition was undermined by the Taoiseach's conduct but from the perspective of Brendan Corish's development as a public representative, it is far more important to concentrate on his own stance on the Bill in question rather than focus on Cosgrave's action. However, the date on which the all-important vote took place coincided with Corish's visit to Nairobi, Kenya where he attended a weeklong International Conference on Social Welfare commencing on 14 July 1974. Thus, he was unable to vote and was still absent from the country when the fallout ensued. While in Kenya, Cosgrave's no vote was relayed to the Tánaiste but the Labour Party did not request his immediate return. At the Labour Party Annual Conference in Galway on 27 February 1971, Corish supported a resolution, which urged the repeal of legislation that prevented family planning. Brendan Corish had over time

²⁴⁷ *Dáil Debate*, volume 293, column 590, 597, 28 Oct. 1976.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, volume 274, column 1266, 16 July 1974.

developed a far more socialist outlook on issues such as divorce and family planning. He supported the referendum to remove the special position of the Catholic Church from the constitution in December 1972. As a democrat, he understood that it was not right to show favour towards one religious group over another. His attempts to arrange a joint working party in early 1977 on an agreed family planning Bill again indicated that he was in favour of improving the existing legislation. The evidence strongly suggests that Brendan Corish would have voted yes, had he been present in the Dáil on 16 July 1974. In fact, his decision to support Cooney's Bill would have reaffirmed the political maturity he reached over the years on religious and social matters, especially when contrasted with his earlier resistance to the Mother and Child Scheme in the first Inter-Party Government, as well as his stance on the Fethard-on-Sea boycott in 1957. The Catholic Church had very clear teachings on family planning and such moral matters. Brendan Corish's favourable position on these issues showed that religion no longer conflicted with his politics. He was still a deeply religious man and remained a committed Catholic until his death but in regards to politics, it was shown that at the end of his career Brendan Corish had a completely independent frame of mind.

As the National Coalition's term began to ebb, the government faced the dilemma of agreeing upon a suitable date to hold the general election. Corish was in favour of setting the date for June 1977. However, the preference of the three other Labour ministers was an autumn election. The motivation behind their decision was that the economy would be in better shape by autumn and thus, the result would in all probability be more favourable for the government if the election were delayed. The reason behind Corish's preference for an earlier election date was due to the internal bickering within Labour. He felt that these disputes would more likely worsen than be resolved if the election were deferred. Disagreements within the party continued during the twentieth Dáil term. In April 1976, Corish proposed the expulsion of Dr David Thornley from the Parliamentary Labour Party following the latter's attendance at a banned Provisional Sinn Féin rally in the capital. Ten months later the whip was restored to Thornley. By then his health had vastly deteriorated and he died tragically on 18 June 1978. Anti-coalitionists remained vocal during this period too. Motions concerning this issue cropped up for debate at annual conferences including one in October 1974, which demanded Labour's withdrawal from government. There were also calls for a change in government economic policy from discontented Labour Party members. The prospects of the National Coalition returning to power would have been

greater had the government decided on an autumn election date instead of June, although no one could have safely predicted the state of the Labour Party at that stage. However, Corish was not under any illusion as to the uphill battle, which faced his party in the 1977 general election. An undated top-secret memorandum for cabinet stated: 'if we are forced into a general election through by-election losses....then there is a serious danger we could lose. The Electoral Amendment Act does not copper fasten the National Coalition in power and it is self deluding to pretend that the possibility of electoral defeat is not a real one.'²⁴⁹ The following words of warning were added: '....there is no cause for complacency in contemplating the next general election. Even with united parties and a common programme the National Coalition could be beaten on its record.'²⁵⁰ It is surprising to discover that the Taoiseach did not have a poll conducted before announcing the general election. When the result was eventually communicated to the cabinet, it reported Fianna Fáil on fifty-nine per cent and both Labour and Fine Gael with ten and twenty-five per cent of votes respectively.²⁵¹ Even with a small margin of error, the result made grim reading. With this prediction in tow, Corish was set to lead the Labour Party to his fifth general election as leader on 16 June 1977.

Aside from Corish's achievements in health and social welfare, the other Labour ministers fared reasonably well in their respective roles in government. Justin Keating held responsibility for industry and commerce and spending on industrial development alone grew from £33 million in 1973 to £107 million in 1977. Irish exports also rose from £650 million in 1972 to £2,000 million five years later.²⁵² Keating introduced important changes to the development and exploration of Ireland's mining and offshore natural resources. He also ensured that Irish governments would financially benefit from future commercial offshore finds.²⁵³ The I.D.A. was given more responsibility and from March 1973 to December 1976, it approved 78,000 new jobs.²⁵⁴ In spite of these improvements, prices increased by an astonishing eighty-four per cent during Keating's

²⁴⁹ Top-secret memorandum for cabinet, undated (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, An Tánaiste 1973-7, p. 1).

²⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 2.

²⁵¹ Collins, Stephen, *The Cosgrave Legacy* (Dublin, 1996), p. 197.

²⁵² 'Vote Labour – Here are five good reasons why' - Newspaper advertisement 1977 election campaign, 1977 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, 1977 election campaign).

²⁵³ Natural resources – The Labour Party Dún Laoghaire constituency, general election brief no. 11, 1977 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, 1977 election campaign, p.1).

²⁵⁴ Industrial Development – The Labour Party Dún Laoghaire constituency, general election brief no. 12, 1977 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, 1977 election campaign).

stewardship.²⁵⁵ The National Coalition undertook a number of initiatives to counteract Ireland's rising inflation problem such as the removal of VAT from essential food products, fuel, electricity, clothing and footwear.²⁵⁶ Subsidies were also introduced to help ease the burden on families and in 1977, this figure stood at £53 million.²⁵⁷ These measures helped to a certain degree but ultimately the effects of the oil crisis proved too powerful an opponent for the government.

As Minister for Labour, Michael O' Leary introduced nine new Bills to improve conditions for workers including employment equality, unfair dismissal, youth protection and equal pay. During his tenure the industrial training budget grew from £2 million to £18 million and he also introduced an employment incentive scheme.²⁵⁸ However, despite the government's best efforts, unemployment increased by fifty per cent to 112,000 in December 1976 with the effects of the oil crisis contributing.²⁵⁹ In the Department of Local Government, James Tully oversaw the building of more than 100,000 houses including 29,000 for local authorities.²⁶⁰ In July 1973, the minister also introduced a new tenant purchase scheme, which enabled tenants to acquire homes at far more reasonable price levels if they wished. Of course, one of Tully's less admirable actions as Minister for Local Government was his revision of constituency boundaries or Tullymandering as it was so appropriately known at the time. It was thought that Tully's initiative would boost the National Coalition's chances in the next general election but in the end, the outcome in a number of constituencies was the opposite to that intended. Having discussed earlier the Broadcasting Authority (Amendment) Act, 1976, Dr Conor Cruise O'Brien as Minister for Posts and Telegraphs successfully managed to direct the investment of more than £150 million into the nation's telephone system enabling 136,000 new subscribers to connect to the network.²⁶¹ Under the National Coalition, inroads were also made into reforming Ireland's tax system. The tax net was extended to include farmers, further relief was given to P.A.Y.E. taxpayers and

²⁵⁵ Prices and inflation – The Labour Party Dún Laoghaire constituency, general election brief no. 8, 1977 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, 1977 election campaign, p. 1).

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 2.

²⁵⁸ 'Vote Labour – Here are five good reasons why' - Newspaper advertisement 1977 election campaign, 1977 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, 1977 election campaign).

²⁵⁹ Daly, Paul, *Creating Ireland: The words and events that shaped us* (Dublin, 2008), p. 169.

²⁶⁰ Housing – A home for every family - The Labour Party Dún Laoghaire constituency, general election brief no. 3, 1977 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, 1977 election campaign, p. 1).

²⁶¹ 'Vote Labour – Here are five good reasons why' - Newspaper advertisement 1977 election campaign, 1977 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, 1977 election campaign).

a wealth tax was introduced in 1974.²⁶² The coalition established an independent planning board and the Director of Public Prosecutions agency. While discussing Labour's achievements and contribution in government, one cannot forget to mention the party's by-election success on 10 June 1976, when Brendan Halligan filled the seat left vacant by the death of the former Taoiseach, Seán Lemass, in Dublin South-West. This was an unprecedented achievement for Labour as it was the first time the party won a seat in a by-election at the expense of Fianna Fáil.²⁶³ Following on from the earlier successes of Brendan Corish in 1945 and Eileen Desmond in 1965, it is almost incredible to discover that Halligan's victory in 1976 marked Labour's third by-election success in fifty-four years.²⁶⁴

