

Fighting Noonan puts poor at heart of election strategy

Gene McKenna
Political Correspondent

FINE Gael leader Michael Noonan yesterday set out the terms of his party's "new deal" for a social contract which will form the basis of its General Election policy.

Mr Noonan promised to give the highest priority to the weak, the less well-off and the disadvantaged.

And, he said, Fine Gael would support all voluntary groups, organisations and agencies who worked for the community and the common good.

Fianna Fail, he said, had fallen into the "Harney-McCreavy Thatcherite trap, now widely discredited in Britain, that there is no such thing as a community, only a collection of individuals."

"They believe the only thing that matters is to mind the individual," said Mr Noonan, who claimed Fianna Fail believed in Mrs Thatcher's remark: "There is no such thing as society and people must look to themselves first."

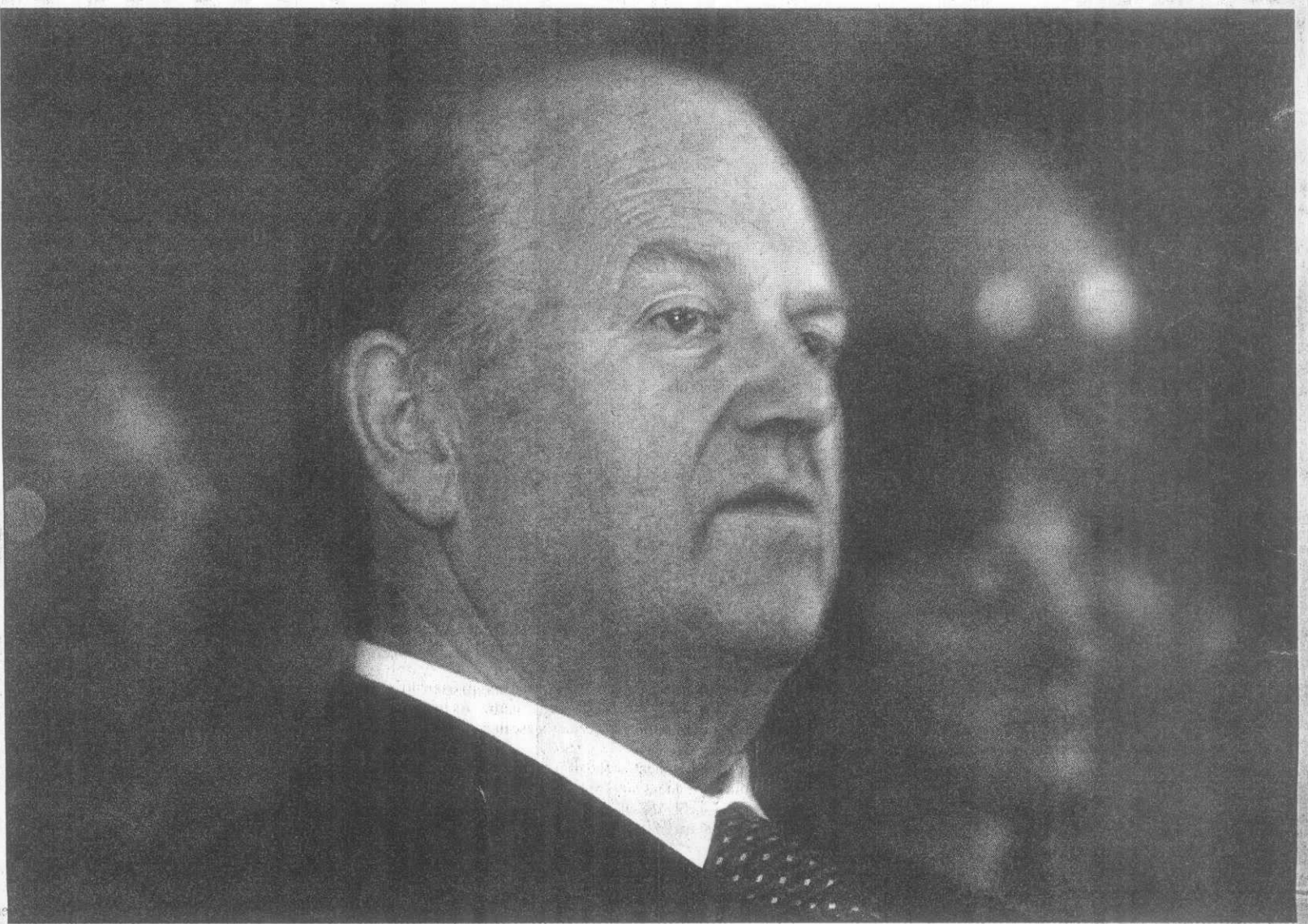
He concentrated on a catalogue of "Fianna Fail failures and incompetence" in the "mismanagement" of our economic success in recent years.

The new "contract" was "the right deal" at a time of rapid and radical change in this country, he told a party regional conference in Carlow.

He promised the deal would get away from promoting "the selfishness of the individual".

Mr Noonan said the Fine Gael "deal" was that while the party believed the free market was "the main, the appropriate structure for Ireland", the people must know and be confident that the Government would look after them in areas covered by or appropriate to the free market.

"Thus, for example, it is a matter for government to provide equal access to education from primary school



Party leader Michael Noonan listens to delegates during the Fine Gael conference in The Dolmen Hotel, Carlow yesterday. Picture: PJ Browne

to third level, to provide a decent healthcare system, to provide support and retraining between jobs, to provide appropriate pension arrangements when the working life is over and, finally, to provide for satisfactory and dignified old age," he said.

