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Seán Lemass: Democratic Dictator

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Bryce Evans has written an iconoclastic study of Seán Lemass (1900-71), who is often considered to be one of the most influential politicians in independent Ireland. Lemass fought in the 1916 Rising, participated in the War of Independence and Civil War (1918?23) and was a founder member of Fianna Fáil in 1926, which remained the largest political party from 1932 until 2011. He served as Minister for Industry and Commerce in successive de Valera governments before succeeding to the leadership in 1959. He was Taoiseach (Prime Minister) from 1959?66 and is reckoned to be the architect of modern Ireland. Previous studies of Lemass have been overwhelmingly positive, but Evans?s work is more critical and revisionist.(1) He suggests that there has been an over-emphasis on the period when Lemass was Taoiseach and a ?Whiggish? tendency to see his earlier career through the lens of this period of change and modernisation. Evans also identifies ?unsavoury? aspects in Lemass?s political life, suggesting that there is evidence for a lack of ethics and some corruption. While claiming that he has no intention to perform a ?hatchet job? on his subject, the sub title ?democratic dictator? without a question mark provides a hostage to fortune. Despite this, Evans provides a challenge to previous contributions and Lemass is presented as a more ambiguous, less liberal and perhaps less modern figure than some versions of his life would have it. It is also a more negative picture of Lemass, though it seems to this reviewer that Evans?s does not satisfactorily make the case for

Lemass the dictator.

It is not surprising that there will be gaps in the life of a politician who protected his privacy and left few personal papers. Evans provides a nuanced assessment of Lemass?s role in the 1916 Rising, describing it as a ?life changing? experience for him. He concludes that Lemass was an ?active but fringe member of the IRA? rather than a central figure and on the evidence available unlikely to have been a member of Michael Collins?s murder squad. He also questions Garvin?s view that Lemass distanced himself from the romantic militarism associated with the Rising, citing his role in the War of Independence and the Civil War as counter evidence. His decision to oppose the Treaty was in conflict with majority opinion and rested on a key assumption of republican ideology for the rest of the decade: that ?the majority have no right to do wrong?. Evans provides a detailed discussion of the murder of Lemass?s brother Noel by Free State agents, asserting that Emmet Dalton, a close confidant of Michael Collins, who had been recently killed by anti-Treaty forces, was implicated in the murder. To my mind the evidence here is inconclusive (or not proven in the Scottish sense) but the author does introduce some important questions that require further research. According to Evans this tragic event was the making of Lemass, helping him rise up the republican hierarchy.

His brother?s murder certainly helped Lemass to progress politically in 1923 and 1924, but Evans assertion that he was an opportunist ignores Lemass?s hard work and application for the republican cause. The author over-reaches himself here and neglects to establish the political context in which Lemass was operating in these difficult years. One consequence is that Evans gives scant attention to a series of articles written by Lemass in 1925 for the main republican paper *An Phoblacht*. He misses the key points in these articles and fails to note the internal debate generated by them.(2) Lemass was arguing for a new departure and one that would bring republicans in from their self-imposed exile outside the political system. An alternative reading of this period is possible which is more nuanced than Evans?s. Lemass was by 1925 working full time in an emotional political environment, where principles were matters to kill or die for (as his brother among others had experienced). Evans also makes little of Lemass?s 1925 call to end abstention from the Dáil (Parliament), a risky move even then. He ignores the significance of the Boundary Commission (December 1925) for those realistic republicans such as de Valera and Lemass who recognised that the Free State was stabilising and republican abstention could do little about this. Nor does he ask why Lemass developed a radical socio-economic strategy between 1924 and 1926. It is true that Lemass ?had no experience of democratic politics? by 1923 yet he displayed a degree of flexibility during these difficult years while remaining committed to his political principles.

