

The 1924 By-Election in Limerick

JOAN DEMPSEY

The by-election campaign to fill the vacancy caused by the resignation of one of the sitting T.D.s for Limerick in 1924 is analysed and discussed. Only two candidates contested for the vacant seat and the dominant issue was the Treaty. The direct involvement of many diocesan priests is emphasised.

The Cumann na nGaedheal deputy for Limerick, then a seven-seat constituency encompassing both the city and county, Dr Richard Hayes resigned his Dáil seat in January 1924. He had always been a reluctant politician and had decided to concentrate on his medical practice in Dublin and pursue his interest in historical research and writing. The writ for the resultant by-election was issued on 11 May with close of nominations six days later, and Election Day on 28 May. This short timescale resulted in a flurry of political activity in Limerick. The anti-treaty Republican Party had moved quickly after the resignation of Hayes. They had their candidate Tadhg Crowley, a merchant from Ballylanders, on the field by 15 February. A veteran of the War of Independence, it was anticipated Crowley would increase the republican vote of 26.38 per cent which the party had received at the general election of 1923. On that occasion there were twenty candidates contesting the seven seats. This time with the prospect of some of the smaller parties such as the Farmers' Party not contesting the seat, the Republican Party hoped to obtain these vital extra votes.

Four candidates went before the selection convention of the Government pro-treaty party, now called Cumann na nGaedheal, on 23 April. They were Patrick Walsh, Cappamore, John A. Smyth, Hospital, Richard O'Connell, Caherconlish and David Hannigan, based in Dublin. Like Crowley, these men were all from East Limerick and all including Hannigan, had been with the East Limerick Flying Column Brigade during the War of Independence. On a secret ballot Richard O'Connell was chosen. After his selection, he was formally proposed to contest the seat on behalf of Cumann na nGaedheal by Rev. Michael Hayes, curate in Newcastle West, a brother of retired deputy Richard Hayes and seconded by Rev. Patrick Coleman, curate in Glin.¹

The returning officer for the election was Benjamin K. Lucas, sub-sheriff for the county. Formal documentation from the two candidates and their supporters was presented to him at the county courthouse on Saturday 17 May, the closing date for nominations. Richard O'Connell had as his proposer Fr Hayes and he was seconded by John A. Smyth, Rathanny, Knockainey. He also had seventy-five endorsements of which eleven were from Catholic priests, based throughout the city and county: Rev. J. O'Carroll, C.C., St John's, Rev. John Lee, P.P., Kilfinane, Rev. Stephen Connolly, C.C., St John's, Very Rev. Patrick Canon Lee, P.P., Newcastle West, Very Rev. Patrick Canon Godfrey, P.P., Cappamore, Archdeacon O'Shea, P.P., Kilmallock, Rev. P. Wolfe, C.C., Kilmallock, Rev. Patrick Coleman, C.C., Glin, Rev. P. V. Higgins, C.C., Kilfinane, Rev. William Dwane,

¹ *Irish Times*, 24 April 1924.

Adm. St Michael's and Rev. Patrick J. Thornhill, C.C., St Michael's. Three women were included, Bridget Conway, Ballynabanogue, Catherine Dempsey, Ballinroche and Margaret Ryan (Mahony) Doon.²

Crowley, the Republican Party candidate, also had some support from the clergy: his assenters were Rev. Thomas Wall, C.C., Shanagolden (brother of Sean Wall, Chairman of Limerick County Council who had been killed by crown forces at Annacarty, County Tipperary in May 1921). Among his fifty named supporters was Rev. Cornelius O'Sullivan, C.C., Monegay. He was proposed by Kate O'Callaghan, widow of Michael O'Callaghan, one of the 'murdered Mayors' who had been killed in March 1921, and seconded by Madge Daly, sister of Ned Daly executed in 1916.

Prior to the first week of May very little electioneering took place in the city or county. Key personnel of both Cumann na nGaedheal and the Republican Party were involved in backroom organisational work ensuring their supporters in every corner of the constituency were ready to canvass, attend public meetings and rallies. Three extremely busy weeks followed for the candidates and their supporters. The 1924 by-election was a two horse race and this resulted in a robust campaign with verbal and at times physical abuse between the supporters of both candidates. Apart from the personalities of the two candidates, the issue up for decision was simply 'pro' or 'anti' treaty and this was the only subject discussed throughout the campaign.

The election brought all the political 'big guns' of the time to Limerick. On the Pro-Treaty side Desmond Fitzgerald Minister for External Affairs, Eoin MacNeill Minister for Education, Kevin O'Higgins Minister for Home Affairs, Patrick Hogan Minister for Agriculture and General Richard Mulcahy were some of the principal speakers at rallies throughout the constituency while people like Countess Markievicz and Sean T. O'Kelly came to support the Republican candidate. Mulcahy was then a backbencher having resigned as Minister for Defence in March due to the 'army mutiny' incident.

