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Mel Farrell, *Party Politics in a New Democracy: The Irish Free State, 1922-37*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. £79.99 (hbk); £63.99 (Ebook), x + 332pp. ISBN 978-3-319-63584-2; 978-3-319-63585-9.

Reviewer: Mark McNally, University of the West of Scotland

Party politics in independent Ireland has often presented something of a conundrum to political scientists. In particular, the system's main parties have proven somewhat resistant to categorization along the familiar Left/Right spectrum. A common explanation offered for this anomaly is the origins of the parties in the Irish Civil War (1922-1923) when the nationalist movement splintered into two opposing blocs divided over the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty and the measure of independence it conceded to the new Irish Free State. This crucial division on the 'national question,' it is argued, formed the basis of an atypical party system with Cumann na nGaedheal/Fine Gael (post-1933) representing the pro-Treaty faction and Fianna Fáil the bulk of the Anti-Treatyites from 1926.

Mel Farrell's study of party politics in the 1920s and 1930s challenges what he regards as this 'tired cliché of 'civil war politics'' (back cover) arguing that the divisions between the two major parties have richer and more complex origins. His approach has four relatively novel characteristics. Firstly, the book focuses primarily on the party-political conflict over socio-economic policy after the Civil War, bringing new light to the under-estimated Left/Right cleavage which emerged between the main parties. Here he attributes a distinct significance to both the economic catastrophe of the Civil War as well as the global economic crisis of the Great Depression. Secondly, while focusing primarily on the two major parties he examines carefully the dynamic created by smaller parties including the Labour Party, the Farmers Party and the National League. Thirdly, he foregrounds the collective role the main political parties played in establishing and securing a stable liberal democratic system of competitive party politics at a time when such systems were in retreat in inter-war Europe. Finally, his discussion of Irish party politics is situated firmly in a broad international context that looks beyond the internal debates within Irish nationalism and its continuing conflict with Britain.

The first three chapters are contextual exploring the background of the party system in the battle for independence and the Treaty conflict. Chapter 4 examines the Cumann na nGaedheal Party Government of 1923-1927 crediting it for 'securing the financial independence of the new state' through policies of fiscal conservatism that built international confidence in its economic management (pp.107-109) while also embedding a crucial democratic pillar of the new state by establishing firmly the supremacy of the Civil Power over the military (pp.119-127). Chapter 5 is dedicated entirely to the year 1927 when Fianna Fáil abandoned its abstentionism and entered the Dáil in the wake of the assassination of Kevin O'Higgins by militant Anti-Treatyites. In contrast to Tom Garvin's influential study and his elevation of the Treatyite leaders to the founders of Irish democracy (*1922: The Birth of Irish Democracy*, 1996, Gill and MacMillan), Farrell argues it was not 1922 but 1927 which constituted a vital democratic turning-point. For this was the year in which 'the Irish Free State would become a normal, functioning democracy marked by keen electoral competition between the two main parties' (p.140) and 'the Dáil finally became fully representative of the Free State electorate' (p.151).

The primary focus of this chapter and chapter 6 is, however, the electoral battle between Cumann na nGaedheal and Fianna Fáil as they grappled with the economic difficulties of developing a new state and economy in the years leading up to the Great Depression. The party debates over protectionism are particularly well-researched with interesting and original material on the 1927 All-Party Economic Committee. Chapters 7 and 8 turn to the transition of power to Fianna Fáil in the 1930s. Here Cumann na nGaedheal's demise is attributed mainly to its determination to cling on to

the unpopular orthodoxies of free market liberalism, balanced budgets and austerity backed by an uncompromising approach to law and order bordering on authoritarianism. While Fianna Fáil's ascendancy and maintenance of power in the 1930s is mainly put down to its commitment to introduce economic protectionism and defend and expand programmes of social welfare wrapped in a suitable garb of Irish economic nationalism which appealed in particular to the lower and middle classes.

Farrell's treatment of Fianna Fáil is not, however, as comprehensive or assured as that of Cumann na nGaedheal/Fine Gael. In particular, the importance of the 'green card' of 'the Republic' in Fianna Fáil's eventual electoral triumph seemed worthy of greater scrutiny. In fact, it could be argued that the originality of the approach – in privileging socio-economics and the broader international context - comes at the cost of underestimating the manner in which the relationship between the receding British imperial power and Irish nationalism continued to shape the political fortunes of the two main parties.

Where Farrell's book, however, excels is the manner in which it draws out the dynamics created by smaller parties in the system. Thus, he charts effectively how Cumann na nGaedheal's electoral fortunes and its developing political strategy in the 1920s were conditioned by the need to fend off the Farmer's Party (representing large-scale commercial agriculture) and the National League (Redmondites) which drew it further to the right. Fianna Fáil's transitory radicalism of the time is also situated in relation to its strategic requirement to erode and capture Labour Party support which proved instrumental in securing its first major electoral victory in 1932, rather than any significant collapse of the Cumann na nGaedheal vote.

Finally, woven into Farrell's analysis of party politics is an argument about the perennial conundrum of how the Irish State managed to sustain liberal democratic governance in the difficult circumstances of the inter-war years. He interprets 'the success of Irish democracy as a joint enterprise' (p.13) in which the moderates of both major parties triumphed – albeit assisted by a strong tradition of parliamentary democracy that ran deep in Irish nationalism (p.295). Thus, Cosgrave and other leaders in Cumanna na nGaedheal saw off the dubious democrats in their ranks - including the quasi-fascist Blueshirts led by Eoin O'Duffy in the 1930s – while DeValera and the Fianna Fáil leadership progressively isolated and defeated the more radical republican and socialist elements inside and outside the Party. In sum, Mel Farrell's book brings a unique and innovative perspective to the study of Irish party politics and liberal democracy more broadly in the first two decades of independence, and it will make a valuable contribution to the existing literature.