

From a Dream to a Nightmare

July 8, 2013

It was supposed to mark the beginning of a new era in Irish politics. The Green Party entered into a coalition government with Fianna Fail in 2007 bringing with it the ideas of a new greener economy and all the hopes and aspirations of environmentalists, but instead their time in power turned out like a comedic tragedy.

One person near the epicenter of that government is the author of *Without Power Or Glory, The Greens In Government*. Dan Boyle was a senator for the Green Party in the Irish senate during those short yet turbulent years that his party was in government, and through this book he attempts to piece together what went wrong and how it all ended so brutally.

Unlike long established parties like Labour (1912), Fine Gael (1922), Sinn Fein (1905) and Fianna Fail (1926), the Irish Green Party was founded in 1981. It was a political party unaffected by civil war politics and infused with fresh ideas for a new generation. It took time for the Greens to evolve into a parliamentary party; in its infant years they represented the voice of the protester and the young radical, but in 2002 during the boom of the Celtic tiger era they won six seats in Dail Eireann including the author Dan Boyle, who represented the Cork South Central constituency. By 2006, the 25th anniversary of the party, Boyle informs us that the Greens were moving in the direction of carving out a governmental image. "Election efforts were ongoing to change the party from one of protest and opposition to a party of government." (16)

By spring 2007 morale within the party was at its highest as all eyes were on taking advantage of Prime Minister Bertie Ahern's lurking problems at the Mahon tribunal where he tried in vain to explain his corrupt dealings while the public was also growing somewhat tired of Fianna Fail which had been in power since 1997. In the general election of 2007 the Green Party won six seats again; this time Boyle lost his and blames it on the fact that during his last tenure as Member of Parliament he foolishly ignored local issues to concentrate on national ones.

Fianna Fail had lost some seats and needed a coalition partner to strengthen it into a government position once again. Negotiations took place between the Green Party and Fianna Fail who looked upon the Greens as perfect partners to prop them up in government. Boyle paints the negotiations episode as a drawn out to and fro-ing between the age-old party of DeValera and the relatively young party of the environmentally aware. "Fianna Fail were the big boys, the practiced survivors and that we were there half under sufferance." (41)

The results of the negotiations were two ministerial portfolios for the Green Party along with Boyle being awarded a seat in the senate in exchange for supporting Fianna Fail in government. The two ministerial positions were of the utmost importance to the Green Party, two highly valued portfolios in their eyes: Minister for the environment, heritage, and local government and Minister for communications, energy, and natural resources.

Reading the chapter on the negotiations leaves the reader feeling a sense that the almost vulnerable Green Party had made a deal with the devil.

Before the newly formed government could take its place, the outgoing administration had some things to tie up, such as the outgoing minister for the environment Dick Roche of Fianna Fail who on his last day in power signed an order for the building of a motorway over an ancient and important Celtic burial chamber at Tara. For years previous the Green Party had been opposed to the

motorway being built over the heritage site, but now they were in government with the same party, which agreed to the construction of what would become the M3 motorway. The Greens found out on their very first day in government how naïve they had been, as Boyle states, “on our first day in government we were undermined.” (63)

Boyle goes on to tell what was obviously well known among the public and that was how Fianna Fail just wanted to use the Green Party to its own advantage, in other words eat them up and spit them out. “Fianna Fail’s strategy was to put the Greens in a box and keep them there.” (64) The feeling of putting the Greens in a corner permeates this book, and it was a fact well known to everyone at the time except, it seems, to the Greens.

This book is supposed to be an insider’s account of those turbulent last years of the Celtic tiger and the start of the economic depression, yet Boyle comes across at some points as being an outsider looking in, and it was, I suppose, how the Green Party as a whole felt during those boom-to-bust years.

Honesty is the main tool in this account and Boyle uses it perhaps not to its fullest but enough just to paint a picture of the frustration felt within the Green Party. In 2008 the turning point came when Bertie Ahern announced his resignation as prime minister just as the economy was heading for an almighty crash. “While Bertie was answering corruption claims at the Mahon tribunal and announcing his resignation in May 2008, which was a long goodbye including addressing the joint houses of congress in Washington, the economy was imploding but all eyes were on Bertie.” (87)

Bertie Ahern had been head of government since 1997 during a time when Ireland’s economy prospered and peace was slowly falling on the North, yet Boyle holds no punches as he tells it the way many people now concede the whole Bertie show to be. He calls Bertie Ahern’s economic policies reckless and the boom superficial, one, which was allowed to grow out of control. Something we all know now but didn’t want to believe back then!

While an economic crash was occurring across the world throughout 2008, in Ireland it was being wholly ignored until September of that year. “The Lehmann Brothers’ collapse made everyone sit up and take notice, the globalised nature of the Irish economy meant attracting a cold in the U.S. meant that pneumonia would follow in Ireland.” (88)

The IMF episode signals the end game for the Green Party in government. Boyle sketches a tragically comic weekend in November, 2010 when it all came to a head. As the G20 summit was taking place in Seoul on the weekend of the 13th and 14th, BBC and Reuters were reporting on an IMF intervention in Ireland. During that weekend domestic news scurried away from reporting any such IMF invite to Ireland while government ministers either went to ground or flatly denied any such talk of the International Monetary Fund coming to take over Irish financial affairs. It took another week before the government eventually confirmed what was widely known around the world.

The comedy of the whole situation continued for another year or so after when the Green Party phoned the prime minister, Brian Cowen, who had taken over from Bertie Ahern, informing him of their decision to pull out of government some 45 minutes before attending a press conference to announce their decision to the public. At the press conference one member of the Green Party who couldn’t find a minder for his toddler had to take her along with him to the event. It summed up the whole situation which was a short yet bizarre and almost always chaotic time in government for the Green Party.

Those days in late 2010 and early 2011 were crazy days. The public was unsure whether the IMF was coming or not, and even some government ministers were unsure also. No one seemed to have been in control of the situation which was spiraling out of control at a rapid pace. Until the Green Party eventually decided to pull out of government and a general election was called for in spring, 2011 did things finally start to calm down, but by then the damage was done and it was a damage which still seems unfixable. The stand out memory I have from those days was the amount of global media camped outside government buildings reporting on the manic last days of a manic government.

Boyle somehow maintains a level head while describing such insane days and weeks but each titled chapter has the word "end" included, a nod to the fact that perhaps the Green Party's involvement in government was doomed right from the start.

While the Green Party was in government it cannot be argued that a new sense of going back to the land took over society. "Grow your own" became buzzwords while many urban dwellers began investing in chicken coops and chickens. Allotments came back to life and farmers' markets took a big chunk from supermarket profits. The fact that the Green Party were in government at a time of resurgence in old ways and organic methods is no coincidence, but the fact that a recession was setting in must also be taken into context.

Before reading this book I always harbored some sort of pity for the Green Party as I had thought they were too naïve and vulnerable to be in government with Fianna Fail. After reading this book my thoughts remain the same.

Boyle closes his account stating that it is necessary to have a Green Party in Ireland and that "the journey continues." (247) But will it be a realistic future for the Irish Green Party? It is a question that may remain unanswered for some years yet.