

Ch. 4 - The IRISH Free State, 1923-32



Introduction

In this chapter you will learn about:

- The establishment of the Irish Free State
- The economic and social policies of the Free State Government
- Foreign policy developments
- The establishment of Fianna Fáil

Useful Terms

- **Executive Council:** the Cabinet in the new Irish Free State Government.
- **An tOireachtas:** the Irish Parliament consisting of the Dáil and Seanad (Senate).
- **Dominion:** one of six countries of the British Commonwealth. They each had limited self-government.
- **Governor General:** the king's representative in Ireland, who signed bills into law.
- **Balance of payments:** when the government spends the same amount as the revenue (income) it gets in.
- **Free trade:** economic policy that allows free trading between countries without taxes or tariffs.
- **Protectionism:** putting taxes (duties/tariffs) on imported goods in order to encourage people to buy Irish-made goods.
- **Land annuities:** repayments to Britain of loans given to Irish farmers to buy their land.
- **Tariff:** a tax on imported goods to protect home industries.
- **Fianna Fáil:** a new political party founded by de Valera in 1926, whose members had been supporters of the anti-Treaty Sinn Féin.

4.1 *Cumann na nGaedheal* IN POWER

The Establishment of the Irish Free State

- The Irish Free State was established on **6 December 1922**, a year after the signing of the **Anglo-Irish Treaty**. The political structures of the new state were set out in a written constitution, which was based on the Treaty settlement. The following were the main provisions of the **Constitution of the Irish Free State**.
 - The Irish Free State was a **dominion** in the **British Commonwealth**, with the **King** as head of state.
 - The **Governor-General** represented the King in Ireland.
 - All laws were passed by the **Oireachtas**, which contained two Houses, the **Dáil** and the **Senate**, whose members had to swear an **Oath of Allegiance** to the King.
 - The Dáil elected the head of government, known as the **President of the Executive Council**. The President then appointed ministers to the Executive Council, or Cabinet. Members of the Dáil - **Teachtaí Dála or TDs** - were elected by all men and women over twenty-one years of age under the voting system of **proportional representation (PR)**.
 - The Senate, comprising **sixty members**, had far less power than the Dáil and was elected by citizens over thirty years of age.
 - **Basic rights** such as freedom of expression, assembly, and religion were guaranteed.

The Establishment of the Irish Free State

- For the first time in its history, most of Ireland now had a written constitution setting down the basic laws of the country and the rights of its citizens. While the **King of England** was the official head of state, real power was in the hands of the elected Dáil and government. The first **Governor-General** was **Timothy Healy**, a former member of the Home Rule Party. Whereas in other Commonwealth countries the Governor-General was usually a British nobleman, the Government of the Irish Free State insisted on the appointment of an **Irishman** and a **commoner** to that role.

Continuity and Change

- The new political structures of the Irish Free State were modelled closely on the **British system of government**. Government ministers were responsible to the **Dáil** and presided over departments that were like those of Britain. These government departments were run by **civil servants** who, in most cases, had also trained and worked in the **British administration in Ireland**.
- Under the **Ministers and Secretaries Act of 1924**, government departments were reorganised. A permanent civil servant, known as a secretary, was in charge of the administration of each department, but ultimate responsibility and authority lay with the government minister. The most powerful department was the **Department of Finance**. Like its counterpart in Britain, the **Treasury**, this department controlled the money available to all other departments. From 1923 to 1932 the **Minister for Finance** in the Irish Free State was **Ernest Blythe**. **Joseph Brennan** was Secretary to the Department of Finance until 1927, when he was replaced by **J.J. McElligott**. McElligott held this powerful position until his retirement in 1953.
- Other government departments were **Home Affairs (Justice), Education, Local Government and Public Health, Defence, Agriculture, Industry and Commerce, and External Affairs**. In most cases, the civil servants in these departments had years of experience in public administration. Although providing a high degree of **continuity and stability**, they were **conservative and resistant to change**. In the early years of the Irish Free State, members of the civil service provided much-needed **guidance and support** for politicians who were inexperienced in running a government.

Political Parties in the Irish Free State

- The first general election under the new **Constitution of the Irish Free State** took place in August 1923. Although the Civil War had ended, political divisions in the new state continued to be dominated by attitudes towards the **Treaty**. The main political parties that contested the 1923 election were as follows:
 - **Cumann na nGaedheal**: This consisted of pro-Treaty TDs who came together to form the new party in April 1923. It was led by **W.T. Cosgrave** and took its name from an organisation founded by **Arthur Griffith** prior to the foundation of Sinn Féin. Its main political position was support for the Treaty and the restoration of law and order.
 - **Sinn Féin**: Although Sinn Féin had split over the Treaty, **de Valera** and the anti-Treaty followers decided to contest the 1923 election under the name of Sinn Féin. They opposed the Treaty and were committed to abstaining from the Dáil. During the election campaign, de Valera was arrested and imprisoned.
 - **Labour Party**: Founded in 1912, Labour was the oldest political party contesting the election. Its members were mostly trade unionists, and it campaigned for improved living and working conditions. Under the leadership of **Thomas Johnson**, the party accepted the Treaty settlement.
 - **Farmers' Party**: This was a sectional party that supported the interests of farmers. It strongly supported the Treaty and favoured free trade and tight control of public expenditure.

