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# History

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# IRELAND

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Faith &  
Fatherland in  
16th Century  
Ireland

Ideology &  
Famine relief

Sketches *from*  
The National  
Library

*Interview:*  
Joe Lee



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# History IRELAND

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Vol.3 No.2 Summer 1995

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Cover photograph

**Captain Thomas Lee**  
(d. 1594)  
by Marcus Gheeraets

(COURTESY OF THE TATE  
GALLERY, LONDON)





*An early Clann na Talmhan gathering in Athenry.*

# Clann na Talmhan

## Ireland's last farmers' party

*by Tony Varley and Peter Moser*

**T**he absence of a strong tradition of farmer parties in a country with a very substantial proportion of the workforce engaged in agriculture has long been a source of puzzlement to students of twentieth-century Irish politics. Those farmers' parties that have appeared in independent Ireland have never threatened to become majority parties nor have any of them endured to the present day. The last attempt, known to history as Clann na Talmhan, presents a little-known case in point. Two broad possibilities can be contemplated in considering the history of Clann na Talmhan: its inability to stamp its authority on the pattern of Irish politics was either the product of a hos-

tile external environment or of paralysing internal weaknesses. These two possibilities can be assessed by considering the background to Clann na Talmhan's appearance and its formative early years.

### **The Irish Farmers' Federation**

The series of attempts to build new farmer organisations from the mid-1930s can be attributed to high levels of frustration and anger in the Irish countryside. Farmer disillusionment was not just with the performance of Fianna Fáil governments; it extended to the pro-Treaty side as well. The twenty years of native government, coinciding as they did with

the post-war slump and the market dislocation of the 1930s, were seen as a period of missed opportunities and gross political mismanagement. The Leinster-centred Irish Farmers' Federation (IFF), which appeared in 1937 and built on the no-rent/rates campaign of the mid-thirties, chose to register itself as a trade union. Its aims were to unite all existing agricultural organisations and to represent their interests in collective bargaining with the state. Prominent among the IFF's concrete demands were the complete derating of all agricultural land, fixity of land tenure and the payment of minimum prices for farm produce.

The IFF, however, was to receive a very frosty reception from the Fianna

Fáil minister for agriculture, Dr. James Ryan. Its demands, in Ryan's view, had to be seen as 'political' and as having been rejected already by the electorate when it had declined in 1938 to vote the Fine Gael party, whose election manifesto contained a commitment to full derating, into office. The complete refusal not only of Ryan but of the government to yield on any of its demands tended to radicalise the IFF. In early 1939, it called for Ryan's resignation, and in April it organised a one-day demonstration and commodity strike in Dublin. On 18 November 1939 when the Association of Milk Producers, which represented about a 1,000 Leinster dairy farmers supplying fresh milk to Dublin city, ceased deliveries over a price dispute with the Department of Agriculture, the IFF quickly moved to expand the dispute into a general farm commodity strike. (A previous milk strike, in July 1936, had seen the dairymen make appreciable gains.) Irish farmers were urged to withhold their produce until the government was willing to concede the IFF's demands.

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*Members of the parliamentary party.*