Brendan Halligan wrote that 'no one ever entered the cabinet room with greater reluctance than he [Corish] did on 14 March 1973 and in truth, nobody was ever happier to leave it four years later.'²⁶⁵ Michael O'Leary also agreed with Halligan's view when he said: 'he [Corish] didn't enjoy government. He worried excessively.'²⁶⁶ While in power, Brendan Corish certainly had a lot to contend with. The burden of responsibility as Tánaiste, Minister for Health and Social Welfare, as well as leading the Labour Party meant spending less time with the family in Wexford. This took its toll on him. Under Corish, the Labour Party in 1977 came a long way from its defeat and disappointment in 1969. In those eight years, he led the party to reverse its coalition policy, negotiated a programme of government with Fine Gael and ensured Labour's full participation in the National Coalition. From Corish's viewpoint, it was unlucky that Labour's involvement in coalition clashed with a detrimental oil crisis and a fresh outbreak of violence in Northern Ireland. However, he did not let these intrusions impact on the important work that needed to be undertaken in health and social welfare reform. His long list of achievements in these two departments and particularly in social welfare, are testimony to his efforts. Compared to Labour's earlier involvement in the first and second Inter-Party Governments, the experience of Corish's party in power from 1973 to 1977 was far more positive. Nonetheless, for those who expected the introduction of liberal, progressive laws; they were left largely disappointed by some actions of the coalition.

²⁶² Labour's record on taxation reform - The Labour Party Dún Laoghaire constituency, general election brief no. 7, 1977 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, 1977 election campaign, p. 1).

²⁶³ Annual Report of the Labour Party, 1975-6 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 3, Labour Party Annual Reports 1967-79, p. 10).

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ Brendan Halligan, 'On Brendan Corish: the man who transformed Labour' in Halligan, Brendan (ed.), *The Brendan Corish Seminar Proceedings* (Dublin, 2006), p. 53.

²⁶⁶ Michael O'Leary, 'An appreciation by the former Labour Party leader, Michael O'Leary' in Halligan, Brendan (ed.), *The Brendan Corish Seminar Proceedings* (Dublin, 2006), p. 56.

Certainly the government's hope to 'transform Ireland into a modern progressive society based on social justice' was not fully achieved.²⁶⁷ Furthermore, a number of those aims outlined in the Statement of Intent were left unfulfilled and the coalition's campaign against rising inflation and unemployment rates was unsuccessful. Naturally, there was a downside to Labour's participation in the National Coalition. Certain Labour policies were implemented over the four years and three months but Corish's party was also identified with harsh measures. Therefore, one can claim that Labour's identity was lost to a certain degree in office. Despite this, the government held firm in the face of economic, political and security crises and thus proved the instability of coalitions a mere myth. Indeed, by the very facts that Labour and Fine Gael produced a joint election programme and that both parties campaigned as coalition partners, Fianna Fáil's familiar old charge was dispelled even further. Pragmatism prevailed and a real alternative to a Fianna Fáil led government was created. Unfortunately for Brendan Corish and his party, Richie Ryan's populist budget of January 1977 proved no match for Jack Lynch's giveaway manifesto. Fianna Fáil romped home to victory and Corish returned to the all too familiar opposition benches once again.

²⁶⁷ Statement of Intent, 7 Feb. 1973 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 2, Formation of 1973-7 government, p. 3).

CONCLUSION

‘The foundations have been laid on which to build a socialist party capable of facing all the social and economic challenges of the future....In this lies great hope for the future [of the Irish Labour Party]....’¹

Following the defeat of the National Coalition in the general election and the loss of two Labour seats, the resignation of Brendan Corish as party leader was announced on 26 June 1977.² Four and a half years later, he made the decision to retire from national politics on 6 December 1981. Prior to his retirement from national politics, Brendan Corish ventured into the world of local politics with his son, Philip Corish in 1979. Together, they served on both the corporation and Wexford County Council. It was fitting that Corish’s political career concluded in local politics in Wexford; the same place his father first entered the political scene back in 1913 - the wheel had come full circle one might say. Unfortunately, a life after politics proved short for Brendan Corish as at the relatively young age of seventy-one, his death took place on 17 February 1990. He battled cancer of the throat for several months and passed away in Ely House, Wexford; a hospital he opened in May 1975 as Minister for Health and Social Welfare.

In a career that spanned thirty-seven years, Brendan Corish attained the ranks of parliamentary secretary, minister on two occasions, leader of the Labour Party and finally Tánaiste. Prior to the death of his father, Corish was an aspiring actor and it was simply out of filial loyalty that he first felt compelled to enter national politics in the by-election of December 1945. He won that contest against most expectations and was elected on the first count with 50.2 per cent share of the votes.³ Corish was greatly influenced by his father, Richard Corish, Michael Collins, James Connolly, Pope John XXIII and his close friend, John Howlin. Like so many other young politicians who inherit a parent’s seat, there was enormous pressure on Brendan Corish to uphold his father’s honour. Richard Corish’s unbroken spell in Dáil Éireann lasted twenty-four years and he held the Mayor of Wexford title for a quarter of a century. He was also a major participant in the Wexford lockout of 1911 and was a much-respected politician in his hometown. Through his actions, Richard Corish taught his son the virtues of party loyalty and pacifism. An enduring concern for the working class and underprivileged

¹ *Irish Times*, 27 June 1977. Mr Brendan Corish, Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Social Welfare, speaking at a press conference in which his resignation as leader of the Labour Party was announced, Dublin, 26 June 1977, as reported in the *Irish Times*.