Political Parties in the Irish Free State

- After more than a decade of political turbulence, the 1923 general election was the first since 1910 to be held in relatively peaceful conditions. With 153 seats to be filled, the election yielded the results shown below.
- Although Cumann na nGaedheal did not have an overall majority, it formed the government because the Sinn Féin TDs refused to take their seats in the Dáil. **W.T. Cosgrave**, as leader of Cumann na nGaedheal, was elected **President of the Executive Council**. As the Farmers' Party generally supported the government, the Labour Party became the official **Opposition** within the Dáil. The new Cumann na nGaedheal Government was deeply conservative in outlook. In the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, its most pressing concern was the restoration of law and order.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. When was the Irish Free State established and what was its status?
2. What was its relationship with the British Crown?
3. Name the main political parties that contested the election in August 1923.
4. Which party emerged as the largest after the election and who was elected President of the Executive Council?
5. What was the most pressing concern for the new government?

Law and Order

- The **Cumann na nGaedheal Government** faced major challenges in restoring order and stability throughout the state. Although the Civil War had ended, acts of violence continued to take place, as many of the anti-Treaty republicans refused to recognise the authority of the **Dáil**. The minister responsible for dealing with the issue of law and order was **Kevin O'Higgins**. He was Vice-President of the Executive Council, or second in command to **Cosgrave**, and **Minister for Home Affairs (Justice)**. He tackled this situation in three main ways:
 - **Public Safety Acts**
 - **Foundation of An Garda Síochána**
 - **Reform of the court system.**
- O'Higgins introduced a number of strict **Public Safety Acts** that gave extensive powers to the government in the area of law and order. They increased the powers of arrest and detention and were effective in dealing with armed attacks and robberies. One of the most lasting achievements of Cosgrave's Government was the establishment in September 1922 of a new, unarmed police force, **An Garda Síochána**, which replaced the **Royal Irish Constabulary**. Members of An Garda Síochána wore a distinctive blue uniform. Their first Commissioner was **Michael Staines**, but he was soon replaced by **Eoin O'Duffy**, who remained as Garda Commissioner until 1933. The gardaí were drawn largely from the ranks of the pro-Treaty IRA, and they soon established a high level of public support for the force. An Garda Síochána played a critical role in restoring law and order throughout the land.

Law and Order

- In 1924, Kevin O'Higgins introduced the **Courts of Justice Act**, which reformed the legal system. Both the old British and the Sinn Féin courts were abolished, and in their place a new court system was established, consisting of four main courts:
 - **Supreme Court**
 - **High Court**
 - **Circuit Court**
 - **District Court**
- Minor matters were dealt with by paid judges in the District Court. This replaced the old British system of unpaid magistrates. The Circuit Court dealt with more serious civil and criminal matters. The two highest courts were the **High Court** and the **Supreme Court**, which dealt with serious cases and with appeals from lower courts.
- Although a new system of courts had been established, there was more **continuity than change** in the legal system. The right of appeal from the decisions of the Irish Supreme Court to the **British Privy Council**, provided for under the **Constitution of the Irish Free State (1922)**, remained in place. Old British laws remained in force, and both the training and dress of the legal profession were modelled closely on British practice.

The Army Mutiny

- After the Civil War, the government set about transforming the army from a wartime to a peacetime force. This inevitably involved the extensive **demobilisation of troops** from the army, which consisted of 55,000 soldiers and 3,500 officers by the end of the Civil War. Many soldiers deeply resented this policy at a time of high unemployment. By early 1924 only 13,000 men and 2,000 officers remained.
- Many soldiers who had fought in the War of Independence and had remained loyal to **Michael Collins** during the Civil War had a particular grievance. Known as the '**Old IRA**', they felt that they were undervalued and were being dismissed, whereas colleagues who had previously been in the British Army were being kept on. The Old IRA members were also disappointed at the lack of progress towards the fulfilment of Collins' hope that the Treaty would form a stepping stone towards an Irish republic.
- Matters came to a head on 6 March 1924, when two army officers and Old IRA members, **Liam Tobin** and **Emmet Dalton**, sent an **ultimatum** to the Cosgrave Government. In it they outlined the grievances of the army and made the following demands:
 - An immediate halt to demobilisation
 - The removal of the Army Council
 - An assurance from the government regarding progress towards a republic.

The Army Mutiny

- The government immediately **denounced the ultimatum** and ordered the arrest of Dalton and Tobin. In the absence of Cosgrave, who was ill, **Kevin O'Higgins** took charge of the crisis. He strongly opposed the existence within the army of secret groups such as the IRB, which was controlled by the Minister for Defence, **Richard Mulcahy**. O'Higgins and other Cabinet members distrusted Mulcahy's motives. They therefore appointed the **Garda Commissioner, Eoin O'Duffy**, as supreme commander of the army over the head of Mulcahy. The mutineers were assured that an enquiry into the army would be set up and that they would not be victimised. However, on 18 March 1924 a small group of army officers met in a Dublin public house to plot further action. A senior army officer arrested the group, having consulted Mulcahy but not O'Duffy.
- Fearful that the crisis was about to worsen once again, O'Higgins persuaded the Cabinet to take **decisive action**. They demanded the resignation of Mulcahy and the Army Council. Mulcahy, however, had resigned before this message reached him. The main consequence of the Army Mutiny was the strengthening of control of the army by the elected government. O'Higgins was determined to wipe out the influence of secret societies in the army. From 1924 onwards, members of the Irish Army had to swear an oath declaring that they did not belong to any secret society. However, the incident also had serious consequences for the Cumann na nGaedheal Government. Two ministers - **Richard Mulcahy** and **Joseph McGrath**, Minister for Industry and Commerce - resigned, and eight TDs withdrew their support from the government. While Cosgrave's Government had successfully surmounted the challenge posed by the Army Mutiny, it did so at considerable political cost.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What challenges did the new government face in restoring law and order?
2. How did Kevin O'Higgins set about restoring law and order?
3. Why were some members of the Irish Army dissatisfied with the government?
4. What was the army mutiny?
5. What were its main consequences?

