

# Politics and Democracy in Fingal, 1924-39



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# Politics and Democracy in Fingal, 1924-39



Saorstát Éireann  
Logo on Pot box.  
Image courtesy of  
Dr Decla Brady.

The early years of Irish independence were characterised by the government's need to build and consolidate the new Irish Free State, against attempts by local politicians in Fingal to maintain their political independence and influence. Political division and personal animosity born in the divisions of the Civil War of 1922-23, political and administrative competition between centre and periphery, national and local government, and the unresolved issues of poverty, class inequality and the land question dominated.

The Local Government Act of 1898 established the local authority bodies of Dublin County Council and its subsidiary bodies Balrothery and North Dublin Rural District Councils (RDC), which gave the nationalist political class in Fingal a political platform, meaningful public representation and the influence and power that came with an increased management of local administration.

The convulsions of the First World War and of the revolutionary period dramatically changed the nature and substance of local government funding, representation and its relationship with the national administration. Independence brought a new dynamic to this changed relationship for political life in Fingal, coming to terms with the costs and legacies of war and revolution.

The local political leaders of Sinn Féin after 1917, Frank Lawless and M. J. Derham, did not live long enough to advance their influence or power. Both had died unexpectedly in accidents by 1923.

The 1920s under the Cosgrave government were challenging in Fingal, where the new normality was poverty for many and economic stagnation and struggle for most.

The division between the centre and the periphery in the administration of local government remained, at times elevating itself to threats of dissolution of the local councils. Local politics was dominated by funding and cutbacks. The arrival of a more substantial opposition when Fianna Fáil entered the Dáil after 1927, sharpened political discourse and elevated the agrarian economic issues of agricultural rating, annuities and tariffs. Local council politics split into government and anti-government groups which pitted ratepayers against workers interests.



Local government was a visible and tangible legacy of British rule that delivered modest but undeniable improvements in living standards for the people of Fingal in public health, sanitation, housing, welfare provision and local representation. It was the gateway to political influence before independence, the reality and only experience of government for many. It was their local democracy. It facilitated a modest access to local power and influence, and for some, entry to the national political stage. The reforms of the 1920s were taking some of that away, and with it changing the nature of Fingal local politics.



Frank Lawless  
This image is reproduced courtesy  
of the National Library of Ireland.

Left: Balrothery RDC Water pump,  
Bridge Street, Swords.  
Image courtesy of Dr Declan Brady.



The Graveside at Frank  
Lawless Funeral.  
This image is reproduced  
courtesy of RTÉ Archives.

# Building a Free State: challenges for local government in Fingal, 1924-25

Local politics in Fingal during the War of Independence was characterised primarily by the crucial role played by both elected members and staff on local bodies such as Dublin County Council and Balrothery Board of Guardians and Rural District Council (RDC) in the usurpation of the British administrative structures of local government.

The old Home Rule elite were replaced in the 1920 elections by the new Sinn Féin controlled councils with single-minded members who declared allegiance to Dáil Éireann and its military and political strategy to achieve independence. In breaking with the Local Government Board (LGB), the local authorities lost their funding grants, risked litigation over the diversion of rates, and put themselves in danger of arrest or injury by withholding documents and records from the Crown forces during raids and searches.

The members of Dublin County Council and Balrothery and North Dublin RDCs took on considerable personal risk in declaring allegiance to the Dáil and played a crucial role in legitimising the claims for independence, usurping the authority of the LGB, diverting the rates and subjecting themselves to military harassment. These sacrifices were even more commendable, when viewed against the increasingly disdainful attitude of W. T. Cosgrave and Kevin O'Higgins towards local politicians and local government.

For the Cumann na nGaedheal government, securing and building the new Free State necessitated comprehensive local government structural reforms and greater central governance. There was a widely held perception that political corruption was prevalent at local level with excessive spending and an unwieldy network of inefficient structures supporting a dependency culture. The new national political elite were suspicious of the communitarian ties and vested interests of potentially troublesome adversaries among local councillors. Reforms threatened local political power and influence and generated considerable tension. Council politics reflected this, the economic and social challenges of the decade and the disappointments that independence did not deliver all that was expected.

