

Southern Society Today

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I came to Ireland forty-two years ago as a student, and began working for my living on *The Irish Times* four years later, in 1961. I was a writer working for the only newspaper that mattered at that time for people coming out of Trinity, for Protestants in Ireland, for British or British colonial expatriates - and there were a fair few then - and it seemed a golden age. For the privileged, it was settled and stable.

In addition to working as a sub-editor on *The Irish Times*, I wrote also for *The Guardian* in England. So I 'covered' a wide variety of issues, from 'hard' politics to literature, theatre, culture, the arts generally. I did this for 'my' English newspaper, and I did it also when I was allowed, for *The Irish Times*.

Writing about Ireland for English readers was fraught with difficulty. The country cut no dash. Ireland believed that it had no natural resources. People were being exported still at a steady rate which, though it had come down from the highpoint of the late 1950s, was still a bit depressing. Many were living on remittance money. There was a tendency to glory in the achievements of Irish people outside Ireland, but there was no parallel sense within the country of dignity, excitement, progress.

We had been through the dark period post-war, the period of unemployment, emigration, continuing poverty. And it had culminated, in the mid-1950s, in a kind of despair as to whether independence had worked at all. As a young observer, I shared in the doubt: Was Ireland a viable entity? Many others doubted it, not least those who governed us. And it gave enormous power to the Roman Catholic Church. On many issues its leading figure, John Charles McQuaid, appeared almost to have a seat at the Government table, and a hand in the making of government policy.

I was required by *The Guardian*, by *The Irish Times*, and by other publications and broadcasting enterprises, to address the life of the country and make some kind of sense of it. A lot of the time I looked for stories, but there were none. I wrote many that did not appear. England's interests in Ireland were not sufficient to offer an opportunity. But then stories began to appear, and modest little cheques did as well. I felt elected to a venerable society, distinguished by history and anecdote, linked with great journalists of the past, literary, scholarly, rich and varied.

The Guardian was well-regarded by Irish politicians. The wave of new men - Charles Haughey, Donogh O'Malley, Brian Lenihan - felt that their noble works should be noted in an English newspaper which was not too right-wing, like *The Daily Telegraph*, and not too Establishment, like *The Times*. And so they asked me to press conferences and told me what they were doing. And I wrote about it.

I became political correspondent of *Hibernia*, under Basil Clancy's editorship, and wrote under the pseudonym, 'Francis Grose'. I was influenced by 'Taper' in the *Spectator*, the hard-hitting, irreverent political columnist, Bernard Levin. He was one of a breed, or kind, in British journalism. Ireland had nothing to compare. I 'took on' Sean Lemass, and wrote about him, not in the hushed and adulatory terms which were then the style for such limited political comment as then existed, but in an aggressive way, attacking in particular the laissez-faire approach he seemed to have, based on a peculiar concept expressed in the phrase 'a rising tide lifts all boats'. I think my argument, in general terms, was to the effect that a rising tide lifts all boats equally, and therefore nothing changes. It was the opposite of radicalism, and therefore of very limited value to a country in serious need of social and economic revolution.

By the end of the 1960s I was writing a political column for *Business and Finance*, which was edited by Nicholas Leonard, doing a good deal of freelance work, and also advising the Federation of Irish Industries, later the Confederation of Irish Industry, on its publicity work. I wrote at the time the popular version of the Third Programme for Economic Development. This brought me into contact with Charles Haughey.

The decade had begun in violence, now regarded as modest, even inept, in the light of the violence we have since experienced. Nevertheless, it produced my first call into political journalism, and represented an unforgettable brush with the IRA, soon to be part of more modern politics as Northern Ireland erupted into conflict and violence again. I wrote about it a good deal, as the Civil Rights Movement marched and protested, and the RUC and B Specials reacted, on the whole badly. I look back with a measure of shame at how limited and insular I was. My main concern was to confine my judgments to political life in the 26 Counties. And this I did.