4.2 THE ECONOMIC POLICIES OF CUMANN *The Economic Policies of* *Cummann* NANGAEDHEAL

The Economic Policies of Cumann na nGaedheal

- The Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 provided the **Irish Free State with full economic independence**. However, in practice the new state was heavily dependent on the British market, which remained the main consumer of Irish exports. In addition, the banking systems of the two countries were closely connected.
- The partition of Ireland in 1920 resulted in the loss of the most industrialised part of the country. Furthermore, the War of Independence and the Civil War had serious economic consequences for the new state, with widespread destruction of property and disruption of transport. In the wake of years of unrest and economic disruption, the demands of restoring law and order placed a considerable strain on the economy.
- The Irish Free State, therefore, was born in difficult economic circumstances. From the outset, the **Cumann na nGaedheal Government pursued a conservative economic policy**. Under the direction of Ernest Blythe, Minister for Finance from 1923, this policy was characterised by a desire to keep taxation and government expenditure at a low level. The Department of Finance modelled itself on the British Treasury and exercised strict control over the expenditure of the other government departments. **Balancing the budget remained a high priority for the Cumann na nGaedheal Government.**

The Economic Policies of Cumann na nGaedheal

- There was a strong contrast between the economic conservatism of the Irish Free State and the political revolution that had brought it into being. Although Cumann na nGaedheal was the political heir of the founder of Sinn Féin, Arthur Griffith, the party did not implement his economic policies of tariff protection and self-sufficiency. In contrast, they implemented a **policy of free trade**, which involved minimal protection of industry on the part of the government. This policy suited larger farmers exporting to Britain and export-oriented industries such as brewing and distilling. Smaller industries, however, looked for tariff protection from cheap imported goods. In 1923 the government set up a Fiscal Inquiry Commission to examine the issue, but it concluded that very little change was needed. However, in a largely rural society such as Ireland, **agriculture rather than industry remained the principal economic concern of the Cosgrave Government.**

Agriculture

- During the 1920s agriculture was the greatest source of employment in the Irish Free State and accounted for over 80 per cent of total exports. The Minister for Agriculture, Patrick Hogan, summed up the importance of agriculture when he stated that agriculture was and would remain by far the most important industry in the Free State and that the touchstone by which every economic measure must be judged was its effect on the prosperity of the farmers. As part of the government's programme to advance the development of agriculture, Hogan and his department took a number of initiatives:
 1. To improve the quality of agricultural exports, grading and inspection were introduced for butter, meat and eggs.
 2. Land purchase was completed by the **Land Commission**, which replaced the Congested Districts Board in 1923.
 3. Greater emphasis was placed on agricultural instruction, with an improved system of advisers and evening classes.
 4. The **Agricultural Credit Corporation (ACC)** was established in 1927 to encourage farmers to borrow for investment in their land.

Agriculture

- These policies had limited success. Agricultural output increased gradually during the 1920s. Conditions in Great Britain rather than domestic policies determined the slow pace of expansion. During the 1920s prices for agricultural goods continued to fall on the British market. A combination of the British cheap food policy, economic depression, unemployment and tough competition from other countries kept prices low for Irish agricultural exporters. The only sector of farming to prosper at the time was cattle production, as prices here held up better than in other sectors.
- The agricultural policies of the Cumann na nGaedheal Government mostly favoured the larger farmers, who in turn were among the government's strongest supporters. The vast majority of farmers, however, lived on small, uneconomic holdings. Both they and landless labourers gained little from government policies, and **emigration from rural Ireland remained high during the 1920s.**
- Although agriculture accounted for half the jobs in the Irish economy in the 1920s, it contributed only one-third of the national income. Therefore, Hogan's assumption that the economic welfare of the state depended on the prosperity of agriculture was open to question. In this context, **industrial development was central to the progress of the young state.**

Industrial Development

- Industrial development in the Irish Free State was impeded by a number of difficulties. These included **lack of capital investment, absence of raw materials** such as coal and iron, and **intense competition from cheaper British imported goods**. Smaller industries, such as clothing, footwear and furniture-making, were dependent on the home market and suffered the most from foreign competition. Although many of them saw tariff protection as the solution to their difficulties, in reality they were often **inefficient, badly managed and slow to innovate**.
- Larger industries, on the other hand, were represented by thriving export-oriented firms such as Guinness and Jacobs. They strongly favoured a policy of **free trade with minimal government interference or protection**. However, in response to pressure from the smaller industries, the Minister for Finance, Ernest Blythe, placed **tariffs, or duties, on imported goods** such as shoes, glass bottles, soap, candles and motor parts. The government also set up a **Tariff Commission in 1926** to assess applications for tariff protection. This three- man commission was chaired by J.J. McElligott, a senior civil servant who was later to become Secretary of the Department of Finance. It was heavily weighted in favour of free trade and granted few tariff applications.