As Dublin County Council became the main forum for discourse, the influence of the rural district councils receded. The lack of locally based Dáil representation became an important dimension of the frustration of Fingal politics and elevated the importance of that council as a forum for any local discourse.

Agrarian unrest re-emerged and unemployment and poverty issues began to dominate both within and outside the local government chambers.

The political environment in 1924 was not an easy one for local authorities as government patience with underperforming county and district councils ran thin. The Department of Local Government called for swifter collection of the rates, reductions in staff bonuses, a review of pension payments and general economies across all council expenditure.

Local councillors had justification in fearing for their political futures. Several local authorities had been dissolved due to financial difficulties or political problems, and government appointed commissioners or administrators were installed in their place, including Dublin and Cork Corporations and fifteen council bodies.

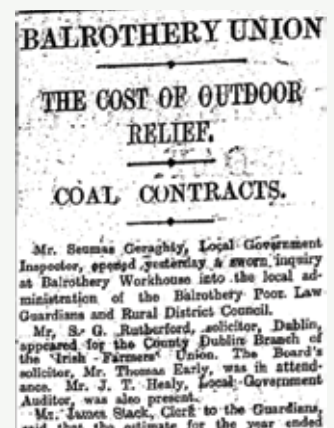
There was no united resistance to the imminent reform of local government, as councils were divided between ratepayer, farmer and business interests on the one hand, generally government supporters, and those representing workers' interests and welfare on the other. One side wanted to spend less, the other more. Political dissension and disagreement became commonplace on Dublin County Council with opportunities to defend or attack government policies exploited by the opposing groups.

The Local Government Act 1925 abolished rural district councils as administrative units and replaced boards of guardians with boards of health and assistance but was postponed in Dublin until 1930. The gradual process of the effective dissolution of Balrothery RDC continued. When the results of the 1925 local elections were declared, only six of the twenty-three councillors at the first meeting of the new Dublin County Council represented the north county area. A quarter of a century earlier, at the first elections in 1898 a third of the councillors were based in the Fingal area. Population changes reduced the area of direct representation to four seats.



11 Parnell Square (formerly Rutland Square) where Dublin County Council had their offices and Council Chamber from 1901 to 1975 when they moved to 46-49 Upper O'Connell Street.

Image courtesy of Fingal Local Studies and Archives.



Balrothery Union *The Irish Times* 2 May 1925.

Courtesy of The Irish Times Newspaper.



Balrothery Board of Guardians and Staff c1925.

This image is reproduced courtesy of Ms Bernadette Marks, Swords Heritage.

# Unemployment and poverty: class politics in Fingal, 1926-30

Over the winter of 1925-26, agricultural depression and reduced produce prices exacerbated the unemployment problem in Fingal with renewed calls for road work schemes to alleviate distress for agricultural labourers. Unemployed groups seeking a hearing led Dublin County Council to seek police attendance at their meetings in Rutland Square.

The County Dublin Farmers Association (C.D.F.A.) now gave its support to work schemes, provided roadmen's wages did not exceed those of the agricultural labourers. The ideological divide between the free market policies of central government and the desire of the councils to fund and support employment initiatives played out on the roads of Fingal. The attitudes of those in government were well documented:

**'People reared in workhouses are no great acquisition to human society. As a rule, their highest aim is to live at the expense of the ratepayers'.**

- W. T. Cosgrave, writing to Austin Stack, May 1921

**'I think we were probably the most conservative-minded revolutionaries that ever put through a successful revolution'.**

- Kevin O'Higgins, Dáil Éireann, March 1923

**'The number of people who lead a parasitic existence was increasing relative to the number of people who were striving to make an honest living'.**

- James A. Burke, Minister for Local Government, Dáil Éireann, June 1924

Unemployment grew worse. When 200 unemployed married men, mostly from Swords, turned up at a meeting at Balrothery Workhouse in June 1926, some of the guardians felt intimidated. P. J. Fogarty warned of revolution like that in Poland if the 'slowly starving men' did not receive support. The view in government and among the higher civil service was that local government was inefficient and profligate, and it was their mission to eliminate every issue of waste. Balrothery RDC was unable to secure bank loans other than from the National Land Bank. This bank, working in close contact with the government, continued to refuse loans for any works not sanctioned by the department.