There were rallies held at every town, village and crossroads. One of the interesting aspects of this campaign is the scant coverage given by the Limerick newspapers to the issues at stake or even to reports of attendance at meetings and rallies. This is in sharp contrast to *The Cork Examiner* which gave extensive coverage to the platform parties for both candidates at each rally. It also gave detailed reports on the speakers and the attitude adopted by the people who stood to listen to the after-Mass rallies throughout the rural part of the constituency.

By the first week in May, Tadhg Crowley had a well organised political machine throughout the county. His campaign started with a meeting in Newcastle West on 9 May, which was addressed by a man named O'Leary from Dublin who suggested somewhat implausibly that in advocating support for Crowley he was carrying out instructions given to him by Pádraig Pearse in 1916. At the same venue Michael Walsh also from Dublin attacked the Treaty, claiming that its 'perverted thinking' had done incalculable harm to the cause of Ireland, leaving 'the country ravaged, land confiscated and the inheritance of the people seized and parcelled out'.³ Similar sentiments were expressed at Republican meetings held in Castlemahon, Caherline, Caherconlish, Castleconnell, Croom, Kilfinane and Kilmeedy. The main speakers were the candidate himself, Annie McSwiney, sister of Terence McSwiney, the Lord Mayor of Cork who had died on hunger strike in 1920, Eamonn Hennessy, republican director of elections and Sean Lemass,

² *Ibid.*, 19 May 1924.

³ *Cork Examiner*, 10 May 1924.

Dublin, who all reiterated the wish to restore unity throughout the country and 'defend the republic against all enemies foreign and domestic'.⁴

The supporters of Richard O'Connell organised numerous private meetings through the constituency with monster public meetings on Sunday 11 May at Kilmallock, Hospital and Kilfinane. Dr Eoin Mac Neill, Minister for Education addressed these gatherings. He reminded the crowd that Richard O'Connell was selected by a representative group of Limerick men and not imposed by any outside body, thereby implying that Crowley had been selected by Dublin rather than the local party activists. He stressed that the issue at stake was the future of the country: supporting the treaty candidate 'was support for the future prosperity of the country'. The other speakers were O'Connell himself, John A. Smyth, secretary of East Limerick Cumann na nGaedheal and Senator T. W. Bennett who chaired all the public Cumann na nGaedheal meetings in the east of the constituency.

On Saturday 17 May the *Cork Examiner* published a list of after-mass speakers for both candidates and included times and places. In Shanagolden and Cappamore meetings were held after Sunday evening devotions. These lists ensured a large and supportive crowd willing to listen to the speakers. Some of the more committed supporters travelled to a number of venues, thus ensuring a large number of well-wishers at each church gate rally. On Monday 19 May the *Cork Examiner* reported on the after church rallies in the rural parts of the constituency. A feature of the campaign was the public support given to O'Connell by the clergy. The parish priest, Rev. William O'Dwyer introduced the Cumann na nGaedheal speakers in Templeglantine while at Bruree Rev. John Breen, P.P. introduced Seamus Hughes, General Secretary, Cumann na nGaedheal to the waiting crowd and in Pallaskeny Rev. Stephen O'Dea acted in a similar fashion. At Doon the Minister for Agriculture gave a list of estates which had been taken over by the state and which would be divided and given to farmers who were subsisting on uneconomical holdings.

In the city the major rallies were held at the O'Connell Monument. On Sunday 18 May Kevin O'Higgins, Minister for Home Affairs reminding the crowd that the people of Ireland supported the Treaty by a large majority. He argued that the Anti-Treaty candidate wished to destroy the Treaty but had nothing to offer in its stead only chaos, confusion and war. The country was at a crossroads, the decision of the electors of Limerick was between construction of the country with the Treaty or destruction through anarchy and poverty with rejection of the Treaty. Desmond Fitzgerald, Minister for External Affairs stressed that by supporting the candidate who stood for the Treaty the stability of the country could be assured.

On Sunday 18 May a huge crowd also attended a republican rally at the O'Connell Monument. Three bands entertained the crowd while they were waiting for the platform party. Over sixty motor cars were used to bring supporters from Clare to swell the attendance. The crowd was addressed by Kate O'Callaghan, Mrs Hanna Sheehy Skeffington and Mary Clancy who were introduced to the crowd as the widows of dead patriots. Sheehy Skeffington commented that 'Limerick was known as the city of the violated treaty and she hoped in a few weeks it would be known as the scrapped treaty'. All the speeches were on the same theme that the Treaty was a poor bargain and should be dismantled forthwith.