The Shannon Scheme

- The most dramatic economic achievement was **the establishment of a hydroelectric station at Ardnacrusha on the River Shannon in 1929**. This addressed the need for a major source of electricity for industrial and domestic use. The Shannon Scheme was the brainchild of Irish engineer T.A. MacLaughlin and had the full support of the Minister for Industry and Commerce, Patrick McGilligan. The contract for constructing the scheme was awarded to the German electrical firm Siemens and involved an investment of **£5 million**. During the construction period between 1925 and 1929, the Shannon Scheme provided **employment for 4,000 Irish construction workers**. Despite strong opposition both from within the government and from sections of the business community, the Shannon Scheme was an outstanding success and was seen as one of the greatest achievements of the Cumann na nGaedheal Government.
- In 1927 the government established a **semi-state body, the Electricity Supply Board (ESB)**, to oversee the production and distribution of electricity. The ESB vastly increased the output of electricity and totally transformed living and working conditions in the countryside in the decades ahead. The ESB was the model for other semi-state bodies, such as the **Agricultural Credit Corporation (ACC)**, the **Irish Sugar Company** and **Bord na Móna**, in the decades ahead.
- While the Shannon Scheme and the ESB were outstanding successes, on the whole, industrial progress during the 1920s was gradual. Between 1925 and 1930 the numbers employed in industry increased by 5,000. Although this increase may be attributed partly to tariff protection, it was more likely due to improving conditions in the worldwide economy. However, this modest economic improvement was to come to a dramatic halt with the onset of a **world depression after 1929**.

Key Personality: J.J. MCELLIGOTT (1893-1974)

- J.J. McElligott was born in Tralee, Co. Kerry, in 1893. He was educated at University College, Dublin, where he studied classics and economics. He entered the civil service in 1913 and worked on the Local Government Board. He joined the Irish Volunteers and fought in the GPO during the 1916 Rising. He was sacked from the civil service for his part in the Rising and was interned in various jails in England until his release in 1917.
- After his release from jail, McElligott earned his living as a financial journalist and became editor of **The Statist**. He was recruited into the Free State civil service in 1923 and was living after his release appointed **Assistant Secretary** in the Department of Finance. He succeeded Joseph Brennan as **Secretary** in the Department of Finance in 1927, a position he held until 1953. He was **Governor of the Central Bank** from 1953 to 1960 and was subsequently a director. He was **President of the Institute of Bankers** in 1956 and the first President of the **Economic Research Institute** (now known as the ESRI).
- As Secretary in the Department of Finance, McElligott was the most powerful figure in the Irish civil service from 1927 until his retirement in 1953. He played a key role in the formation of the economic policies of the new state. As Chairman of the **Tariff Commission** (1926-30), he was strongly against economic protection. While recognising the need for major developments such as the establishment of the ESB in 1927, McElligott was economically conservative, favouring low government expenditure and low taxation.

Key Personality: J.J. MCELLIGOTT (1893-1974)

- His achievements in the Department of Finance include the launching of the **first national loan**; his role in guiding politicians and civil servants successfully through the **first change of government** in 1932; and his support for the establishment of the **Central Bank**, which was set up in 1932

Questions

1. How did J.J. McElligott's early life bring him into conflict with the authorities?
2. How did he earn his from jail in 1917?
3. What position did he hold from 1927 to 1953?
4. What economic policies did he favour?
5. What contribution was made by J.J. McElligott to Irish affairs?

KEY CONCEPT: FREE TRADE

This is an economic policy that opposes putting taxes on imported or exported goods. It was a fundamental part of British economic policy for much of the nineteenth century. Ulster Unionists feared that any threat to free trade under a Home Rule government would be very damaging for industrial prosperity of north-east Ulster. The Cumann na nGaedheal Government, 1923-32, in the Irish Free State was largely supportive of free trade, but Fianna Fáil under de Valera implemented a policy of **economic protection**, the opposite of free trade.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. In what respects was the Irish Free State established in difficult economic circumstances?
2. Describe the economic policy pursued by the Cumann na nGaedheal Government?
3. How did it set about implementing its policy of free trade?
4. State two important initiatives taken in the 1920s to advance the development of agriculture.
5. How successful were the agricultural policies pursued by the Cumann na nGaedheal Government?
6. What was the most dramatic economic achievement of the first government of the Irish Free State?
7. What semi-state body was established by the government in 1926 and how successful was it?

4.3 *Social Policy of Cumann na nGaedheal*

Industrial Development

- The **social policy** of the Cumann na nGaedheal Government was in line with its **economic policy**. The same principles of **limited government intervention** in the economy and **balanced budgets** applied. The government continued to implement schemes inherited from the British administration, but made little attempt to improve them. In fact, in an effort to balance the budget, **old-age pensions** were actually **reduced by a shilling a week** by Ernest Blythe in 1924.
- **Unemployment insurance** was limited to a small proportion of workers, who only received payments for the **first six months** after losing their jobs. After this, they had to depend on a **means-tested home assistance allowance**, which was difficult to obtain. As a result, **emigration** remained the only viable option for many unemployed people.
- Although the **Department of Local Government and Public Health** was established in 1924, **public healthcare** had not advanced since the nineteenth century. Poorer people who were old or sick were frequently cared for in **county homes**, which were old workhouses. In order to obtain any assistance at home, the poor had to undergo a **humiliating means test** during which their homes were examined and their goods valued. Indeed, without the involvement of religious organisations of priests, brothers and nuns in healthcare and education, the condition of the poor would have been much worse.

Education and the Irish Language

- The Irish Free State inherited an extensive system of education from the British administration. Under the direction of **Eoin MacNeill**, the **Minister for Education**, some important changes were introduced. A new **Department of Education** was set up, taking over the functions of the old National and Intermediate Boards of Education. While most primary and secondary schools remained under the control of the churches, the new Department of Education attempted to improve attendance and introduced reforms in the curriculum. In 1926, the **School Attendance Act** introduced **compulsory school attendance** for children between the ages of six and fourteen. Despite this, many children continued to leave school before the age of fourteen. During the 1920s about 90 per cent of children did not go beyond primary school.
- At secondary level, significant changes were introduced. The old Intermediate examinations were abolished and replaced by the **Intermediate and Leaving Certificate examinations**. **Payment by results** was abolished, and schools were given **grants by the Department of Education** instead. As with primary schools, Department of Education inspectors had the task of visiting and improving secondary schools.