### 'Political objectives by forms of intimidation'

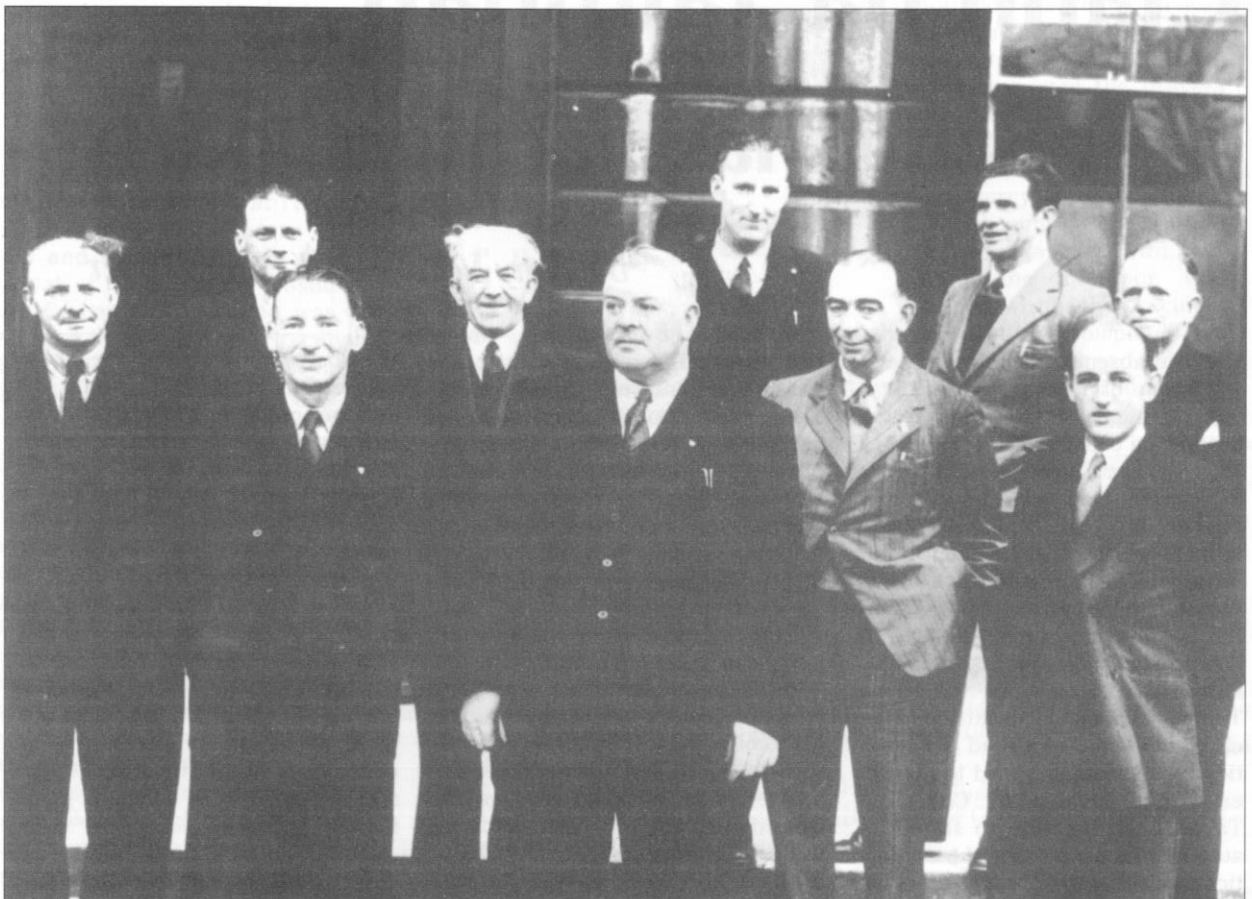
The strike, which lasted a fortnight, ended in defeat for the strikers on 2 December. On this occasion the government made no concessions, though it did promise that the question of the milk price would be considered by the milk board. Significantly, while the cabinet accepted the milk producers' claims as negotiable, it denounced the IFF's actions as an attempt to achieve 'political objectives by forms of intimidation'. Before and during the strike, use was made of the new emergency powers legislation to suppress IFF statements. Alternative milk supplies for the capital city were brought from the state-controlled dairy disposal creameries as well as from private creameries in Leinster and Munster.

The trade union and pressure group tactics used by the IFF to press its demands were effectively discredited with the collapse of the 1939 strike. Frustration at the outcome of the strike within the IFF was enormous—the County Louth IFF executive, for instance, felt 'chased away by Dr. Ryan like small boys'. The major underlying problem facing

the IFF was that while it could count on limited support in Leinster and Munster, it had never succeeded in reaching the mass of farmers all over the country. Because they did not share the demand for full derating of agricultural land, important organisations like the Irish Sugar Beet Growers' Association (which, incidentally, had been promised higher beet prices by the government for the following year during the strike!) and Clann na Talmhan did not support the strike.

### Clann na Talmhan

The founding meeting of Clann na Talmhan had taken place on 29 June 1939 when delegates from fourteen counties gathered at Athenry, County Galway, in the wake of the breakdown of unification talks between the IFF and representatives of organised farming interests in Connacht on the derating issue. While the IFF continued to hold out for full derating, the western view was that the largest farmers should not be relieved of all their rate-paying obligations. Were this to happen, indirect taxation would inevitably increase and small farmers and work-



ers would find themselves appreciably worse off. According to the sliding scale advocated by the westerners, only the first £20 of poor law valuation should be fully derated.

As much as the leadership of the new western movement accepted that unity between the different farming groups was desirable in principle, it was equally recognised that western farmers had different interests. Very early on the leading western farmer activists came under pressure to distance themselves from the 'big farmers' policy of the IFF. Thus, after commencing negotiations to form a single national farmers' organisation, Michael Donnellan (Clann na Talmhan's first leader) and his closest associates were denounced for having gone "skylarking" with the lords of the pale and other gentlemen farmers'.