The greatest astonishment at the time was when Charles Haughey was arrested and charged. At the personal level it had a direct effect. My mail from Tony Fagan, his departmental secretary, was intercepted, and I was puzzled by this. But puzzlement gave way to astonishment as Haughey's role was revealed, and as he and Neil Blaney were dismissed from the Government, with Kevin Boland's resignation following later the same evening as the dismissals. I later corresponded with Jack Lynch when writing my book about Charles Haughey, and incorporated some material from those exchanges. I wish now that I had done the same when writing *What Kind of Country*, though, as I now reflect on it, the account given in that book of the events at this time stands up well to later re-reading.

What neither book achieves is the kind of judgment which is provoked by the ending of the century, and by a sense of an era being looked at again before being consigned to history. And here I must attempt a summary of that important decade.

I became a political commentator, an established figure in all forms of journalism, including radio and television by the end of the ten-year period. It had begun so modestly. Ireland was deliberately isolationist. Her literature and films were subject to censorship, grumbled about but widely accepted. As Brian Fallon has demonstrated in his recent book, *An Age of Innocence*, there was an acceptance, and what Ireland put up with was also the lot of other European countries, notable Britain. The Roman Catholic Church seemed to rule the moral life of the country. Internationally we cut a poor figure. The isolation of intellectual and moral thought was almost an 'ism'; a kind of preservative of national character and identity. It was mildly tolerant of an Englishman seeking to operate at the heart of political life. Censorship was in the process of being banished by the power of television. The Church's role was being diminished, its power lessened, by this and other forces. The idea of a secular hierarchy, made up of officials and elected representatives was open at least to question. Economically, things got better.

But it was a slow process and far from confident. My own work for the industrialists had revealed, perhaps in a unique way, the realities behind the bland assurances of ministers. These realities were about the smallness of enterprises and the difficulty of competition. We saw the inevitability of Europe, but were afraid of its challenges. Could we compete? Or would it swamp us? We saw the implications for agriculture, the need for larger farms, a move from the land, amalgamations. But we did not believe it would happen. Nor did it happen. And we look now at the wilderness which has been the result.

Jack Lynch resolved peacefully the huge challenge to his authority represented by Haughey and others within his Government. He demolished opposition within Fianna Fail, expelling all his opponents, the only maverick voice at the end of the blood-letting being that of Charles Haughey. And, it should be remembered, he survived only because he submitted totally to

party policy as enunciated by Jack Lynch. This removed the need - or the possibility, depending on the point of view - of getting rid of him.

Perhaps the most significant thing about the 1960s was not an achievement at all; rather it was the simple result of the grimness of the 1950s, an absence of desire to look back. The Irish, who have shown in recent years, and throughout the past thirty years as well, an intense and sustained interest in their own past, behaved for the first time differently during the 1960s, and concentrated on a future which was concerned with the prospect of economic growth and development, the new world of television, liberation from censorship, and a political and social life which was increasingly disposed to believe in promises.

It was still a deeply Catholic society. *Ne Temere* prevailed. The Roman Catholic Church retained enormous power. The ideology and practice of the Left, embraced by the Labour Party, represented still by other Left-wing factions, remained a supposed threat, and was significant in the general election result of 1969, when Fine Gael and Labour failed to achieve the necessary transfer of votes because of mutual distrust about the extent of Left-wing ideology in the Labour Party.

Early in the 1970s I joined the *Irish Independent* as political commentator, and began writing a Saturday column, called 'Politics and Politicians' which had a significant impact during the decade and beyond it, an impact which can be demonstrated in various reactions, the most notorious being the tapping of my telephone in 1982, ostensibly by the then Minister for Justice, Sean Doherty, but in reality on the instruction of Charles Haughey, a fact not revealed until almost a decade later.

I spent the whole of the decade of the 1970s as a political writer for the one paper, and my second home was Leinster House, where I watched from the Press Gallery the affairs principally of two important administrations. From early in 1973 Liam Cosgrave became Taoiseach, and led a coalition government in which Fine Gael and Labour shared power. There was a stable partnership. It had many good aspects, and several notable achievements. Its most impressive performance came early on, with the Sunningdale Agreement.