Education and the Irish Language

- During the 1920s the need for a better system of **vocational - or technical - education** was clear. Technical schools had been set up in 1899, but they were under-funded and poorly attended. In 1930, therefore, the government introduced the **Vocational Education Act** to reform technical education. This established **thirty-eight Vocational Education Committees (VECs)** to organise and oversee the provision of vocational education. Because vocational schools did not prepare students for the Leaving Certificate, many parents regarded them as inferior to secondary schools.
- The most important innovation introduced into the education system of the Irish Free State was undoubtedly the promotion of the **Irish language**. In 1922, all primary schools were instructed to teach Irish for at least an hour each day. From 1926 onwards, all infant classes were to be conducted through the medium of Irish. Special summer schools in Irish were organised to improve teachers' knowledge of the language. At second level, Irish was also given an important place in the curriculum. Schools that taught all subjects exclusively through Irish were given **increased grants**. Irish became a **compulsory subject** for entry to the civil service. The position of Irish in the education system reflected government support for the revival of the Irish language. The policy of using schools as the main vehicle for the restoration of the language was not a successful one. In particular, the element of **compulsion** alienated many young people and turned them against the Irish language.

Culture and Society

- After the cultural and political ferment of the Gaelic revival and revolutionary struggle, the Irish Free State was by contrast **culturally conservative** and **inward-looking**. As a result of partition, the southern state was overwhelmingly **Catholic** in composition, and the **Catholic Church** exercised great power and influence over people's lives. The predominantly **rural** nature of society also contributed to its conservatism. Indeed, because of the level of emigration, many rural areas lost the younger and more dynamic elements of the population. As a recently independent country, the Irish Free State was anxious to establish its own **distinct cultural identity** and was **sensitive to any criticism** both at home and abroad.
- The controversy over divorce in 1925 was typical of the cultural climate in the Irish Free State. In that year, the Cosgrave Government, at the behest of the **Catholic bishops**, **banned divorce** in the Irish Free State. A number of prominent Protestants, including the poet and senator William Butler Yeats, protested in vain against this measure.

Culture and Society

- The position of women in society **disimproved** during the 1920s. Between 1914 and 1923 many women, including Countess Markievicz and Maud Gonne, played prominent roles in the struggle for independence. A separate women's organisation, Cumann na mBan, was attached to Sinn Féin and the IRA. However, during the 1920s women played little part in public affairs. Women at work usually earned **less than their male counterparts**, and most of them were compelled to leave their positions on getting married. At the time, the dominant roles played by women were as **wives and mothers**, with very little opportunity outside the home.
- One of the more controversial aspects of official policy in Ireland from the 1920s onwards was **ensorship**. In an effort to protect the morals of its citizens, the state appointed censors to check books and films, with the power to edit them or to ban them outright. Whereas the system of censorship was strongly supported by the **Catholic Church**, it was deeply resented by writers and other artists. Many famous books by Irish and foreign authors were banned, and several writers emigrated as a result. More than any other facet of life, the strict censorship laws epitomised the **conservative, inward-looking** and **insecure** nature of Irish society at this time.

KEY CONCEPT: CENSORSHIP

Censorship was the efforts by both church and state to prevent people coming into contact with material considered dangerous or immoral. From the 1920s onwards there was **strict censorship** in the Irish Free State: many books and films were **banned**, including the works of eminent authors, many of whom left the country to work abroad as a result.

KEY CONCEPT: CONFORMITY

This refers to the willingness of most people to follow the instructions of religious and political leaders, especially in the areas of morality. Between 1912 and 1949 there was a **high level of conformity** in Irish society in areas of morality, especially **sexual morality** at a time of deep political divisions.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Describe the social policy pursued by the Cumann na nGaedheal Government.
2. List two important changes in Irish education in the 1920s.
3. How did the government set about promoting the Irish language?
4. In what respects was the Irish Free State culturally conservative and inward-looking?
5. How did the position of women deteriorate during the 1920s?
6. What approach did the Irish Free State take to censorship?

4.4 CUMANNANANGAEDHEAL'S FOREIGN POLICY

Establishing an Independent Foreign Policy

- Under the Anglo-Irish Treaty of December 1921, the Irish Free State became a **dominion** in the British Commonwealth, with the same rights as other dominions such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. However, unlike the other dominions, which grew out of British colonial settlement in different parts of the Empire, the Irish Free State had achieved dominion status as a result of revolution.
- From its inception, the **Cumann na nGaedheal Government** was anxious to vindicate Michael Collins' view of the Treaty as a stepping stone to greater freedom.
- As part of this approach it was anxious to follow an **independent foreign policy** from the beginning. The first example of this policy was the successful application to join the **League of Nations** in 1923. The Irish Free State insisted on having the Treaty registered at the League in Geneva as an agreement between two states. The British objected to this and regarded it as an internal matter within the Empire.
- In October 1924, the government sent a representative to the **United States of America**. This was a further advance towards greater autonomy, as before this, members of the Commonwealth had depended on the British ambassador in other countries. The Free State followed this initiative by sending representatives to **France and Germany**. By 1932 the Irish Free State had established **diplomatic links with many countries abroad**.

