The simple presence of the Republicans in the Czech legislature contributes to the drastically overhauled face of Czech politics in the aftermath of the 1992 elections. Along with the former Charter 77 dissidents, any talk of civil society and expanded forms of democracy has vanished from political discourse. The monetarists of Vaclav Klaus’ Civic Democratic Party (CDP) dominate parliament. Following the recent dissolution of Czechoslovakia human rights activists in the Czech Republic fear that the government’s conservative tint will aggravate tensions between minorities and the majority. “Our two years of grace are over,” says Gypsy spokesperson Samkova, who slipped into parliament as a GCI deputy in 1990 under the Civic Forum umbrella.

Samkova’s efforts to put her organisation under the Klaus party’s wing during the 1992 election campaign were rebutted. “They said that they were sorry but that they simply didn’t want to risk the white vote,” she explains. “The CDP doesn’t see how human rights and minority issues are useful to it. If something doesn’t bring them immediate economic profit, it’s expendable.”


THE JOYS OF SPRING

In Ireland, history has a habit of getting stuck—and usually in the most uncomfortable places, like the 17th century. One German member of the European Parliament recognised that fact during last year’s crisis over the right of a 14 year-old alleged rape victim to travel to Britain for an abortion. “I propose,” he said, “that only states which have experienced the Age of Enlightenment can be members [of the EC].”

But if such dangerously new-fangled concepts such as the separation of church and state have still to be fully accepted in the Republic, the political party system has at least advanced unequivocally into the 20th century—all the way to 1923, to be exact. That was the year in which the brief but savage civil war ended. The war was fought over the treaty signed with Britain in 1921, which granted the 26 counties which now constitute the Republic of Ireland de facto independence, but left the six north-eastern counties with large protestant populations under British rule. The pro-treaty forces defeated the hardline republicans who refused to accept partition. Yet the cleavage between the two was to remain the essential dividing line in Irish politics for the next 70 years, as the opposing civil war factions evolved into constitutional political parties, Fianna Fail (anti-treaty) and Fine Gael (pro-treaty).

It remained so until last November’s elections, when the Labour Party achieved what seems to be a historic breakthrough, more than doubling its representation to 33 seats in the 165-seat parliament. This achievement, modest enough as it appears on paper, has been greeted as a watershed in Irish political history, the ‘end of civil war politics’. The two main parties between them secured only 63% of the primary vote, Fianna Fail registering their worst performance since 1927, Fine Gael their worst since 1948.

After two months of horse trading, Labour rather surprisingly decided to enter a coalition with Fianna Fail, securing six cabinet positions, and the posts of deputy prime minister and foreign minister for their popular leader, Dick Spring. The long-term significance of the result lies less in the particular nature of the government formed in its aftermath than in the vastly increased influence wielded by Labour, the prospect of further erosion of the two main parties’ votes in the future, and the development of a more conventional political system characterised by Left-Right distinctions rather than atavistic mysticism.

Ironically, it is the party representing the losers in the civil war, Fianna Fail (‘Warriors of Destiny’), which has dominated Irish political history ever since they swallowed their pride and entered parliament in 1927. Fianna Fail have governed alone or (briefly) in coalition for no less than 44 years since then. Since 1932, Fine Gael (‘The Tribe of the Gaels’) has always been the second largest party.
The differences between the two have always been ones of style, culture and tradition, rather than substance. Fianna Fail have traditionally tended towards populism and opportunism, cementing their rural power base through protectionism, identification with 'Catholic values' and windy rhetoric on the Republic's claim to sovereignty over Northern Ireland. The party never fails to exude a strong whiff of corruption and cronism, a factor which contributed strongly to successive failures to win an outright parliamentary majority in the 1980s, the dramatic defeat of their candidate in the 1990 presidential election, and the downfall of leader, Charles Haughey, in January of last year.