The challenge for Lemass (and others) was how to accommodate the new state, remain steadfast to republican principles and politically challenge the prevailing conservative consensus. Lemass recognised that violence would not achieve republican aims as the state had proved more effective than republicans at using force. Even on Evans?s reading he was sceptical of the IRA?s claim to be the ?real? government of Ireland. Moreover, the state had achieved legitimacy and even those who were critical of the Treaty condemned de Valera, Sinn Fein and later Fianna Fáil for perpetuating the situation by refusing to enter the Dáil. Lemass?s actions reflect the unease among republicans about recognising the state and this unease does not disappear after the split in Sinn Fein and the formation of Fianna Fáil in 1926. Lemass was one of the founder members of Fianna Fáil, becoming the honorary secretary and later director of elections. According to Evans account this ?enabled him to accumulate the political power he craved? because ?his hunger for power could not be fulfilled within Sinn Féin?, yet little evidence is provided to show that Lemass was power hungry. When he discusses Lemass?s contribution to building up the new party, Evans draws the reader?s attention to his purported ?sexism? or his lack of sympathy for ?rural? sensibilities rather than to the very real achievement that it constituted. In this way every achievement is qualified and downgraded. There is room for debate on these issues, such as the claim that Lemass was not prepared to take on the powerful Catholic Church, but they are asserted here rather than demonstrated. Some of the sources used are open to question. The author might have treated the opinions of Kevin Boland, a fierce critic of Fianna Fáil after he resigned from the party, with greater caution and scepticism.

Evans makes a number of substantive points about Lemass in respect of the period up to 1932 when Fianna

Fáil emerged as the largest party and formed its first government. He corrects Garvin?s claim that Lemass was sympathetic to free trade by the late 1920s suggesting persuasively that he was anti-liberal in economics and protectionist in policy terms. He also argues that Lemass had had become more conservative but remained impatient with democracy. There is little evidence for Lemass?s conservatism at this time but his attitude to democracy is of significance. Evans rejects benign interpretations of Lemass?s declaration that Fianna Fáil was a ?slightly constitutional party?, detecting a deeper scepticism with democratic constraints among Fianna Fáil members. There is considerable strength in this charge as Fianna Fáil remained an anti-system party and an anti-constitutional one prior to 1932. This does not make the party anti-democratic necessarily and its stance might be compared to that of Charles de Gaulle and his political movement in the Fourth Republic. The party questioned the legitimacy of the state and retained close relations with the IRA. One of the first acts of the new government in 1932 was to release jailed IRA members. However, Evans does satisfactorily explain why an anti-system party became the key element in the Irish political system during the 1930s and reinforced liberal democratic constitutionalism. The most remarkable aspect of Ireland in the 1920s and 1930s is not that there is evidence for authoritarianism, clericalism or illiberal attitudes, but that it survived as a democracy at all. Virtually every other secessionist state that emerged after the First World War ceased to be democratic by 1939 and in most cases this was a result of nationalists or the military taking power. Indeed, it is easy to miss how seriously divided Ireland was in 1932 and 1933. Evans offers a partial account of the 1933 election, describing Lemass as a ?conspirator? and accusing him of ?shaking up Civil War tensions?. This takes little account of the feverish nature of the election, with the IRA and some Fianna Fáil members disrupting opposition meeting with the cry of ?no free speech for traitors?. This led in turn to the establishment of a right wing (and later Fascist) counter movement by the opposition. Not only were both sides inflammatory but they mobilised in large numbers. Yet, the tensions were resolved in a democratic fashion and both government and opposition recognised the need for restraint and some degree of cooperation. This helped to consolidate the democratic process by 1938.(3)

This evaluation of Lemass is incomplete because Evans does not adequately establish the wider context. Thus, when he highlights the weakening of Fianna Fail?s social radicalism, he does not appreciate the progressive nature of the government?s welfare and economic policies. There are certainly comparisons with the New Deal in the United States, if on a smaller scale, and similarities with Scandinavian social democracy are also possible. Fianna Fáil achieved a considerable amount by 1938 and did so while maintaining fiscal and monetary stability without incurring debt. This was achieved in the middle of a major crisis for capitalism while maintaining living standards at reasonably high levels. Instead of noting these achievements Evans spends considerable space describing Lemass?s ambitious plans to build a new ministerial office block to consolidate his department. Lemass effectively transformed the Irish economy and did so in the face of formidable internal and external obstacles. It is arguable that protectionism, state intervention in the economy and the welfare reforms helped to stabilise Ireland in the face of this crisis and did so while consolidating democracy. This is not to suggest that every policy was justified; the economic war with the United Kingdom and the clash with cattle farmers were self-inflicted wounds for ideological reasons from which the economy was slow to recover.(4) These issues do not seem central to Evans study, though he does concede that ?the macroeconomic changes Lemass was able to secure in this decade appear all the more remarkable?. He might also have spent more time assessing the differences between the radical Lemass and the conservative Seán MacEntee at Finance, as this remains an unresolved matter.(5)