The Boundary Commission

- One of the **outstanding issues** that dominated relations with Great Britain during the early years of the Irish Free State was the issue of **Northern Ireland**. According to the **Anglo-Irish Treaty**, a **Boundary Commission** was to be set up to **revise the border** between Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State. During the Treaty debates, Griffith and Collins had assumed that **large areas** of Northern Ireland would be transferred to the south. However, the words of the Treaty on this point were **open to different interpretations**.
- The **Civil War** delayed the establishment of the Boundary Commission, which was eventually set up in **1924**. The Minister for Education, **Eoin MacNeill**, was nominated to represent the Irish Free State; a South African judge, **Richard Feetham**, was appointed chairman by the British Government; and when James Craig, the Northern Ireland Prime Minister, refused to nominate a representative, the British Government appointed a Belfast lawyer, **J.R. Fisher**, to represent Northern Ireland.

The Boundary Commission

- The Boundary Commission heard legal submissions and visited border areas to hear the views of local inhabitants. The members had to decide whether to **redraw the border completely** or to make **small alterations**. They also had to decide whether to give greater weight to the wishes of local inhabitants or to **economic and geographic conditions**. As chairman, Justice Feetham's views carried great weight. He favoured **minimal change**. Whereas Fisher kept the Northern Ireland Government well informed, it appears that MacNeill failed to make Cosgrave familiar with developments.
- On 7 November 1925 a British newspaper, the **Morning Post**, carried a leaked report on the work of the **Boundary Commission**. According to the report, **minimal alterations** were to be made to the border: the Free State was to gain small areas of Armagh and Fermanagh but was to lose part of Donegal to Northern Ireland. A huge controversy broke out, as few in the south had expected the Free State to actually lose territory to Northern Ireland. **MacNeill** resigned from the Boundary Commission and then from the government. As a published finding would be binding on all parties, **Cosgrave** rushed to London to prevent the publication of the report. Under an agreement between the Irish Free State and Great Britain, the report of the Boundary Commission would not be published and the border would remain unchanged. The part of the British war debt owed by the Free State was cancelled. The Boundary Commission episode was a political fiasco for the **Cosgrave Government**. It was seen as a triumph for **Craig** and the Government of Northern Ireland, as partition now became permanent.

Ireland in the Commonwealth

- During the 1920s the **Irish Free State** and other members of the **British Commonwealth** sought to redefine and expand the concept of **dominion status**. They sought equal status with Great Britain within the Commonwealth. These developments evolved at **imperial conferences** held at regular intervals to discuss Commonwealth affairs. From 1923 onwards, the Irish Free State played an important role in advancing the cause of equality within the Commonwealth. At these conferences the Irish Free State was represented in turn by **Kevin O'Higgins**, **Desmond FitzGerald** and **Patrick McGilligan**.
- One of the most significant advances took place at the 1926 Imperial Conference, with the issuing of the **Balfour Declaration**. This declared that the dominions were autonomous (i.e. self-governing) communities within the British Empire, equal in status, in no way subordinate one to another in any aspect of their domestic or external affairs, though united by a common allegiance to the Crown and freely associated as members of the **British Commonwealth of Nations**.

Ireland in the Commonwealth

- The Balfour Declaration enshrined the concept of '**co-equality**' between Great Britain and the other dominions. It also paved the way for the **1930 Imperial Conference**, which led to the passing of the **Statute of Westminster**. This law declared that:
 - Britain would no longer pass laws binding on dominions without their consent.
 - Dominion parliaments could change laws passed by Britain on their behalf.
- The Statute of Westminster marked the high point of the independent foreign policy pursued by the **Cosgrave Government**. It gave practical expression to **Collins'** view of the Treaty as a stepping stone towards greater independence. It marked the end of British involvement in the internal affairs of the Irish Free State. However, Cosgrave's Government remained committed to friendly relations with Great Britain and regarded Commonwealth membership as an advantage for Ireland.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What steps were taken by the Cosgrave Government in pursuing an independent foreign policy?
 - a. Ireland joined the League of Nations in 1923. Then they sent a diplomat to the United States of America in Oct 1924, followed by representatives to Germany and France.
2. What agreement was reached between the Irish Free State and Great Britain regarding the Report of the Boundary Commission?
 - a. The two governments agreed to keep the boundary between the Irish Free State and North Ireland the same as the one decided in the Government of Ireland Act 1920. They hid the results of the Boundary Commission.
3. How did the Irish Free State and other members of the Commonwealth seek to re-define the concept of dominion status?
 - a. Imperial conferences took place in which dominion countries sought to gain more power over internal affairs while gaining equal
4. What was contained in the Statute of Westminster and why was it so significant?
 - a. The **Statute of Westminster** declared that Britain would no longer pass laws binding on dominions without their consent and that dominion parliaments could change laws passed by Britain on their behalf. This became a stepping stone towards Irish independence.

Key Personality: WILLIAM T. COSGRAVE (1880-1965)

- **W.T. Cosgrave** was born in Dublin on 6 June 1880. He joined **Sinn Féin** in 1905 and was elected to Dublin Corporation as a Sinn Féin councillor in 1909. In 1913, he joined the **Irish Volunteers** and served as adjutant to Éamonn Ceannt at the South Dublin Union during the **Easter Rising of 1916**. He was sentenced to death for his part in the Rising, but this was later commuted to a sentence of life imprisonment.
- After his release from jail in 1917, Cosgrave became actively involved in the new, resurgent Sinn Féin and won a seat for the party in the Kilkenny by-election. He was arrested in May 1918 during the 'German plot' episode. He subsequently won a seat for the party in the 1918 general election. He was appointed **Minister for Local Government** in the First Dáil and played a key role in persuading most of the county councils to accept the authority of the Dáil. He supported the Treaty and became **President of the Provisional Government** of the Irish Free State after the deaths of Michael Collins and Arthur Griffith.
- When Cosgrave assumed the reins of power, the **Civil War** was still in progress. He felt an unflinching duty to protect the new state against those who had taken up arms against it. He therefore succeeded in getting the **Special Powers Act** passed in the Dáil: this Act established a military tribunal and allowed the death penalty for certain offences.