² Annual Report of the Labour Party, 1976-8 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 3, Labour Party Annual Reports 1967-79, p. 37).

³ Walker, Brian M. (ed.), *Parliamentary Election Results in Ireland, 1918-92* (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin and Queen’s University Belfast, 1992), p. 167.

sections of Irish society was also handed down to Brendan Corish at a tender age, as well as a strong Christian faith and a deep sense of nationalism.

Three short years after entering Leinster House, Corish was involved in the first Inter-Party Government and elevated to the position of Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministers of Local Government and Defence. Indeed, early on in his political career Corish showed signs of promise. His promotions to the ranks of vice-chairman in 1946, Chief Whip of the Parliamentary Labour Party in 1947 and also as Labour's only parliamentary secretary in the first Inter-Party Government all clearly signalled that Brendan Corish was quickly making his way up the party structure. Prior to 1948, Ireland had never experienced a coalition and in fact, the main motivation behind its establishment was to oust Éamon de Valera who ruled uninterrupted for sixteen years. Corish's experiences of a coalition and of being in power for the very first time were overall quite mixed. The main positive features included a tremendous housing drive, the declaration of the Irish republic, the launch of a successful programme to eliminate tuberculosis, a slight increase in population, as well as some improvements in the area of health and social welfare. However, Corish also witnessed at first hand a number of negative aspects associated with coalition involvement. Labour's strength and position of influence around the cabinet table was relatively weak in contrast to the largest coalition party, Fine Gael, and compromises featured prominently. Labour's vulnerable position was shown during the blatant stalling of William Norton's social welfare plan and yet again, in directing government policy, the Labour Party should have acted more forceful. The insecure nature of coalitions was also made known to Corish and nowhere was this more evident than in the eventual fall of the government in 1951. Brendan Corish was still in favour of coalition following the collapse of the first Inter-Party Government. He played a relatively minor role as parliamentary secretary but nevertheless, the experience Corish gained stood to him later as a minister in 1954 and 1973.

In 1954, Brendan Corish was elevated to the rank of Minister for Social Welfare in the second Inter-Party Government. He was one of four Labour TDs to hold a ministry in that coalition and at the age of thirty-five, Corish was the second youngest seated at the cabinet table after Liam Cosgrave. However, disappointment and frustration marked his second term in power. Corish's later opposition to coalition – a position he maintained until 1970 – by and large originated from the period 1954 to 1957. While in office, Brendan Corish and his fellow cabinet colleagues faced

significant challenges including soaring emigration, widespread unemployment and a renewal in I.R.A. activity in Northern Ireland as well as a series of border raids. As inflation grew, Brendan Corish also had to deal with troubling cutbacks in his own department. He succeeded in introducing slight improvements in the field of social welfare but overall his experience of government was tainted by the introduction of harsh, anti-social measures. After the dissolution of the fifteenth Dáil, Corish was convinced that the future of the Labour Party lay not in coalition but in the formation of a single party government with appropriate party policies at hand and also a high standard of ministers at its disposal. Of course, a further objection by Brendan Corish to coalitions was founded on a desire to develop the left-right divide within Irish politics. The tragic civil war in Ireland distorted the alignment of Irish political parties from the natural separation in modern democracies of socialists versus conservatives. Instead, the two main political parties in Ireland remained conservative in character and Corish hoped that both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael would be forced to coalesce on the occasion of Labour holding the balance of power.

In 1960, Brendan Corish became leader of the Labour Party and as successor to William Norton, he set about to transform Labour into a 'national party of government.'⁴ Prior to Corish's take over, the Parliamentary Labour Party was an organisation 'without a philosophy' suited to the needs of 1960s Ireland.⁵ In fact, the parliamentary party was at that time a bunch of 'disparate' individuals with a support base mostly confined to rural Ireland while its position in Dublin was relatively weak.⁶ With the development of social change in the western world in the 1960s, change was also afoot not only in Irish society and in the economic status of the country itself as Ireland became more industrialised, but also in national politics with the emergence of Corish, Seán Lemass and James Dillon as the new leaders of Labour, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. Brendan Corish was only forty-one years of age when he became Labour leader and his choice of direction for the party marked a clear change to that overseen by Norton. Corish's predecessor was largely associated with conservatism, had favoured coalitions and his style of leadership was focused on local politics. Certainly, Brendan Corish's candidacy for the Labour leadership appealed to his fellow parliamentary party colleagues. These personal attributes included a background steeped in Labour history, youthful vigour, a good physical presence, cabinet experience,

⁴ Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Brendan Howlin TD, Wexford, 14 Sept. 2009.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

respectability, a positive public image, articulacy and also a strong work ethic, which he devoted to the party. Corish was open to change and against Labour's involvement in another coalition. This was most important.