### Grassroots movement

The agrarian movement that was to take off in Connacht, however, represented much more than a loosely-organised anti-government force. By 1943 Clann na Talmhan had become a dynamic and densely organised grassroots movement, many of whose leaders had been active in Fianna Fáil. Its rhetoric was anti-establishment and populist, stressing the importance of and seeking to restore a sense of dignity to 'the man who lives and works on the land'. At wartime rallies—enlivened by marching bands, enormous crowds and passionately delivered speeches—politicians, financiers, produce processors (especially the bacon curers) and farm input suppliers (such as fertiliser merchants) were roundly condemned as parasitic elements in society. Most of all, blame for the bad state of affairs in the countryside was laid at the door of politicians. A flavour of the distaste for politicians and other establishment figures is well conveyed in Michael Donnellan's suggestion, at a Dunmore rally in 1942, that

You could take all the TDs, all the senators, all the ministers and members of the judiciary and all the other nice fellows and dump

them off Clare Island into the broad Atlantic. Still, Ireland would succeed. But without the workers and producers the country would starve in twenty-four hours.

At the same time, given the IFF's failure to make progress with pressure group and trade union/strike tactics, the problem for Clann na Talmhan was that it had no choice, if it wished to bring about the change it so earnestly desired, but to involve itself directly in the political process.

central dynamic of party competition in the post-independent state, had to be rejected and resisted. 'No working farmer', Donnellan announced in March 1940, 'can afford to have political differences with his neighbour. Politics are not for us; they are no use to us'.

### 'Rotten party system'

On top of their other grievances, the state's refusal to involve farm organisations sufficiently in the consultative process which was expanded during the war, served to push them further into the arena of party politics. And the big success in some local elections in 1942—farmers won control of the Roscommon and Kerry county councils—kindled hopes in Clann na Talmhan circles of being able to break the stranglehold of the 'rotten party system', in the general election that had to be called by June 1943.

In Leinster, where members of the IFF had set up the National Agricultural Party in 1942, leading figures like Patrick Cogan, the independent TD from Wicklow, became ever more convinced that a merger between Clann na Talmhan and the National Agricultural Party was a pre-condition for any electoral breakthrough at national level. In the interests of 'unity' and with the general election drawing closer, there was now a greater willingness in Leinster to accept the differentiated derating policy of Clann na Talmhan.

A fresh round of unification meetings in the early months of 1943 culminated in the long hoped-for merger and a new organisation called 'Clann na Talmhan - The National Agricultural Party', led by Michael Donnellan and Patrick Cogan (deputy leader), came into being. Minimum prices for agricultural produce, a tillage subsidy and a reduction of higher public sector salaries were prominent elements in the programme of the new Clann na Talmhan.

## Clann na Talmhan Farmers' Party

FARMERS AND WORKERS—

YOU are the majority of the people. YOU can control the destiny of the country. YOU can secure your own and your children's future IF YOU ORGANISE NOW BY JOINING CLANN NA TALMHAN, YOUR OWN PARTY.

From Davitt and the Land League to the Tillage Campaign of the present, the FARMER has saved the country. What have you got for your victories?—NOTHING—but Poverty, Slavery and Emigration. Politicians and Job-hunters have given you these. TAKE CONTROL YOURSELVES, and free the country from the Blight of the Place-hunter and the Politician.

GIVE YOURSELVES Economic Prices, Afforestation, Better Land Division, Organised Sea Fishing, Increased Old Age Pensions, Family Allowances, Unemployment Assistance till all have Work.

SMASH THE RACKETEERS AND POLITICIANS  
GIVE THE COUNTRY BACK TO THE PEOPLE  
VOTE FOR THE FARMERS' CANDIDATES.  
SUPPORT

**McCormick and O'Hara**

Issued by P. J. HENNIGAN, B.A., LL.B., Solicitor, Election Agent for Clann Na Talmhan Candidates, and printed by the "Western People," Ballina.

Although Clann na Talmhan was to contest a Galway West by-election in 1940, it nonetheless emphasised that it was a 'non-political' organisation. By this was understood two things in particular: that organised farmers should aspire to build a vocational party and that any strategy of playing politics, in the sense of taking sides and putting party concerns before the national interest, should be firmly avoided. The entrenched bitterness between Treatyites and anti-Treatyites that had become a

## 1943 general election

Clann na Talmhan won ten seats in the general election of June 1943, although some of its five TDs outside Connacht were answerable to their county executives in the first instance. Fianna Fáil's representation in the then 138-member Dáil dropped by ten seats, Fine Gael's by thirteen. In all, fifteen seats were lost to farmer candidates, five standing as independents and the balance identifying with Clann na Talmhan. The outcome of the election—no party had won an overall majority—left the farmer deputies holding the balance of power. In line with their 'non-political' stance, the farmers' preference was for an all-party national government, but Fianna Fáil rejected this option as a ploy by a visibly declining Fine Gael to return to power. The alternative—an alliance with Fine Gael—was considered too dangerous. The earlier Farmers' Party and National Centre Party had both been drawn into the orbit of the leading pro-Treaty party never to appear again.