Key Personality: WILLIAM T. COSGRAVE (1880-1965)

- After the Civil War, Cosgrave, as leader of **Cumann na nGaedheal** and **President of the Executive Council**, was committed to securing and consolidating the **Irish Free State**. In the early years of his government, the restoration of law and order was a priority. In economic and social matters, the Cosgrave Government was cast in a conservative mould. It was committed to **low taxation, low government expenditure** and **free trade**. However, among the most enduring of his government's economic achievements was the **hydroelectric scheme at Ardnacrusha** on the River Shannon and the subsequent establishment of the **Electricity Supply Board**.
- Cosgrave and his ministers played an important role in establishing an increasingly independent voice for Ireland in foreign affairs during the 1920s: Ireland joined the **League of Nations**, appointed representatives to foreign countries and played a major part in the **imperial conferences** that redefined the relationship between Britain and the other members of the Commonwealth.
- The Cumann na nGaedheal Government, under the leadership of Cosgrave, remained in power until 1932. One of Cosgrave's greatest achievements lay in facilitating the smooth transfer of power to Fianna Fáil after the 1932 general election, thus demonstrating the political maturity of the young democracy.
- When the Blueshirts, Cumann na nGaedheal and the Centre Party joined together in 1933 to form a new party, **Fine Gael**, Cosgrave handed over the leadership of the new party to Eoin O'Duffy. However, Cosgrave became leader of Fine Gael in 1935, when the party broke its links with O'Duffy and the Blueshirts. He was to remain leader of Fine Gael until his resignation in 1944.

Key Personality: WILLIAM T. COSGRAVE (1880-1965)

Questions

1. What role was played by W.T. Cosgrave in the struggle for independence?
2. What were his priorities on becoming President of the Provisional Government?
3. How, as President of the Executive Council, did he set about consolidating the position of the Irish Free State during the 1920s?
4. How did he contribute to the establishment of an increasingly independent voice for Ireland in foreign affairs?
5. What were the successes and achievements of W.T. Cosgrave as a political leader?

4.5 *Political Developments in the Irish Free State, 1926-32*

De Valera and the Foundation of Fianna Fáil

- After the Civil War, the **Irish Free State** was firmly established. As a pragmatic politician, **de Valera** felt isolated and powerless as long as he remained outside the Dáil. At a Sinn Féin Ard-Fheis in March 1926 de Valera proposed that the party should enter the Dáil if the **Oath of Allegiance** were abolished. When this motion was narrowly defeated, de Valera used the opportunity to leave Sinn Féin, bringing many followers with him. In May 1926, he founded a new political party, **Fianna Fáil**. Its main aims were:
 - The restoration of the **Irish language**
 - The achievement of a **thirty-two county Irish republic**
 - **Economic self-sufficiency**
- Most Sinn Féin TDs joined the new party, and many republicans gave it their support. The new party set up a local **cumann**, or branch, in most areas throughout the country. The first electoral test for Fianna Fáil came in the general election of June 1927. Beforehand, de Valera went on a fundraising trip to America. The outgoing **Cumann na nGaedheal Government** had become unpopular for a number of reasons. The reduction in the old-age pension and public service salaries caused resentment. So too did severe law and order measures. **Kevin O'Higgins'** proposal to reform the alcohol licensing laws in February 1927 encountered widespread opposition and contributed further to the falling popularity of Cumann na nGaedheal.

De Valera and the Foundation of Fianna Fáil

- In the June 1927 election Cumann na nGaedheal lost 16 seats and was reduced to 47 seats. It was closely followed by Fianna Fáil, which won 44 seats in its first general election. Fianna Fáil TDs did not take their seats because of the requirement to take the Oath of Allegiance, and **Cosgrave** was therefore able to form a government once again. However, the political scene was to be transformed in July 1927 with the assassination of Kevin O'Higgins.

Fianna Fáil Enters the Dáil

- On Sunday 10 July 1927, **Kevin O'Higgins** was assassinated as he walked from his home to Mass. Although nobody was ever arrested for the murder, it was presumed to be the work of the **IRA**. **Cosgrave** and the government reacted vigorously to this challenge to their authority. Two important laws were passed by the Dáil:
 - The **Public Safety Act**: This gave the Government the authority to set up a special court that could impose the death penalty on those found with illegal weapons.
 - The **Electoral Amendment Act**: Candidates for the Dáil or Senate would have to swear that if elected they would take the Oath of Allegiance.
- The Electoral Amendment Act was to prove highly significant. In the aftermath of O'Higgins' death, it was designed to force **Fianna Fáil** to enter the Dáil and pursue normal parliamentary politics. This was a courageous decision on the part of Cosgrave, who realised that Fianna Fáil's entry into the Dáil would be likely to force another general election. On 11 August, **de Valera** and the other Fianna Fáil TDs entered Dáil Éireann. They described the Oath of Allegiance, which they had to sign, as an empty formula. Fianna Fáil's entry into the Dáil radically changed the political landscape. Having barely survived a motion of no confidence, Cosgrave called an election for September 1927. As politics became more polarised, support for the two main parties increased. In the process, Labour, the smaller parties and independent candidates lost out. Cosgrave and Cumann na nGaedheal formed a government, with Fianna Fáil as the official Opposition. From 1927 until 1932, the Cosgrave Government depended on the Farmers' Party and some independents to survive. From the outset, it was a considerably weakened administration.