Under the direction of Brendan Corish, the Labour Party went through a complete revamp during the 1960s. The recruitment of Brendan Halligan as Labour's new political director in May 1967 and his appointment as General Secretary of the I.L.P. in December 1967 marked important stepping-stones along Labour's path to transformation. Corish was greatly influenced by Halligan and they 'worked closely' together in developing a clearer Labour identity.⁷ Party policies were drafted, Labour's independence was affirmed and new recruits were enlisted including prominent radicals and intellectuals such as Dr Noel Browne, Dr Conor Cruise O'Brien and Dr David Thornley. Labour's backing in Dublin increased with the widening of the party's membership base and the decade also saw a growth in trade union support. Labour's new image was radical and unmistakably socialist. Brendan Corish's *New Republic* speech in 1967 was a landmark occasion in the development of his political career but also in terms of Irish political history. Not only did he openly declare his support and that of his party for socialism but Corish also spoke of 'transforming Ireland from a backward' state into a nation with 'principles for a fair and just society with democratic structures.'⁸ His speech was pioneering, compelling and is of great historic importance.

The promising results from the general elections of 1961 and 1965 gave encouragement to Brendan Corish as they indicated a growing support for Labour's new policies and its choice in electoral strategy. Nationally, Labour's vote rose consistently from 9.1 per cent in 1957 to 11.7 per cent in 1961 and 15.4 per cent four years later.⁹ Corish predicted that Labour's big breakthrough would come in 1969 and boldly forecast that 'the seventies would be socialist.'¹⁰ Those were indeed exciting times with Labour stationed on the threshold of power. Corish also lent his own overriding support to Labour's electoral strategy, when in 1969 he declared that were Labour to go into coalition, his reaction would be to 'support socialism from the backbenches.'¹¹ As we are all too aware, despite Labour more than doubling its national vote from 111,7000 in 1957 to 224,575 twelve years later – which equalled a seventeen per cent share of the

⁷ Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Brendan Howlin TD, Wexford, 14 Sept. 2009.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Annual Report of the Labour Party, 1969 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 3, Labour Party Annual Reports 1967-79, p. 19).

¹⁰ Corish, Brendan, *The New Republic: Complete text of 'The New Republic' Address by Brendan Corish* (Dublin, 1968), p. 3.

¹¹ Puirseil, Niamh, *The Irish Labour Party, 1922-73* (Dublin, 2007), p. 261.

entire vote in 1969 - Corish's party actually lost four seats.¹² Even the tenfold increase in seats in Dublin from 1961 to 1969 did not completely ease Corish's overwhelming sense of disappointment.¹³ Labour was unable to launch an adequate counterchallenge to Fianna Fáil's unscrupulous red smear campaign and the attempt to entice the party's conservatives into fully embracing the ideals of the New Republic was also proven unsuccessful. The other main contributory factors towards Labour's fall included the influential Catholic Church in Ireland, which castigated Labour's socialism as godlessness from pulpits throughout the country, the weak standard of some candidates, changes to constituency boundaries by Fianna Fáil, a poor level of vote transfer and also the party's electoral strategy. With the aim of establishing a Labour led government, Corish set himself an unenviable task and the first of its kind in Irish Labour history. However, following the dissatisfying 1969 general election results he was left consigned to another term on the opposition benches instead of becoming Taoiseach to Ireland's first majority Labour Party government and with fewer deputies than before the dissolution of the previous Dáil.

A continuous spell of sixteen years in opposition reinforced for Brendan Corish the opinion that it was 'not good to have one party' in power for so long and that real power lay with those in government, whereas all one could do in 'opposition was to debate' the relevant issue.¹⁴ Furthermore, the general election results of 1969 caused Corish to completely rethink his party's electoral strategy. The Arms Crisis and the government's mishandling of the entire affair also underlined the drastic need for change and eliminated any qualms Brendan Corish felt regarding the necessity of Labour's participation in another coalition with Fine Gael.

