

# **MacGill Summer School, Glenties July 20th 2010**

## **Standards in Public Life and Accountability**

When I was a child, I had a rare and rather strange interest in politics and all aspects of current affairs. Believe it or not, as a child of six or seven, I was fascinated by everything to do with the business of politics. Perhaps even more bizarrely, I truly believed that a politician could make a genuine difference to the country.

I grew up in the era of Garret and Charlie. To my innocent eyes it was the personification of the battle between right and wrong, of light versus darkness. It intrigued and inspired me and whetted my appetite for an eventual entry into active political engagement.

Similarly the O'Malley/Haughey dynamic within the Fianna Fail party enthralled me. I remember watching the first conferences of the PDs on television in 1986 and believing that Dessie O'Malley had some profound higher calling, based on his willingness to challenge the all-powerful Charles J. Haughey. As a child I genuinely believed that Des O'Malley was a true patriot – and I thought there could be no higher aspiration than to become a politician and aim to bring truth and honour into public life in Ireland.

Years later I look at politics in Ireland and I wonder where and why it has all gone wrong. Miraculously, I have achieved my childhood dream of becoming a member of the national parliament, but my simple and definite image of the battle between good and bad has been thwarted. The possibilities and potential for real change which shined so brightly for me as a child, now seem further away than ever.

The apathy amongst many politicians is palpable. The labyrinth of bureaucracy within the political system is

stifling. The lack of ambition amongst all political parties, as well as their studious dodging of courageous political positions leaves me cold.

The absolute and all consuming political commitment to standing for nothing can be soul-destroying. Sameness and uniformity are paraded by politicians and political parties as proudly as a prize bull at the county show. Obviously I am one of those politicians and I represent one of those parties, which gives me some insight, and also, it is fair to say, affords me some degree of culpability.

The objective for most politicians these days is not to break new political ground in the pursuit of some lofty national or public interest. No, the primary aspiration of most politicians is conformity. With blind conformity, comes mediocrity. It is essential, if a politician wishes to succeed – to progress politically – that they conform to the party “line”. So the first question must be, ‘What is the Party line?’.

Well it seems that the ‘Party Line’ is usually a hybrid entity. It’s a bit like a hybrid car, running on two or more power sources. It is made up of positions which emanate firstly from paid party officials, who are generally not party members and may have no commitment to, nor belief in, the values upon which the party is anchored. These positions appear on an ad hoc basis.

They are then ‘stress tested’ on cross sections of normal people called focus groups. The party line is then tailored according to the pronouncements of such focus groups. Generally, experience suggests that focus groups are resolutely in favour of motherhood and apple pie. It is fair to conclude that focus groups generally disapprove of such horrors as humanitarian crises, war, genocide and what is known as fiscal rectitude or tightening the purse strings to save for the rainy day.

Upon completion of this intensive process of policy formulation, the party position is ultimately signed off on by a collection of politicians known as 'The Parliamentary Party'. However, it is unlikely that they will see the policy in written copy as they cannot be trusted by the beleaguered party handlers not to leak it to the press. Having completed this rigorous and intellectually challenging process of policy formulation, we arrive at what is familiarly known as 'The Party Line'.

The role of defending and selling the Party Line, becomes the lofty responsibility of the Party Leader and his or her Front Bench. They must ensure that no politician think independently, or (God forbid) assess or analyse the party position. In most modern democracies, where a whip system exists, the severity of the Whip imposed by a party depends logically on how critical a parliamentary vote is to the programme of the Government and/or the platform of the Opposition. This is rational and good.

In Ireland, however, the most stringent form of whip, the three line whip is imposed for every single vote. This demonstrates to me a lack of confidence amongst political parties. It shows an immature democracy, which urgently needs to grow up to meet the needs of a mature people. It also creates a fertile environment for mediocrity to flourish, where politicians are enabled and indeed encouraged to avoid individual accountability. The result of our entrenched and archaic party whip system is that our politicians can dodge personal responsibility for their own political decisions.

For politicians with no scruples, no values and no backbone, a political party is a wonderful hiding place. It is rare that such a person will ever be exposed. They will never have to defend their position or stand over their convictions. Indeed they generally have no positions or convictions apart from a 'win my seat at all costs' mentality. They enjoy being

shielded by the ubiquitous whip system, which gives failsafe protection for the politically and ideologically impotent.

I do believe that almost every politician who stands for political office does so, at least at the outset, for genuine and worthy reasons. However, many very quickly become part of the system, part of the club where the rules of engagement demand blind "loyalty" and blind adherence to the party line. This means that even when a politician believes and knows that something being said or done by his party is wrong, he is fearful and quite unlikely to point this out.

This is the culture which gave us the Mahon tribunal and the Moriarty tribunal. It is the culture which turned a blind eye to the questionable practices of Charlie Haughey, Ray Burke, Bertie Ahern and Michael Lowry. It is also the political ethos which led this country into the economic morass in which we now wallow.

What saddens and disappoints me, as someone relatively new to the system, is that when we hear plans for political reform, most of what is said amounts to mere window dressing. No political party is talking about a real departure for Irish politics. They are happier to tinker around the edges.

Very few politicians want a radical shift from the crony politics of the nod and the wink. Our system is rooted on creeping, obsequious advancement and preferment. It rewards mediocrity, a commitment not to rock the boat and a supposed "loyalty" to the party above all else. Indeed our abuse of the term 'party loyalty' would have fitted well in the Soviet Union. Beliefs, values, principles and even loyalty to ones country are deemed inferior to blind party loyalty.

My colleague Brian Hayes, in an interview he gave to last Sunday's Mail, referred to some of the problems within our

own party. It takes courage and above all integrity and honesty to face up to such challenges. It is easy and comfortable to remain constrained by a strange pact of silence, papering over cracks in order to avoid being labelled a 'dissident' or 'rebel'. It is easier still to brand colleagues with such crude titles. Of course it is far more difficult to confront shortcomings and tackle them face on.

My party, Fine Gael, and its predecessors, founded our Republic. It is a party of great tradition and ethos and a solid value system, which is based on the principles of Christian Democracy. It is the party which can genuinely transform Ireland. For that to happen, however, we must transform ourselves and our own culture. We must ignite a new energy and a new hunger within the party. Fine Gael must demonstrate greater ambition for our country and show much higher standards for our people.

That means there can be no room in Fine Gael for the cute-hoor politics. These are the politics which have defined and tainted Irish public life like an incurable cancer. We cannot be satisfied with low standards in high places. Fine Gael in government must be much more than simply "Fianna Fail Light".

We cannot, on the one hand, condemn Fianna Fail for entertaining developers in the Galway tent, while on the other hand extend the biscuit tin for contributions from high profile developers, who are beholden to NAMA. The Irish people expect more from Fine Gael; they demand more, and they are right.

Fine Gael cannot equivocate about the standards we wish to bring to the running of this Republic. We need a real 'New Politics' – of substance rather than sound-bites. We need a politics that is about serving the people of Ireland, and not simply about replacing Fianna Fail. It is time for a politics built on courage, integrity and truth. That is the politics

which I signed up for and the sort of public service which the Irish people so desperately need.