In return, said Mr Noonan, Fine Gael expected that people would work hard, embrace change when necessary and, above all, contribute to the well-being of the community.

"This will help to secure

the future competitiveness of our economy," said the Fine Gael leader.

In a damning criticism of the Fianna Fail-PD administration, he said that, materially, we now had more but, emotionally and spiritually, we had less.

"We have a higher standard of living but a lower quality of life," he said.

He accused the Fianna Fail-PD Government of "lacking vision and leadership".

He said Fianna Fail believed the role of govern-

ment was to look after the rich and powerful and "hope the trickle down effect will look after the weak and the less well off".

But, he said, in contrast, Fine Gael believed the primary role of government was to look after the generality of people and, in particular, the poor.

"The rich and powerful are well able to look after themselves."

He slammed Fianna Fail and the PDs for "widening the gap between rich and poor" and favouring the bet-

ter off at the expense of the less well-off in their budgets.

And, he said, they had refused to follow the Fine Gael and Labour lead in banning corporate donations — "the main source of the difficulties currently under tribunal investigations".

Mr Noonan said a Fine Gael government would be policy-driven, not personality-driven.

Fine Gael policies, he said, derived from a number of fundamental principles:

- It put the community interest above the interest of the individual or of any single-issue pressure group.
- It believed in protecting the weaker people in society.

- It believed the people needed to know where they stood in their relationship with government.

"We affirm that competence, reliability and trustworthiness are essential components of governance and we will provide them in government, as we did in the past," said Mr Noonan.

A subdued mood prevails but FG's terrier finally bares sharpened teeth

Miriam Lord

IT was a lovely sunny day when a happy Michael Noonan became leader of Fine Gael.

Then a small dark cloud came scudding across the political horizon and screeched to a halt over his head. And it has remained ever since, refusing to move no matter how much Michael tries to move out from under its malevolent shadow.

It just isn't fair. If Noonan were a puppy, he'd have one eye, walk with a limp and answer to the name of 'Lucky'. Conversely, if the Fianna Fail leader found himself in the doghouse and on the receiving end of a few kicks, Bertie Ahern would somehow land on his feet beside a bowl of fresh water, in the welcome and

warming ray of a sunbeam.

There is little point in listing the litany of disaster that has befallen Michael since he assumed the mantle of WT Cosgrave, save to say his accession and subsequent reign has been about as smooth as the path up Croagh Patrick. But at least he can take some consolation in the knowledge that most of the problems have not been of his own making.

Yesterday in Carlow was another example. The event was an FG Special Conference on Environmental Issues — worthy in itself, but not expected to set the headline writers dizzy.

However, Michael and his handlers had chosen the occasion to set out their general election stall, and a hard-hitting keynote address from the party leader was planned as the

highlight of the day.

This was a real Noonan Bites Yer Leg speech — full of fight and challenge and packed with the sort of disdain for the current shower which has been lacking thus far from a party which has reasonable aspirations to government come the next Dail.

Normally, it would have been just the sort of rhetoric to rouse the grassroots.

But these are not normal times. And the mood in the Dolmen Hotel among the 500 delegates, drawn from party organisations East of the Shannon, was understandably subdued. So too was the mood of the party leader.

Yet, the Fine Gael forces must be mustered, and Noonan's late afternoon speech formed an important part of his party's gen-

eral election strategy. It may have been delivered in a more appropriately low key fashion, but he put it up to the Government nonetheless, drawing the political battle-lines for the hectic months to come.

He gave us Noonan's New Deal. Unveiled the Limerickman's Contract. It's FG's quid pro quo for the people — the State will look after you and your community and you go to work and do your bit to make it happen.

Apparently, throughout the summer, Michael has been living up to his Mor-nin' Noonan Night nickname and tramping the highways and byways meeting the plain people of Ireland. And he told his audience, "I am struck by how often people have said: 'We have never been better off but the same time, we have

never been worse off."

Which gave him the opportunity to get stuck into the Government. But not before MEP Avril Doyle, in charge of doing the warm-up speech before her leader took the podium declared: "Michael is the man who will replace the Premiership Mascot who is running the country at the moment."

With a kinder wind behind him, Noonan would have been frothing at the mouth with the indignant bon mots, but he'll just have to view yesterday's speech as a warm up. Central to his argument was the assertion that there is a real difference between Fianna Fail and Fine Gael.

He listed them out, accusing his main rivals of looking after the rich and powerful and leaving the

less privileged to the crumbs from a booming economy. You can see the way the fight will be taken to Fianna Fail in less gloomy days — they have fallen into the "McCreavy/Harney Thatcherite trap" he sneered.

And then, in a stroke of genius he invoked the sacred Fianna Fail names of Jack Lynch, George Colley, Sean Lemass and Eamon de Valera, and claimed ownership of their ideas for Fine Gael. "They recognised, as Fine Gael does, that Ireland at its best is a collection of communities pursuing their self interest."

That should have the Soldiers of Destiny raging. And at long last, it looks like Noonan is ready for the fight — the next loin-girding conference is in November.

Anti-incinerators groups hammer out election approach

Brian McDonald

Fianna Fail and the Progressive

would run a candidate. We plan to

Management Plan for the West,

West constituency, while