At the specially convened Labour Party conference in Cork's City Hall in December 1970, Brendan Corish put his leadership on the line in proposing an Administrative Council motion, which called for the reversal of the party's anti-coalition stance. His arguments were strong, sound and persuasive. Ultimately, they helped influence the majority of delegates to adopt a new electoral strategy for the party. The momentous decision taken by Corish and the I.L.P. at that conference was ultimately proven correct as Labour's downward trend - in respect of seats - was reversed. In that general election of February 1973, the Labour Party increased its

¹² Annual Report of the Labour Party, 1969 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 3, Labour Party Annual Reports 1967-79, pp. 11, 19). The I.L.P. won 9.1 per cent of votes nationally in 1957.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁴ Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Brendan Howlin TD, Wexford, 14 Sept. 2009.

representation in Dáil Éireann by one, which brought its total number of seats to nineteen.¹⁵

Brendan Corish reached the zenith of his career in politics when in 1973 he became Tánaiste, as well as Minister for Health and Social Welfare to the twentieth Dáil. With the aid of his parliamentary secretary, Frank Cluskey, Corish introduced key reforms to social welfare. In the Department of Health, he found the funding of projects problematic and he also faced stiff opposition from consultants. Nevertheless, Corish brought about improvements to health care and overall, was seen to act compassionately in both ministries. Furthermore, the Tánaiste and Taoiseach worked remarkably well together and their display of unity – for the most part – held the government intact. Brendan Corish justified Labour’s participation in the National Coalition when he said: ‘we are in government to defend the interests of those we represent and to implement the maximum amount of our policies. We are not in power for power's sake. Power without purpose is to me immoral. We are in government to do the best we can to propagate and implement our policies, not for the sake of power, prestige or position.’¹⁶ It was unfortunate that Corish’s period in government coincided with a renewal of violence in Northern Ireland and an international oil crisis. However, the National Coalition most certainly did not neglect its duties while in power, nor did it shirk from confronting these great difficulties. It responded in a manner thought fitting at the time and the immediate threat posed by subversives to the Republic of Ireland was quelled. However, despite the implementation of several key Labour policies during the twentieth Dáil, Corish’s hopes to transform Ireland into a socially progressive state were not fully realised. Such progress included amendments to the Irish tax system and health care, a growth in industrial development expenditure, the introduction of fairer legislation for workers, essential improvements in social welfare, the removal of VAT from certain goods and services, as well as a housing drive. Labour suffered embarrassment indirectly over the Donegan-Ó Dálaigh shambles and over the family planning Bill fiasco too. Controversial laws were brought in as a result of increased republican activity; Ireland’s unemployment figure grew as did the cost of living. Overall, Corish’s third tenure in office was a vast improvement from the previous inter-party government experiences but by no means compensated for a majority Labour Party government.

¹⁵ Annual Report of the Labour Party, 1972-3 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 3, Labour Party Annual Reports 1967-79, p. 32).

¹⁶ *Dáil Debate*, volume 293, column 599, 28 Oct. 1976.

Brendan Corish's political career reaffirms the old adage that politics is the art of the possible. For a man who held no political ambitions before the 1945 by-election, his rise to the most important position in Irish government after prime minister was remarkable. As heir to his father, the mantle of political responsibility was great. However, in terms of positions of influence and political achievements, it is clear that Brendan Corish outshone his father. His legacy to the Labour Party is immense. As leader, Corish 'pulled together the various strands' and he modernised the party, which resulted in a 'credible force' with a clear identity and set of purpose.¹⁷ With Brendan Corish in charge, the I.L.P. was shown to be a 'fundamentally decent' party, which renounced violence.¹⁸ Labour's support nationally grew during Corish's tenure as leader, reaching its peak in 1969 with 224,575 votes or seventeen per cent.¹⁹ In terms of seats, 1965 marked the largest number won by Labour under Brendan Corish - a total of twenty-two.²⁰ He was also responsible for establishing a socialist foothold in Dublin, where a third of the entire population now dwells. In Wexford, the survival of the Corish political dynasty was maintained for sixty-one years and a Labour seat is still held today in his home constituency by Brendan Howlin, his political successor.

Brendan Corish was by no means a doctrinaire socialist in his lifetime, nor a militant socialist like James Connolly, nor even a socialist revolutionary like Jim Larkin. He was however a democrat, dedicated to social reform. Corish's legacy in this area lies in the many new benefits and legislation he introduced as Minister for Social Welfare in the 1970s. In the early years of his political career, Corish was a pragmatic socialist and was wary of attracting a red scare from his opponents. His socialist thinking developed over time and the progressive pontificate of Pope John XXIII undoubtedly impacted favourably upon him. Originally, Brendan Corish viewed socialism in 'practical' terms rather than 'theoretical or philosophical' but the latter approach was developed in due course and in the end, socialism was for him, 'political social democracy' as manifested in his 'New Republic' speech.²¹ Furthermore, Corish completely revolutionised socialism within the Labour Party and although he spent twenty-six years of his political career in opposition, his impact on Irish political history is no less insignificant. Indeed, one might claim that a reaction by Fianna Fáil and Fine

¹⁷ Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Brendan Howlin TD, Wexford, 14 Sept. 2009.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Annual Report of the Labour Party, 1969 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 3, Labour Party Annual Reports 1967-79, p. 11).