The Advance of Fianna Fáil, 1927-32

- Between 1927 and 1932, **Fianna Fáil** vigorously opposed the government on a wide range of constitutional, social and economic issues. As a republican party, it campaigned for the **abolition of the Oath of Allegiance to the King of England**. Although Fianna Fáil had entered the Dáil in 1927, the party maintained close links with the **IRA**, especially at local level. This practice of maintaining connections with republican dissidents while participating in parliamentary politics is reflected in Seán Lemass's description of Fianna Fáil in 1928 as 'a slightly constitutional party'.
- Fianna Fáil combined a republican political programme with a radical social and economic agenda. The party campaigned for an end to the payment of land annuities to the British Government (repayments of loans given to Irish farmers for land purchase); for better housing and healthcare; and for the encouragement of Irish industries through extensive tariff protection.
- Between 1927 and 1932, Fianna Fáil grew in popularity as **Cumann na nGaedheal** declined. This may be attributed to a number of factors.

The Advance of Fianna Fáil, 1927-32

- Fianna Fáil had a highly developed and efficient local organisation centred on the party branch, or cumann, of which there was one in almost every parish. The cumann selected candidates for elections and pioneered an annual church gate collection for the party. In 1931, Fianna Fáil founded **The Irish Press** newspaper to spread its views and to combat the pro-Cumann na nGaedheal stance of existing newspapers. Cumann na nGaedheal, by contrast, had a very poor local organisation. It depended largely on committees of local volunteers at election time.
- Fianna Fáil's social and economic programme appealed to various sectors of the electorate, especially small farmers and a wide range of workers in the towns. In contrast, Cumann na nGaedheal's support base was much narrower. It drew its main support from larger farmers and the professional and business sectors of society.
- Fianna Fáil's republican programme was widely popular. By contrast, Cumann na nGaedheal was seen as a pro-British or pro-Commonwealth party. The harsh public safety measures introduced by the Cumann na nGaedheal Government were especially unpopular. These culminated in a **Public Safety Act**, which provided for the death penalty for republican violence.
- Among his own supporters, **de Valera** was a charismatic leader who inspired personal loyalty and deep commitment. **Cosgrave**, by contrast, was seen as a less inspiring leader.

The Advance of Fianna Fáil, 1927-32

- The Cumann na nGaedheal Government faced major difficulties with the onset of worldwide economic depression following the Wall Street Crash in October 1929. Agricultural exports declined sharply, factories closed and unemployment increased. The government responded to the crisis by cutting public expenditure, which involved unpopular measures such as reducing the salaries of teachers and gardaí. The deteriorating economic situation rendered the Cumann na nGaedheal Government increasingly unpopular with the electorate. The political test for both Cumann na nGaedheal and Fianna Fáil was to occur in the general election of February 1932.

The 1932 General Election

- **Cumann na nGaedheal** fought the 1932 general election on the basis of its record in government over the previous decade. The party emphasised its role in **restoring stability** to the country and **maintaining law and order**. It defended its **careful management of the public finances**.
- **Fianna Fáil**, not wishing to alarm wide sections of society, presented the electorate with a cautious programme of reform. The party downplayed its republicanism: although promising the **abolition of the Oath of Allegiance** and the **release of republican prisoners**, the actual word 'republic' was not used in its programme. Fianna Fáil campaigned for **social and economic reform**, including **increased dole payments**, a **house-building programme** and the **economic protection of industry and agriculture by means of tariffs**.
- The election campaign was fought in an atmosphere of great tension and bitterness. Cumann na nGaedheal campaigners stressed the links between Fianna Fáil and the **IRA**. They also used '**red scare**' tactics against their opponents. This involved the accusation that a Fianna Fáil government might pave the way for the introduction of communism into Ireland. **Peadar O'Donnell**, an IRA member, had set up a left-wing group called **Saor Éire** in 1931. This group had been banned, and O'Donnell was imprisoned under the **Public Safety Act**. During the general election, Cumann na nGaedheal tried to link the small communist element in the IRA with de Valera and Fianna Fáil. Fianna Fáil, on the other hand, accused Cumann na nGaedheal of being **pro-British** and serving the interests of the better off. When de Valera's newspaper, the **Irish Press**, was prosecuted by the government during the election campaign, Fianna Fáil gained more sympathy, as many people saw this as an attempt to interfere with the democratic process.

The 1932 General Election

- When the results of the election were declared, **Fianna Fáil** had made a major advance. It now had **72 seats** out of a total of **153**. **Cumann na nGaedheal**'s share of the total declined to **57 seats**, and **Labour**, the Farmers and the independents lost seats as well. In the highly divisive circumstances of the election, bitterly fought between Cumann na nGaedheal and Fianna Fáil, it is not surprising that the smaller parties and the Independents lost support.
- Fianna Fáil was now in a position to come to power with the support of **Labour**. Those who had been defeated in the Civil War a decade earlier were about to take over the running of the country. The peaceful transfer of power was a strong sign of the democratic stability and political maturity of the young Irish Free State.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What new political party was established by de Valera in May 1926 and what were its main aims?
2. What major event occurred on 10 July 1927 and how did the Cosgrave Government react?
3. Under what circumstances did Fianna Fáil enter the Dáil on 11 August 1927?
4. State two reasons why Fianna Fáil grew in popularity between 1927 and 1932.
5. What major difficulties faced the Cumann na nGaedheal Government from October 1929?
6. How did the Cumann na nGaedheal party portray Fianna Fáil during the 1932 General Election campaign?
7. What approach did Fianna Fáil take during the election?
8. Explain the significance of the results of the 1932 General Election?