In the most important sections of the book (chapters three to four) Evans presents a more detailed case for the subtitle, ?democratic dictator?. Here he uses terms such as ?dictator?, ?illiberal? and authoritarian? without explanation, leading inexorably to the title of chapter four, ?The great dictator?. There can be little disagreement that Lemass accumulated considerable economic and political power by 1938. He weakened the influence of the Department of Finance and expanded the role of the state significantly in the economy. Most of his policies were anti-liberal in the strict sense that they ran counter to orthodox and conservative economic thinking, though they were endorsed by Keynes. The policies were also introduced with majority support in the Dáil and included support from the Labour Party and active endorsement by the trade union movement; indeed trade union membership increased significantly during the 1930s. There is a charge that Lemass was high-handed and that this impatience alienated his cabinet colleagues and the business

community. An assessment of the balance of opinion within Fianna Fáil would suggest a more complex situation. As a nationalist party, members were not united on socio-economic policy (as might be the case for a socialist party) and radicalism on the national question did not translate into social radicalism. However, Lemass was not alone in the cabinet advocating progressive policies; he had support from important sections of the party and externally from the trade unions.

In respect of the business community, it is important to distinguish between those well-established concerns such as Guinness who remained opposed to government policy and the new industrial bourgeoisie who benefitted from protection. But Lemass had to be cautious, and it is disingenuous to suggest that ?dialogue? with business would have prevented mistakes. Dialogue would have given Irish business veto power over policy and Lemass resisted all such attempts. Once established, native Irish industrialists wanted to restrict further entry to sectors that they dominated and resisted Lemass?s encouragement to invest in new areas of industry. The specific legislation introduced by the Department of Industry and commerce was crafted with care by civil servants, though Lemass certainly maintained control over policy direction. There is scant evidence for authoritarianism in the departmental records; what is there is a commitment to transferring control from non-nationals to nationals in as many sectors as possible. It is also important to assess how specific legislation was implemented. Evans agrees that the ?Conditions of Employment Act? 1936 was progressive and adds that section 16 allowed the Minister to restrict or prohibit the employment of women in specific sectors. He links this to legislation that forced women teachers to resign when they married, but neglects to note that section 16 was never invoked by a Minister.

The most comprehensive part of Evans work is the account of the Department of Supplies set up to coordinate the economy during the Emergency (1939?45). His research on the black market is original and informative. He is extremely critical of Lemass?s attempts to control the black market during this period and questions Lemass?s application of moral and ethical economic principles to the organisation of supplies. While Lemass?s actions were often coercive, a case can be made that his firm control over rationing and excess profits secured a more egalitarian outcome for most people (as also proved to be the case in Britain). In view of his attitude to Lemass, it is not surprising that Evans sides with the clericalist and medievalist recommendations of the Commission on Vocational Organisation (1943). The Commission was corporatist in intention and its report provided right-wing and clericalist thinkers with the opportunity to criticise not just Lemass but the industrialisation project itself and more fundamentally the appropriateness of parliamentary democracy for Ireland. It is this latter threat that provoked the fierce criticism of the Commission by virtually every senior member of the government. Evans makes much of Lemass?s cautious attitude to the Church, yet fails to appreciate that the critique of the Commission and the confrontation between Lemass, de Valera and Archbishop McQuaid on the Youth Employment Commission were successful attempts to defend the secular state against clericalist intrusion. Evans provides a careful assessment of the harsh conditions in turf camps and the lack of official sympathy for those forced to work in them. His charge of coercion is supported by the experience of the construction corps during the Emergency and the compulsory tillage programme. He might have added the 1941 Trade Union Act, introduced by MacEntee but bearing the hall mark of Lemass. Less persuasive is the account of the debate on full employment, though he does argue persuasively that Lemass?s policies would have been so disruptive as to destabilise rural Ireland if not the state itself. Even less persuasive is the attempt to make the case that Lemass had a ?certain lack of ethics? and may have been open to corruption due to his close relations to the business community and his love of gambling. The discussion is unconvincing and based on questionable sources.

