

Challenges faced by Irish governments in the 1950s

From the declaration of a republic in 1949 up to the end of the 1950s, successive governments faced a number of recurring problems. Most of these stemmed from or revolved around the stagnating economy. The 1950s are often remembered as 'wasted years' ; a bleak period where Ireland grappled unsuccessfully with the twin demons of emigration and unemployment, sagged under the weight of Catholic conservatism and struggled to find its place in the emerging post-war world.

The most pertinent problem that Ireland faced was a complete lack of Industrial producers or infrastructure. Because of its colonial past, Ireland 'missed' the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century and was left almost entirely dependent on agriculture. The 1st Inter-Party government, led by John. A Costello tried to rectify that by setting up a series of state bodies such as the CSO (Central Statistics Office), Córas Tráchtála and the IDA (Industrial Development Authority). The CSO was required to provide accurate, reliable commercial data so that governments could plan for the future, Córas Tráchtála was set up to promote Irish products (particularly food produce) abroad, and the IDA was tasked with attracting multinationals to Ireland. However this policy largely failed because the governments failed to remove the restrictive protectionist measures (such as the 'Control of Manufacturers Act 1932') which repelled potential investors.

The Governments also faced the problem of an agriculture sector which had stopped growing and innovating, mostly because of those same protectionist measures which sheltered

inefficient and uncompetitive farmers from the uncertainty of the open market. The Minister for Agriculture James Dillon tried to counter this by establishing the land rehabilitation scheme to reclaim large tracts of infertile land, but initiatives like this failed to revitalise the sector. It became clear that one sector could not support the entire economy.

These woes contributed to the overwhelming problem of unemployment. In 1957 alone, 78,000 members of the workforce were unemployed. There was little social protection for these displaced workers, since social welfare only lasted for six months and the system could not cope with the large numbers of long-term unemployed. This had detrimental psychological effects and contributed to the general feeling of doom and gloom which pervaded the 50s. It also contributed to problem of emigration which peaked during the 1950s. From 1951-61 408,000 people emigrated. This idea of emigrating upon reaching adulthood became deeply engrained in the Irish psyche. Most went to English-speaking nations, such as the UK, the US and Australia. This would lead to serious economic problems later on as Ireland's population aged, but the immediate effect of this emigration was to act as a safety valve for the live register, preventing the number of unemployed from becoming unmanageably high.

The response of the various 1950's governments did little to alleviate these problems. In fact, their short-sighted, reactionary economic responses exacerbated them. For example, in 1952, due a budget deficit the Minister for Finance Gerald Sweetman introduced a suite of austerity measures including taxes hikes and spending cuts, which drastically reduced people's spending power and further contracted the economy. In 1955, in response to a £62m budget deficit, Sean MacEntee of Fianna Fáil made the same mistake. Governments refused to adopt Keynesian thinking which stated that government investment was required to grow the

economy. Ireland's economic problems were worsened by external factors such as the Korean War and the collapse in milk prices. One positive measure taken by the First Inter-party government was to apply for Marshall Aid (European Recovery Project). To be eligible, Ireland was required to join the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) and draw up a long-term economic recovery plan. In return, Ireland received \$125m, which was much needed by the ailing economy. All in all, Irish governments did not fare well against the economic challenges of the day.

They faced challenges in many other areas as well, most notably health and education. At the time Tuberculosis (TB) was a serious killer and in 1950 mortality rates were as high as 124 per 100,000. In 1949 Dr. Noel Browne was appointed Minister for Health and he was determined to tackle this issue. He engaged in a huge programme of 'sanatoria' building, providing 5500 new beds specifically for TB patients. He also launched a huge public awareness campaign and by the mid 1960s the mortality rate had dropped by over 90%. Browne also saw a need to reform the two tier system whereby wealthy patients could visit their local GPs while poorer patients had to apply for a 'red ticket' to visit the local dispensary. He worked to bring more people into the realm of state-provided healthcare and so by the mid 1950s 85% of the population was eligible for free or state subsidized treatment. The Government met these challenges with aplomb. However Noel Browne was not as successful in all areas. When he tried to introduce free healthcare for all mothers and children U-16 he met the wrath of the episcopacy. They felt the state would be interfering too much in family matters, and doctors were also fearful that their practises would be essentially nationalised. Overwhelming pressure forced him to drop the 'Mother and Child scheme' and resign from cabinet.

The Governments of the day were also mostly unsuccessful in facing the problems of education. At the time huge drop-out rate of almost 90% after primary school. Most people had to get a job to provide for their family and only a privileged few could go on to second or level. In 1951 only 7800 people attended college. This meant Ireland simply did not have the educated workforce required to attract multinational investment. There were also structural problems with the education system. E.g. there was too much emphasis placed on classics, such as Greek and Latin, to the detriment of more pertinent subjects such as maths and modern Languages. These problems would persist until the Donogh O'Malley brought in a series of sweeping reforms in the 1960s.

The governments also faced numerous sociological problems, among them the hegemony of the Catholic Church and the disintegration of the Irish language. The latter they addressed effectively by establishing a department for the gaeltacht and by promoting Irish music and poetry through organisations like Comhaltas Ceoltóirí na hÉirinn and Gael Linn. However Governments were too afraid to tackle the power of the church. This led to a very conservative, regressive, ostensibly moral society where Magdalene Laundries persisted and Schools and hospitals remained under church control.

Governments of the 1950s faced a host of challenges, and in general they responded poorly, with a few notable exceptions (in the areas of health and culture). Governments were deeply restrictive in their thinking and failed to question the prevailing wisdom. This meant Ireland was destined to wander in the darkness until the enlightenment of the '60s.