Fine Gael, by contrast, aspire these days to be a modern conservative party, unhampered by Fianna Fail's need to pay lip-service to their origins. But while Fine Gael's lack of historical baggage has enabled them to make more imaginative initiatives on the Northern Ireland problem, it has also left them at the mercy of the prevailing ideological winds. In abandoning the relatively liberal social policies of former leader Garrett Fitzgerald in favour of free-market orthodoxy they have lost the allegiance of liberal, middle-class Dublin to Labour. In a country where the urban middle class is in many respects the most radical section of the electorate, it's hard to see where a party committed to economic liberalism and with no alternative core constituency can go for support.

But the substantive policy differences between the two parties are impermanent and often almost imperceptible. Fianna Fail's populist tradition didn't prevent it implementing severe public spending cuts in the name of fiscal rectitude in the late 1980s. Fine Gael have swung from Fitzgerald's principled and genuine liberalism to pseudo-Thatcherism in the space of five years. The ideological malleability of Irish politics can be clearly seen from the fact that following the election almost any combination of parties seemed possible as a coalition government. Faced with the unenviable choice between the morally bankrupt Fianna Fail and the economically incompatible Fine Gael, as coalition partners, Labour opted for the former. They have come in for a good deal of criticism for doing so, having previously been the most vocal critics of Fianna Fail chicanery while in office. But at least it doesn't immediately compromise their economic policies as another alliance with Fine Gael would have.

The glue that has held the two-party system together for so long has been the vague underlying perception of the parties as respectively 'more republican' or 'less republican.' But the persistence of the war in Northern Ireland is almost the only arena left for displaying such stances—and even here the scope for action, as opposed to rhetoric for domestic consumption, is small.

As the violence in the North shows no sign of ending, the irrelevance of the policy stances of the major parties in the Republic become more and more apparent to the electorate. Northern Ireland is simply not an issue in the Republic's elections. Paradoxically, this shift away from a politics based at least in theory on varying shades of nationalism could be a step forward for North-South relations. If Labour continues to gain in strength, it can surely only be a matter of time before they attempt to remove (by referendum) the Republic's constitutional claim to the territory of Northern Ireland.

That would at least go a small part of the way towards lifting the siege mentality of the Northern Protestants, whose refusal to counterbalance any political arrangements perceived as diluting the union with Britain helps to make 'normal' politics in the North impossible. The more the Republic moves towards a modern, secular state, the less easy it will be for the Protestants to raise the bogey of a Catholic-dominated 32-county state as a fundamental threat to their way of life, and a barrier to any change.

Of more immediate concern to the southern electorate are the economy and the great social questions of abortion and divorce. It's in the latter area that Labour's increased influence is likely to have the most immediate effect. Indeed, the new government's very first move was to announce the decriminalisation of homosexuality and a new referendum on the constitutional ban on divorce. But the economic and social spheres are closely linked. Ireland's hugely important agricultural sector has benefited to a massive extent from EC subsidies, as have its underdeveloped western areas. The idea of Europe is popular among many young urban people (as it is in Scotland), since it offers a new and more positive frame of reference than the old antagonism-cum-inferiority-complex towards England. The Irish delight in being good Europeans while the English so conspicuously are not.

But this enthusiasm for Europe inevitably implies a trade-off. If Ireland wants to continue enjoying the economic benefits of association with its larger and richer neighbours, it also has to become something more akin to a modern European nation itself. That means that archaic social legislation will eventually have to go. There was a hint that such changes might come sooner rather than later in the 1990 election of the candidate of the Left, Mary Robinson, as President. Robinson, who made her name championing causes such as the right to information about abortion, and who has taken a conscious and courageous stance against misty-eyed republicanism, embodies the new mood in Irish politics.

Her election was a sensation at the time, but the results of last November's poll suggest that it was a harbinger of more hopeful things to come rather than an aberration. Ireland's electorate continues to surprise itself: 20 women were elected to parliament (constituting 12% of the total), the highest ever number. Above all, the rejection of two parties with no credible contemporary raison d'être marks the next phase in the modernisation process. Ironically, as Left and Right become more nebulous concepts in most other democratic countries, in Ireland they are finally starting to make sense. History there has sputtered into life again, and not before time.

MIKE TICHER is ALR's assistant editor.

FEBRUARY 1993 ALR 11