²⁰ Ibid., p. 8. This figure included the outgoing Ceann Comhairle, Patrick Hogan, who was returned automatically.

²¹ Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Brendan Howlin TD, Wexford, 14 Sept. 2009.

Gael to Labour's socialism during the 1960s was to reassess their policies and programmes as well as taking a slight leftward shift.

Brendan Corish was a 'better performer' in government from 1973 to 1977, precisely because of his lengthy spell in opposition and his earlier involvement in both inter-party governments.²² One also cannot consider those years in opposition ill spent by Corish as he utilised his time wisely in building up the Labour Party. In essence, Brendan Corish was a pragmatic politician overall, who was constantly learning and not afraid to change his mind. Following the collapse of the second Inter-Party Government, he understood that a new direction was needed for the Labour Party. When Labour's anti-coalition strategy did not work, he set on a fresh course for the party, which involved a new coalition with Fine Gael. These actions should not be misinterpreted as indecisiveness or opportunism on Corish's part but rather as the actions of a realist, whose personal responses always reflected his honest opinion at the time.²³ However, like any human being he was not without flaws and one cannot say that Corish as a public representative exercised the wisest of judgements on several issues during his political career. For example, the wisdom of his decision to uphold Labour's independent electoral strategy for so long is debatable.

Brendan Corish regarded his religious faith as very important. In the early part of his career religion conflicted with politics but one cannot ignore the fact that Corish's attitude on ecclesiastical issues reflected the norm of anyone growing up in that background or era. As his career progressed, he developed a more socialist outlook on moral and religious matters. In 1976, he confessed: 'I have my own firm beliefs....developed over the period of my life as an individual, father and in my work. Christian faith provides a focus for all the many interpersonal relationships, which are so important.'²⁴ His perspective on nationalism also evolved over time from strong republicanism in his youth to moderation in later years. He was a pacifist who believed there 'had to be a non-violent solution' to the struggle for complete Irish independence and the outbreak of violence in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s and 1970s reaffirmed this theory.²⁵ His involvement in Sunningdale in December 1973 also verified that.

²² Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Brendan Howlin TD, Wexford, 14 Sept. 2009.

²³ Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Desmond Corish, Wexford, 17 Sept. 2009.

²⁴ Corish, Brendan, as cited in Homily by Brendan Comiskey, Bishop of Ferns at funeral of Mr Brendan Corish, Wexford, 19 Feb. 1990 (I.L.H.S., Brendan Corish archive material box 3, press cuttings – Brendan Corish).

²⁵ Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Brendan Howlin TD, Wexford, 14 Sept. 2009.

The game of politics is compared on so many occasions to a blood sport with many participants left wounded on the battlefield. However, Brendan Corish had very few enemies and was widely respected by his own political foes. As a public figure, he never got personal. Hence, it was not unexpected that Corish was pressed to run as a potential presidential candidate. He left politics with his dignity and respect firmly intact. In Wexford, Corish remains up to the present day the county's most beloved politician. There is no doubt that he loved his birthplace in return. In 1977, he confirmed that the 'continued support [of the Wexford people] was a source of great consolation throughout the trials of public life.'²⁶ He was unassuming and remained closely connected to his constituents throughout his entire life, which is most certainly virtuous for a public figure. Therefore, it is not surprising to discover that on five occasions Corish was elected on the first count from a total of eleven elections.²⁷ Aside from his remarkable 50.2 per cent share of the vote in the 1945 by-election, Corish's result in the general election of 1961 with 28.8 per cent marked his highest personal tally during his long distinguished career.²⁸

Of course, the main downside to a life in politics was that Brendan Corish was forced to spend so much time away from his family. In an interview with *The People* reporter, Mervyn Moore, in 1983, Corish 'readily admitted that front bench politics played havoc with his family life.'²⁹ His son, Richard Corish, confessed as much when the latter said: 'we in the family all remember the enormous pressure put on our quality time by the impositions of state, party and branch. She [Phyllis Corish] was both mother and father to the three of us for many years, fully understanding that politics knows no opening and closing hours.'³⁰ Therefore, the advice Brendan Corish gave to a young Fine Gael senator, future TD and MEP, Avril Doyle, was not all that surprising - 'never neglect your family for your politics.'³¹ It was Brendan Corish who personally felt the impact of politics on the family most acutely, both as the son of a politician and also as an elected representative himself. In spite of the intrusive nature of politics on his family life and the great insecurity involved in his job, Brendan Corish did not regret his

²⁶ *Irish Times*, 27 June 1977. Mr Brendan Corish, Tánaiste and Minister for Health and Social Welfare, speaking at a press conference in which his resignation as leader of the Labour Party was announced, Dublin, 26 June 1977, as reported in the *Irish Times*.