Council relations with the government got worse, as the government centralised recruitment and procurement with Minister for Justice, Kevin O'Higgins, suggesting that 'nepotism, logrolling [cronyism], and corruption in the matter of public appointments' was the reason for the legislation. Councillors rejected the allegations and labelled the department 'a dictatorship'.

The 1927 general election was fought over local as much as national issues. Patrick Belton began the campaign as an Independent Nationalist but was elected a T.D. for Fianna Fáil. He was the only T.D. representing the Fingal area.

When Kevin O'Higgins was killed in Dublin on Sunday 10 July 1927, the government responded with the Public Safety Act that strengthened police powers but also forced Fianna Fáil to take or concede their seats. Belton was expelled from Fianna Fáil as he took his seat early to vote against an annuities bill. W. T. Cosgrave called a second election in September, which increased the Cumann na nGaedheal government majority. However, the parliamentary dynamic changed, and the scrutiny of the opposition intensified.

Locally, the Department of Local Government & Public Health now increased the pressure on the councils to balance their books and control expenditure, while within the council the political argument over expenditure intensified. It was impossible to resolve to the satisfaction of all the aggrieved parties. Reducing the rates burden for farmers meant reducing expenditure and thus reducing supports and reliefs for the working class. No central increased central funding or relief measures were forthcoming.

By December 1927, large groups of unemployed men regularly walked to the Balrothery Workhouse boardroom to make a case to the councillors and guardians attending their regular fortnightly council meeting and families in distress sought to occupy rooms in the now abandoned Balrothery workhouse. The area had over twice the national average in receipt of home assistance relief. Following a series of stand-offs over funding, Balrothery RDC was suspended by the government in May 1929 and abolished a year later.



Balrothery Workhouse in ruins. Benton/Curtis Collection. Courtesy of Fingal Local Studies and Archives.



Patrick Belton  
This image is reproduced courtesy of the National Library of Ireland



The elected members of Fianna Fáil, 1927. Patrick Belton is seventh from right in the middle row.

This image is reproduced courtesy of the National Library of Ireland.



Election Literature for P. J. Curran.

This image is reproduced courtesy of the National Library of Ireland.



Road workers in Saggart, County Dublin.

Courtesy of the Mary Mcally Collection at South Dublin Libraries.

# Land Questions and Agrarian Issues



The protest at Hilltown Farm in Swords.  
*Irish Independent* 19 April 1929.  
Courtesy of the Irish Newspaper Archives.

Patrick Belton's growing national public profile encouraged his enthusiasm to become involved in a new farmers' organisation, the Agricultural League, founded in 1928. This was a non-party group established to prioritise increased food production in Ireland and thus attract smallholders and labourers to their ranks. This was a threat to the more conservative Irish Farmers Union, and their president Richard Butler, Skerries, who were seen to be too close to the Cumann na nGaedheal government and its policy favouring livestock exports.

