Regression: Jack Lynch and the Border

After losing power in 1973 as the more traditional republican strand within Fianna Fáil asserted itself in opposition, Jack Lynch capitulated. Indicative of Lynch’s weakness was his acceptance of Charles Haughey’s return to a leading role in the party and his appointment to the front bench as spokesmen on Health in January 1975.¹

The party was also influenced by the increasingly nationalist line of the SDLP after the collapse of Sunningdale. At a meeting with Roy Mason in September 1976 Garret FitzGerald had pointed to the demoralisation which he claimed was prevalent amongst the SDLP after the collapse of their informal talks with the UUP. Members of the party had become so disillusioned with the deadlock that ‘tendencies of the old-fashioned nationalist wing in the party – always sceptical about the possibility of working for changes within the system – had been decisively strengthened.’²

The temptation to play the anti-British card over issues like the coalition’s attitude to cross-border co-operation was also a powerful one. In 1974 Lynch appointed Ruairí Brugha to the new position of spokesman on Northern Ireland.³ Although Dermot Keogh claims that Brugha had an ‘unrivalled knowledge’ of Northern Ireland,⁴ this was not obvious at the time to British officials who, while welcoming the fact that he was a ‘moderate by Fianna Fail standards’, added that ‘he has at times shown a very shaky grasp of realities in Northern Ireland.’ The focus in his Dáil interventions was sectarian murders of Catholics in the North and allegations against the security forces: ‘His readiness to take up publicly allegations on the basis of unsubstantiated newspaper reports is not helpful.’⁵ From London’s perspective, the situation within Fianna Fáil took a turn for the worse as a result of growing unrest on northern policy. This may have been influenced by fevered speculation in the
North about an alleged undeclared policy of withdrawal on the part of the British. In September 1975, Michael O’Kennedy, spokesman on Foreign Affairs, moved closer to the Provisionals’ position by requesting the British to make a declaration of intent to withdraw, and on 30 October the party adopted as policy that the British government should ‘declare Britain’s commitment to implement an ordered withdrawal from her involvement in the six counties of Northern Ireland.’

The tensions within Fianna Fáil over the North had been forensically analysed earlier that year by Dr Conor Cruise O’Brien. According to O’Brien the conflicts within the party reflected the tension between its founding mystique as the vanguard of anti-Treaty and anti-partitionist forces in the nation and the ruthless pragmatism that had characterised it when it governed the 26-county state. Its republican all-Ireland political ideology and internal culture was at variance with its more mundane 26-county state-building practice. However, he argued that ‘The rhetoric so firmly based in the traditions of the founding years of the party has a life of its own, usually divorced from practise but having a potential contingent bearing on practise.’ The northern crisis had unleashed, for the first time since the 1920s, a fundamentalist republican upsurge in the party, manifest first in the Arms Crisis and now in the rebellion that had forced Haughey back onto the front bench. He argued that the Provisional IRA might not have developed into such a dangerous organisation if it had not had a great deal of tacit encouragement from Fianna Fáil attitudes. Fianna Fáil’s domination of politics and government in the state had, he also claimed, infected the Republic’s entire political culture with ‘an ambivalence towards anti-democratic bodies which arrogate to themselves powers rightly belonging to the democratic state’ and a ‘sneaking regard’ for ‘the boys’. Thus, despite the fact that in government the party had often dealt ruthlessly with the IRA, ‘The inmost sentiment of many of its followers still yearns towards them.’

The implications of the article and the controversy it generated were analysed by M. F. Daly, an embassy official. While considering that O’Brien’s article had a considerable amount of validity, he mentioned a letter to the Irish Times which contained the ‘most sensible comments’ on the article but which criticised O’Brien for not bringing out sufficiently that, while Fianna Fáil had emerged from ‘the tradition of a violent undemocratic republic’, it had ‘at the same time defused it, and that far from being responsible for the survival of such a tradition it had done much to tame the beast’. Daly noted that, like the tamer of wild animals, the party was in constant danger of being devoured by its charge and this fear appeared to have been vindicated by the hard-line shift in policy in