While this did not last, it set the tone for the only acceptable democratic resolution of Northern Ireland's problems, and is the blue-print from which the current agreement has emerged. It architects and those who participated most directly - Garret FitzGerald, Conor Cruise O'Brien, Liam Cosgrave - handled the process well, and Conor Cruise O'Brien, in particular, foresaw the difficulties which would derive from too much being demanded too early. He demonstrated a flaw in Irish Government handling of international affairs, which is a lack of patience, a lack of caution, an impetuosity with too much reliance on instinct, and too little awareness of the fears of opponents. It prevails to this day.

It is probably even worse today than it was then. Garret FitzGerald at least had the merit of knowledge of Northern Ireland, familiarity with its culture, family relationships, and a broad grasp of political and legal aspects of what was being attempted. But he, more than most, is impetuous and impatient as a politician. He does not suffer fools or the slow gladly. He is nice to them; but his frustration is a mark of restricted judgment, and this was the case then, and became even more the case when he was dealing with Margaret Thatcher.

Conor Cruise O'Brien has been repeatedly shown to have the judgment, but not to have been in a position to exercise comparable power. His was a marginal ministry, that of Posts and Telegraphs, which gave him a significant role in respect of broadcasting and its freedoms, but less directly important in respect of Northern Ireland policy; he was there as the Labour Party's Northern Ireland representative, while FitzGerald, as Foreign Minister, held the true reins of power and information.

Liam Cosgrave was a leader of a different order, politically speaking. His principle shortcoming was a desire to reach finality on issues. He wanted things cut and dried. If they failed he accepted this, and went forward, usually in another direction, abandoning, often in principle and in practice, what really required a second and a third and a fourth effort at resolution. Unfortunately, he did not have the political resources for protracted negotiation. It showed in the aftermath of Sunningdale, when his drift was towards the simplistic 'law-and-order' solution which was also followed by Harold Wilson's Secretary of State, Roy Mason.

It also showed in a very different controversy of those years: contraception. Liam Cosgrave was a devout Roman Catholic, and his approaches to social change were governed by this fact. He led a party divided over such change, and it meant that the inescapable forward march of a liberal ethic in Ireland, which had profound implications for health and welfare, family size, economic viability, was held up, if not reversed during the first half of the 1970s.

In the end, Cosgrave was culpable as leader, adopting policy lines which were destructive. Only long afterwards did I do any assessment of what really brought down the coalition, and clearly it had a good deal to do with the Wealth Tax, which was a concession to Labour. But this could have been better handled, particularly in respect of his own party. Fine Gael were not happy about the Coalition Government's taxation policy, and it made enemies. The partnership bias, inevitable with all coalitions, was seen to favour the Left, and this was irksome to a substantial body of Fine Gael opinion.

There were other issues, including the crisis which followed the assassination of Christopher Ewart Biggs. What augmented the difficulties were perceptions that Cosgrave was seeking to impose draconian security measures in the aftermath of this event. Another crisis of a different kind followed when the Minister for Defence, Paddy Donegan, gave a speech which undoubtedly insulted the Head of State who is Commander in Chief of the Defence Forces. Cosgrave's undoubtedly foolish handling of the Donegan Affair, when the President, Cearbhall O'Dalaigh, resigned, had a much larger impact than the circumstances merited.

Jack Lynch and Fianna Fail, over which he exercised comprehensive control, effectively exploited these mistakes and created a climate where change was sought. The Fianna Fail Party fought an excellent campaign, though drastically over-selling themselves with extravagant promises involving the abolition of rates on private houses, and expensive job-creation programmes. The return to power - with a majority of eighteen seats - was a phenomenal result. Lynch also had the merit of a kind of moral superiority on Northern Ireland affairs; not wholly deserved, it was nevertheless real, and derived in part from his challenges against militant republicanism within his own party.

Alas, within two years the whole package on which the power strategy had been based was in tatters. Within the party an impatience and devious Charles Haughey was fomenting trouble. And Lynch withdrew. His judgment was a *que sera sera* one. He was not pushed out. He decided that the party - and indeed the country in due course - had to decide what it wanted. That was what democracy was about.