## The Mrs Menton Case 1929

In 1929, an episode unfolded near Swords, County Dublin that reprised the events and rhetoric of the days of the Land War of 1879-82. It illustrated the agrarian class structures, networks and divisions that still competed for advantage in independent Ireland, and of the double standards, opportunism and unending land hunger that existed at every level. Newspapers reported in dramatic terms a protest at the 150-acre Hilltown Farm at Brackenstown in Swords against the eviction of Mrs Margaret Menton, a widow with nine children. The Land Commission, in disposing of the Staples estate, had secured an ejectment order against the tenant Mrs Menton. Patrick Belton and P. J. Kettle, invoking the rhetoric of the Land War, organised a group of one hundred farmers with sixty ploughs and threatened to plough part of the farm in defiance of both Gardaí and the court order. Belton alleged the collusion of the Land Commission with the adjacent landholder, Harry Ussher of Brackenstown House, a racehorse trainer, accusing him of grabbing the farm for use as horse gallops.

Mrs Menton did not live at Hilltown but at Blackhall Place in Dublin City, where she ran the extensive and successful dairying business inherited from her husband when he died in 1925. Eight of the nine Menton children were at boarding school, the two boys at the prestigious Clongowes Wood College. The farm at Swords, with 200 dairy cows, was part of a wider lease and closer to 200 acres in total, in addition to another 100 acres at Santry. Mrs Menton was already the recipient of over £7,000 in land purchase loans under previous land acts and limited to £3,000 under the 1923 Land Act. She was only entitled to that part of it for which £3,000 would be forthcoming in loan advances, and declined the compensation offered for the balance. The Land Commission delayed its decision for six weeks, but Mrs Menton was still the registered leaseholder when she died in 1956.

## Farmers' Issues: Rates & Annuities

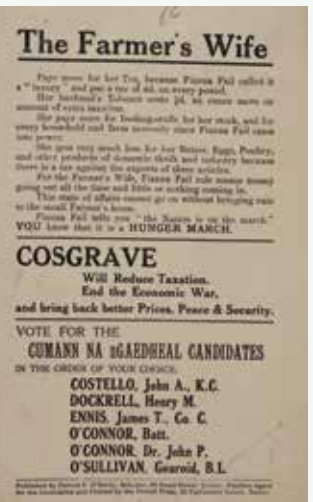
When agricultural land in the Britain was fully de-rated in 1928, there were calls for similar legislation to be enacted in Ireland. By 1930, as momentum gathered in the campaign for protectionist tariffs and a moratorium on annuity payments, de-rating was included in the range of demands and farmers' grievances. These issues were exploited by Fianna Fáil in the 1932 general election and continued to be farmers' issues that Patrick Belton pursued well into the 1930s. Land redistribution was only a concern to the landless and unviable smallholders.

De Valera kept his promise to withhold the payment of land annuities to the British government, starting a trade war which lasted six years, especially hitting the mainstay export of live cattle. The Irish authorities still collected the annuities but retained them in Ireland, and farmers found themselves losing export markets, but still having to pay annuities and rates.

Late in 1932, Patrick Belton and John Rooney from Lusk helped establish the National Farmers and Ratepayers Association. Although divided from the outset, between militants and moderates, the political and the apolitical, it quickly absorbed the ailing Irish Farmers Union. When the Dublin branch was set up, the prominence of the Blueshirts was notable. The Farmers and Ratepayers League was ultimately absorbed into Fine Gael. While the 1933 Land Act introduced some reliefs, it did not go far enough for Patrick Belton.



P.J. Kettle pictured at a farmers' meeting, April 1937.  
*Irish Independent* 5 April 1937.  
Courtesy of the Irish Newspaper Archives.



A 1933 Cumann na nGaedheal election campaign leaflet for the county Dublin constituency specifically targeted at farmers and mentioning the Anglo-Irish Trade War.

This image is reproduced courtesy of the National Library of Ireland.



Mrs Margaret Menton.  
Image courtesy of the Menton Family

# Council Politics



Edward P. McCarron  
the *Irish Independent*  
11 September 1925.  
Courtesy of the Irish  
Newspaper Archives.

In 1929, Joseph A. O'Neill was re-elected as chairman of Dublin County Council. Colm Lawless, son of Frank, became the new chairman of Balrothery RDC, following his father and grandfather into local government. In April, J. V. Lawless resigned as secretary to Dublin County Council, following the initiation of criminal proceedings by the secretary of the department, E. P. McCarron over alleged irregularities in the retention of fees relating to the preparation of voters' lists in 1923.