Both camps had large numbers of canvassers working throughout the county each day. Monday 19 May was fair-day at Kilfinane with the result both candidates held meet-

⁴ Ibid., 12 May 1924.

ings at different parts of the town. There were numerous interruptions and heckling of the speakers, again in Ballylanders rival meetings were scheduled for around the same time. The principal speaker for Crowley was Deputy David Kent (two of whose brothers had been killed in 1916), he asked the people to 'be true to the memory of the dead to give Tadhg Crowley such an overwhelming victory that treachery would never again raise its head'. As Tadhg Crowley finished his speech, Richard O'Connell arrived to address his supporters. This led to violence among the crowd and revolvers were drawn. Fortunately saner heads prevailed and the protagonists were removed from the area. On the same day at Askeaton the Gardaí removed some disruptive hecklers at the Republican gathering. At a number of other venues hecklers were also forcibly removed from among the throng gathered to hear the speakers.

The majority of the public meetings took place on Sunday afternoons. Both groups of speakers and supporters were vying for the same audience. On Sunday 25 May a Cumann na nGaedheal meeting at Bruff was marred by a fracas. The visiting speakers at this meeting were Patrick Ó Máille, T.D., Batt O'Connor, T.D., Sean Milroy, T.D. and General Mulcahy. There was some minor heckling for the earlier speakers. When General Mulcahy started speaking a scuffle commenced with the combatants separated by the Gardaí. Some motor cars containing people coming from the republican meeting which had just finished at the other side of the town started jeering and shouting which led to further scuffles.⁵ When the meeting concluded and as the speakers and supporters were travelling through Crawford's Lane, Bruff another disturbance broke out and an elderly man, John O'Neill of Hospital was injured.

After-mass rallies on behalf of Tadhg Crowley had various anti-treaty speakers. Countess Markievicz accompanied by Liam Monahan and Liam Cripps addressed the crowds at Grange, Fedamore and Croom. Dan Breen was the main speaker at Kildimo and Foynes. They unrelentingly pushed home their message 'Vote Republican, dismantle the Treaty'. At Dromcollogher the platform party included Deputy Charles Murphy, Art O'Connor, Brian Fagan and Liam Cripps. Art O'Connor discussed the problems in the agricultural sector. Charles Murphy spoke at length on the 'oath'. They also addressed meetings at Garrinderk, Effin, Raheenagh and Broadford. At Mungret, Ballybrown, Crecora, Pallaskenry and Askeaton the speakers were Deputy Dr Ryan and Nurse Linda Kearns (1916 and Cumann na mBan activist). Tadhg Crowley, Sean T. O'Kelly and Donnacha O'Brien spoke to a large gathering at Clounagh.

Contrary to newspaper predictions there was a high turn out on polling day. The *Limerick Leader* was printed in mid-afternoon therefore the edition of Wednesday 28 May carried the latest news from the city polling stations. The journalists expressed surprise at the amount of activity taking place at the city polling booths. Party workers for both candidates indicated a high turnout in all parts of the city. The post-election report in *The Irish Independent* opined that 'the fine weather enabled the blind, lame and feeble' to vote.⁶ The total electorate was 79,000, there were 633 spoilt votes most of which contained cynical or amusing remarks such as 'jobbery' written beside the names of the candidates, the total valid poll was 51,981 or 65.8 per cent, up three quarters of a percentage point on the August 1923 general election figure. The quota was 25,999. O'Connell received 28,243 votes while Crowley polled 23,738.⁷

⁵ *Irish Independent*, 28 May 1924.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 25 May 1924.

⁷ Michael Gallagher (ed.), *Irish Elections 1922-44: Results and Analysis* (Limerick, 1993) p. 78.

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The *Limerick Leader* published tally figures for the city wards and for east and west Limerick.⁸

Tally First Preference Votes by District

	Crowley	O'Connell
Dock Ward	768	1,823
Custom Hse. & Market Ward	820	1,347
Irishtown Ward	873	978
Shannon & Glentworth Wards	883	1,613
Abbey & Castle Wards	1,342	1,871
City Totals	4,684	7,632

Tally from Rural Boxes

East Limerick	9,194	9,697
West Limerick	9,100	9,370

	Crowley	O'Connell
Bruree	234	208
Abbeyfeale	319	404
Rathkeale	314	316
Monegay	315	236
Ballylanders	213	82
Caherconlish	128	338

The official results of the by-election confirmed the tally figures which had indicated overwhelming support for O'Connell in the city. Rural towns such as Abbeyfeale also show this trend. In the smaller rural areas support for the candidates was fairly evenly matched. The editorial of the *Limerick Leader* declared the election a 'fair test' and the result 'a striking endorsement of the Anglo-Irish agreement signed by Michael Collins and his fellow plenipotentiaries on 7 December 1921'. It also considered that the republican supporters had voted in full strength therefore it concluded that the majority of the 27,000 who did not vote, fully supported the pro-treaty government.⁹ O'Connell held his seat at the June and September general elections of 1927 but lost out to his city based party colleague James Reidy at the general elections of 1932 and 1933.

⁸ *Limerick Leader*, 30 May 1924.

⁹ *Limerick Leader*, 30 May 1924.