In the end, and so as to avoid another Emergency election, it was decided that it was in the national interest to allow the largest party, Fianna Fáil, form a government but

### *A Mayo branch on the march.*



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## CLANN NA TALMHAN IS YOUR HOPE OF PROSPERITY. SUPPORT IT!

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to oppose anything likely to damage agriculture. Michael Donnellan's 'courtesy call' on de Valera before the Dáil met on 1 July was the cause of much speculation that Clann na Talmhan and Fianna Fáil had concluded some pact. Shortly afterwards the new farmers' party was to be bitterly attacked by the other opposition parties in the Dáil for abstaining in the votes to elect a Taoiseach and approve the new government, especially after both Donnellan and Cogan had so spiritedly denounced Ryan's performance since 1932 as minister for agriculture.

### Lack of unity

The formal unification between Clann na Talmhan and the National Agricultural Party in 1943, it quickly became clear, would never qualify as a marriage made in heaven. The signs were there from the start that it would not provide an enduring basis for transcending the differ-

ences between the Leinster large farm interest and that of the west of Ireland smallholder. Party meetings were frequently stormy affairs and a change of leadership occurred after the 1944 election (the party marginally increased its share of the vote but lost a seat). The underlying strength of the westerners was demonstrated by the replacement of Donnellan as party leader by a Mayo large farmer, Joseph Blowick.

Tension between the principle of fixity of tenure dear to the hearts of IFF members and the western call for more land redistribution had always existed. A major split was to occur around this issue in 1946 when Patrick Cogan withdrew after a protest at a farm auction in south Mayo led to two of the party's Mayo TDs being incarcerated for a month in Sligo jail. The difficulties of representing the interests of all farmers were again to be highlighted in 1951 when the government's treatment of milk producers caused further defection.

### Decline

By then Clann na Talmhan may have been a member of the first inter-party government, but its star no longer burned brightly. Indeed, its electoral support had almost halved in 1948, and the same grassroots



*An election meeting in North Mayo.*

energy that had marked its appearance in the west in the early 1940s was now a thing of the past. What remained were essentially the personal electoral machines of the handful of remaining TDs. These were to receive a lease of life from the benefits of participation in the 1948-51 and 1954-7 coalition governments but, increasingly identified with a reviving Fine Gael, Clann na Talmhan continued to fade away as the 1950s wore on. In the eyes of the new breed of farmer activists that were to organise Macra na Feirme, the Irish Creamery Milk Suppliers' Association and the National Farmers' Association in the 1940s and '50s, Clann na Talmhan's career had to be read as the final proof of the bankruptcy of direct involvement in party politics as a political strategy for Irish farmers.

### Conclusion

Was Clann na Talmhan's inability to achieve anything like major party status to be attributed to internal or external factors? The most plausible interpretation suggests an interaction of both. For one thing, the differentiation of the Irish farming population by size, region, and production

specialism came to reproduce itself within the party in a way that created abiding and ultimately self-destructive sources of tension and instability. Similarly, the history of attempts to build a cross-class political alliance between Irish farmers bears witness to the immense difficulty of putting together and sustaining a viable farmers' party across the Treaty split divide. The fact that the political allegiance of the bulk of the electorate had already been pledged to one or other of the two main nationalist parties (each of which claimed to represent and to be concerned with the welfare of the Irish farmer) was something that lay beyond the ability of Clann na Talmhan, and its precursors in the 1920s and '30s, to alter fundamentally.

Yet another element in the adverse external environment facing Clann na Talmhan was the hostility of Fianna Fáil governments. At the close of the nineteenth century the political organisation of German and Swiss farmers was welcomed by ruling politicians as a means of preserving or reinforcing values and institutions threatened by rapid industrialisation. Circumstances were very different in southern Ireland during the 1930s. Here industrialisation had scarcely commenced and it was not at all clear whether the experiment

of import-substituting manufacturing would be a success. Practically, regardless of their demands, the challenge posed by organised farmers could easily be read in ruling party circles as striking at the heart of the state's development project.

*Tony Varley lectures in political science and sociology at University College Galway. Peter Moser is a Swiss historian and writer.*

### Further reading:

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