They represented two different political traditions in Ireland: Lawless a republican who fought in the struggle for independence, McCarron a career civil servant who had fulfilled his duties to the constitutional administrations before and after independence. After a series of court cases, retrials and appeals, Lawless was convicted in 1931. Dublin County Council declined to pay his pension, and he dedicated himself to working for the welfare of the Old Fingal I.R.A. McCarron was dismissed in 1936, following a disagreement with the minister Seán T. O'Kelly.

The Local Government (Dublin) Act, 1930 abolished the rural district councils and transferred their functions to the county council. The former unionist townships transferred to the city or the new Dun Laoghaire borough, which remained part of Dublin County Council. Rural and poorer Fingal still had to compete with the affluent coastal suburbs of south Dublin, and a fear of annexation by the city.

The new council of 1930 was evenly divided, between government and anti-government groups with farmers representative, John J. Shiel, elected chairman. Only seven members represented regional Fingal interests but included the three most spirited and forceful members: P. J. Curran (Labour), Patrick Belton and P. J. Fogarty (Fianna Fáil). If Fingal lacked a voice in the Dáil, it certainly did not on Dublin County Council. A highly personalised and vitriolic rivalry developed between Fogarty and Belton, who dominated proceedings. Belton's priorities were economic, accusing Fogarty of always reverting to some matter of principle on patriotism or republicanism.

## De Valera comes to Power 1932

On election De Valera suspended the Public Safety Act, abolished of the oath of allegiance, withheld land annuities, introduced protective tariffs and merged the office of governor-general with that of the president. In his maiden speech in the Dáil, P. J. Curran articulated the priorities of many ordinary voters, more concerned with the 'unfortunate worker trying to feed a wife and six children on a ten-shilling food ticket and looking for work', than with the oath. He lost his seat in the 1933 election, when Belton regained his.

Fianna Fáil's ascent to power gave confidence to their minority party presence on Dublin County Council as the chamber increasingly became a divided political forum. They reflected the challenges to democracy that Ireland faced in the 1930s, from various political or economic discontent, including the Blueshirts, the I.R.A., right- and left-wing fringe groups and Christian crusade movements. Patrick Belton was involved in some of these groups, markedly the Blueshirts, which served to exaggerate their presence in Fingal.

## Divisions, diversions and Belton's crusades, 1933-38

The 1934 local elections returned another finely divided council but a stormy seven-hour meeting elected Patrick Belton as chairman, a position he held until 1938. Excluded by the numbers from the committees, the Fianna Fáil councillors proceeded thereafter to be as obstructive as possible.

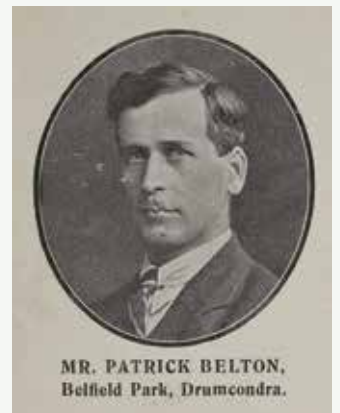
Following Eoin O'Duffy's resignation as leader of Fine Gael in September 1934, Belton maintained his contact with the Blueshirts and the County Dublin Farmers Association, building a more overtly political network of families and farming organisations in Fingal.

The council was divided by the priorities of farmers against workers, unemployment assistance against agricultural grants and annuity arrears. By 1935 the media were more concerned with the 'dangers of communism and where it lurked in Ireland'.

The outbreak of the Spanish civil war in 1936 presented an opportunity for the diehards around O'Duffy to reactivate their ideological cause and a platform for some to pursue political crusades. Patrick Belton and the Irish Christian Front were at the forefront of this in Fingal. They had such strong support from large farmers that some feared it was another front for the Blueshirts and Fine Gael, and so its members were referred to as 'the Blueshirts in tweed'.