Evans is much less assured when he deals with post war Ireland (1945?66). The discussion on the failure of Lemass?s radical initiatives 1944?8, the consequences of Fianna Fáil?s defeat in 1948 and his search for a new dynamic economic policy during the 1950s is disappointing. It is all the more so as the existing literature on this period remains sparse and would have benefitted from further research. This is compounded by a weak and inconclusive chapter on Lemass when he served as Taoiseach 1959?66. Evans is aware of the challenges facing Lemass after de Valera retired, yet the main aim of this chapter appears to be a critique of Garvin?s belief that Lemass was a ?cultural revolutionary?. In pursuing this theme Evans misses

something of the drive and enthusiasm that Lemass brought to the 1960s. This section is also flawed by a number of errors and a weak grasp of the literature.(6) Nevertheless, Evans is right to draw attention to continuities in Lemass?s world view, especially his commitment to state intervention, albeit in a free trade environment. He also distinguishes between Lemass?s Keynesianism and the more conservative influence of T. K. Whitaker, the most outstanding civil servant of the period. The chapter would have benefitted from greater attention to Lemass?s achievements while Taoiseach. These were considerable and include economic policy, Northern Ireland, Europe and the Constitution. Surprisingly for a revisionist, the author accepts uncritically that Lemass was waiting for the chance to take Ireland into the EEC since 1957. Lemass?s attitude to Europe was more cautious and ambiguous than this suggests. Indeed, he was indecisive on this question up to 1961, insisting that Ireland would not join the EEC unless the UK did so. What this view also neglects is that Ireland would not have become a member of the EEC without Britain?s active support. One of the consequences of this is that Evans does not question the claim by Lemass?s daughter that the French and the Germans were prepared to veto British membership unless they left Northern Ireland. A cursory examination of the official archives would have provided the author with a very different view of Ireland?s diplomatic and political position in respect of its application for membership.

While this is an interesting and at times thought-provoking study, it is not the last word on Lemass or the political environment he helped to make. Indeed, it prompts many additional questions about Lemass, Fianna Fáil and independent Ireland. I remain concerned at the use of terms such as dictator without justification, as well as the rather vague and unsubstantiated charges of corruption or lack of ethics. Some of the evidence used is open to serious question and oral testimony (collected 30?50 years after the event) is treated uncritically. Despite this and the misgivings noted in the review it is a book worth engaging with.

Notes

1. J. J. Lee, ?Sean Lemass? in *Ireland: 1945-70*, ed. J. J. Lee (Dublin, 1979), pp. 27?37; Brian Farrell, *Chairman or Chief? The Role of Taoiseach in Irish Government* (Dublin, 1971); idem., *Seán Lemass* (Dublin, 1983); Paul Bew and Henry Patterson, *Seán Lemass and the Making of Modern Ireland 1945?66* (Dublin, 1982); J. J. Lee, *Ireland 1912?1985: Politics and Society* (Cambridge, 1989); John Horgan, *Seán Lemass: The Enigmatic Patriot* (Dublin, 1997); Tom Garvin, *Judging Lemass: The Measure of the Man* (Dublin, 2009); *The Lemass Era: Politics and Society in the Ireland of Seán Lemass*, ed. Brian Girvin and Gary Murphy (Dublin, 2005).Back to (1)
2. Farrell, *Seán Lemass*, p. 14.Back to (2)
3. Brian Girvin, *From Union to Union: Nationalism, Democracy and Religion in Ireland* (Dublin, 2002), pp. 63?105.Back to (3)
4. Brian Girvin, *Between Two Worlds: Politics and Economy in Independent Ireland* (Dublin, 1989), 80?130.Back to (4)
5. Tom Feeney, *Seán MacEntee: A Political Life* (Dublin, 2009), pp. 60?128.Back to (5)
6. For example George Colley was a Catholic not a Protestant, and it was independent TDs who supported Lemass?s government between 1961 and 1965, not the Labour Party.Back to (6)

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