²⁷ Walker, Brian M. (ed.), *Parliamentary Election Results in Ireland, 1918-92* (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin and Queen's University Belfast, 1992), pp. 167, 190, 204, 211, 227.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 167, 204.

²⁹ Reprint of interview by *The People* reporter Mr Mervyn Moore with Mr Brendan Corish, Jan. 1983 in *The People*, 22 Feb. 1990.

³⁰ Richard Corish, 'The formal hand-over of the Corish papers' in Halligan, Brendan (ed.), *The Brendan Corish Seminar Proceedings* (Dublin, 2006), p. 9.

³¹ *The People*, 22 Feb. 1990.

decision to become a politician.³² He was, as Brendan Howlin rightly pointed out, a ‘natural politician.’³³ However, a life in politics took its toll on Corish’s personal health too. His brother, Des Corish, remembers that by 1977, he was ‘worn out.’³⁴ Brendan Corish had not complained of poor health but it was evident that he had aged since entering government in 1973.³⁵ Before the 1977 general election, Corish made the decision to step down as party leader irrespective of the election outcome. Furthermore, he picked up a dreadful infection on holiday in Portugal in 1981, which at the time was thought to have been Legionnaire’s Disease and this was partly responsible for his refusal of a ministry in June 1981.³⁶ Corish spent his declining years in the comfort of his family, often visiting the Labour Party head office in Wexford.

The renowned history professor, E. H. Carr, wrote that ‘history is, by and large, a record of what people did, not of what they failed to do: to this extent it is inevitably a success story.’³⁷ In spite of this, like any politician at the end of his or her life it was natural that Brendan Corish had political regrets, namely that many of his goals were left unfulfilled.³⁸ In an interview with the *Irish Times* conducted in December 1981, he admitted that ‘there are many things I would like to have achieved that did not happen.’³⁹ Indeed, his aim of achieving a single Labour Party government remains an ambition for those within the Labour movement today. Furthermore, his realignment of Irish politics remains skewed. However, if we are defined by our actions then Brendan Corish is surely remembered as a socialist, a formidable debater, a risk taker and pragmatist, a nationalist who appreciated the value of peace, a hardworking politician and friend. He is still remembered on the canvass trail today and so too is his father.⁴⁰ If posterity is the final arbiter then Brendan Corish’s real legacy lies in the social welfare improvements he introduced and in his efforts to revolutionise the Labour Party. From the birth of the Irish republic and following Ireland’s entry to the EEC, Corish’s life in politics witnessed at first hand the development of a progressive society and the forging

³² Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Desmond Corish, Wexford, 17 Sept. 2009. See also interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Brendan Howlin TD, Wexford, 14 Sept. 2009.

³³ Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Brendan Howlin TD, Wexford, 14 Sept. 2009.

³⁴ Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Desmond Corish, Wexford, 17 Sept. 2009.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Interview by *Irish Times* reporter Mr Frank Byrne with Mr Brendan Corish TD in the *Irish Times*, 13 Dec. 1981. See also interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Desmond Corish, Wexford, 17 Sept. 2009.

³⁷ Carr, E.H., *What is History?* (2nd ed., London, 1990), p. 126.

³⁸ Philip Corish, ‘Concluding remarks’ in Halligan, Brendan (ed.), *The Brendan Corish Seminar Proceedings* (Dublin, 2006), p. 41.

³⁹ Interview by *Irish Times* reporter Mr Frank Byrne with Mr Brendan Corish TD in the *Irish Times*, 13 Dec. 1981.

⁴⁰ Interview by author Sinéad Ní Choncubhair with Mr Brendan Howlin TD, Wexford, 14 Sept. 2009.

of a new nation. However, his epitaph is still as relevant today as it was during Brendan Corish's lifetime: 'Stand true and stand together, your Labour is your own.'⁴¹

⁴¹ Inscription, which is on the headstone of Mr Brendan Corish located at St Ibar's Cemetery, Crosstown, Wexford.

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