J. P. Fogarty with the Fingallians  
Football Team 1932 (front left in coat).  
Courtesy of Fingallians GAA Club.



Patrick Belton as pictured on Cumann na nGaedheal election literature for Dublin City North in 1933.

This image is reproduced courtesy of the National Library of Ireland.



James V. Lawless.  
Courtesy of Fingal Local Studies  
and Archives.

# Counting the costs of the 1930s

De Valera's dismantling of the Anglo-Irish Treaty was boosted by the abdication crisis in Britain in 1936, paving the way for a new constitution in 1937. Negotiations with the British ended the economic war in 1938, returned the treaty ports and ended annuity payments for a one-off consideration of £10m. The economic war had only marginally reduced dependency on the British market and allowed a modest development of Irish industry and agriculture based on import substitution and government intervention. Social policy finally included the disadvantaged, and livestock exports, while still the biggest sector was no longer dominated economic policy.

The economic war fostered a sense of national unity against Britain, but at a considerable sacrifice to large farmers and some international trading business. Consumer prices rose, and unemployment and emigration soared since 1932. Self-sufficiency in agriculture and protectionism in industry only worked to the point of home market saturation and then stagnated. Ireland's dependency on Britain as an export market and emigration destination remained.

P. J. Fogarty regularly raised questions regarding the redistribution of grazing lands in north Fingal, as the land question continued to be a popular cause for politicians to make political capital and gain electoral advantage. In 1938, as the chairman of the Balbriggan Town Commissioners, he suggested that it should abolish itself and transfer all its responsibilities to Dublin County Council to save money.

## Dublin Airport

In January 1937 building commenced on a new airport at the former R.A.F. site at Collinstown, near Swords. Expected to cost £150,000 and employ about 500 men over eighteen months, it was half funded by the government, the balance by Dublin Corporation (38.5%) and Dublin County Council. At the outset, there were industrial relations problems with rumours that local men employed on ground clearance work were underpaid, at 29s. per week. By May, a strike halted the works, ending with the reinstatement of the men at 42s. per week after Dublin County Council threatened to withhold its contribution. Councillors had little to lose as the airport work had deprived some of them of their farm labourers, with the ratepayers now footing unemployment assistance for the striking men. There was further disruption when union tradesmen refused to work with the local non-union labourers.

P. J. Fogarty and Gerard McGowan (Labour) were elected in the 1937 general election, at the expense of Patrick Belton, in a reduced five seat constituency. Belton won his seat back in the snap election of 1938. McGowan warned in the Dáil of industrial issues when site clearance finished and raised persistent complaints about the number of 'Cork and Kerry accents' heard on site, highlighting that the parliamentary secretary for the department responsible for building the airport was a Cork T.D. When the main contractor started, most of the local men were laid off.

Even a positive development like the airport construction was not without its challenges in the closed labour market of the late 1930s. Apart from future employment opportunities, the immediate vicinity benefitted from infrastructure linked to the airport including roads upgrades and water schemes.



Laying the turf sods for the grass runway at Dublin Airport, 1936.  
Image courtesy of Dublin Airport Authority.



Dublin Airport 1930s.  
Courtesy of Fingal Local Studies and Archives.

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# Fingal Local Studies and Archives

Fingal Local Studies & Archives collect, preserve and make available historic records relating to Fingal and Dublin generally. The collections are an important resource for the study of local history comprising photographs, postcards, ephemera, maps, artwork and an extensive printed collection of local history books, periodicals, directories and reference works.

The Archives contains records of local government in County Dublin from 1775 to the present day along with a variety of private and estate papers. The service is available to anyone interested in local, social or family history. All researchers are welcome and queries can be made by phone, post or e-mail.

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Balrothery Workhouse in ruins.  
Benton/Curtis Collection.  
Courtesy of Fingal Local Studies and Archives.