To the country's credit it never again gave to Fianna Fail an overall majority. I do not put this down to Lynch, but in discussions I had with him at that time - and one I remember in particular - his resigned attitude about the growing threat of a more militant republicanism in Fianna Fail which might threaten relations between North and South was calm and in a sense reassuring.

And as it turned out, though the party decided in favour of a man who was to bring chaos and disgrace to its good name and history, and humiliation on himself, the decisions Lynch made changed irreversibly the balance between Fianna Fail and the 'plain people of Ireland'; the dominance of the party under de Valera, and under Sean Lemass, and under Lynch himself - and we must never forget his unique success in the 1977 general election, of an eighteen-seat

majority - was undermined permanently. What Conor Cruise O'Brien has described as the mutual identification of Fianna Fail and the Spirit of the Nation was broken, and no one has mended it since. Its new leader was under democratic constraint from his first day in power, in December 1979. And he remained that way for the whole of his career as party leader. It has remained the same for his two successors.

The decade saw some of the truly appalling atrocities in Northern Ireland. It saw violence spreading into the south. There were bombs in Dublin and in Monaghan. And there was the murder of Billy Fox, a Protestant Fine Gael senator who was the only member of the Oireachtas killed in thirty years of violence. In other ways the Northern 'Troubles' spread into the South. Even so, the line of separation, which the collapse of Sunningdale produced, was sustained throughout the 1970s, allowing a far greater emphasis to be placed on the economy and on our newly acquired membership of the European Community.

It was the luck of the Irish to survive that decade without being drawn more directly into Northern Ireland's violence. But the decade concluded in a dark event, dark at the time, made much darker by subsequent revelations. I refer to the undermining of Jack Lynch's leadership and his government by Haughey, who deliberately and systematically weakened individual members of the Government, sniped at Lynch's own republicanism, which was strong and truthful and fair and democratic, and culminated in Haughey's election to the leadership of the party and his assumption of power in the face of an acrimonious debate which I sat through in its entirety, and which I shall never forget.

Looking back, it is an extraordinary phenomenon to see these events - from the Arms Crisis to Haughey succeeding as leader - dominating our recollection of life in the South. We were pleased not to be part of Northern Ireland violence, yet to take many foolish measures, and adopt many mad attitudes, in order to assert a role in Northern affairs, and to tell successive British governments what they should be doing. It is shameful, looking back, how ignorant and how opinionated we all were.

The 1970s saw the growth and development of feminism. Ireland was effective in bringing women into politics, mainly through the creation of the Women's Political Association, which campaigned across party lines for the greater involvement of women in public life. It was particularly fruitful in this work at the end of the decade, and in the early 1980s, when a succession of elections gave opportunity for feminist issues to be identified, and for women candidates to put themselves forward for election.

The other great social campaign was for multi-denominational education. Northern Ireland's sectarian battles taught people in the South that a different approach was required. The Roman Catholic Church, still powerful at the beginning of the 1970s, still effectively led by John Charles McQuaid, made it difficult to process the legal side of multi-denominational education, and to some extent the Church of Ireland facilitated Roman Catholics who wanted their children educated in a more liberal environment by accepting them as pupils. But within the success of this lay a threat to Protestantism and also to the cohesion and character of such schools.

To those who campaigned it was readily apparent that independent, non-denominational, or multi-denominational schools had to be set up. And they were. It was the beginning of the liberalisation of the cornerstone of religious teaching - control of the education of the young. Those who achieved it were proud of the change; those who opposed it were fearful of the implications of what was happening.

Nothing seemed to hold together, during the early period after the Fianna Fail leadership change when Lynch resigned. Charles Haughey had to deliver on what he had promised. He needed to return to the Dail the eighty and more deputies who had swept into power after the 1977 election. He had to do this with sparkling and effective economic measures, a new deal on Northern Ireland, labour peace and wage restraint.

He had already blown economic and wage stability by undermining teacher and postal worker pay while Jack Lynch was still Taoiseach. As far as Northern Ireland was concerned, he was deeply distrusted because of the 1970 Arms Crisis. But he set about the business of wooing Margaret Thatcher with his visit in May 1980 to Downing Street, and her return visit the following December. Neither worked. After the second he engaged in dishonest semantics about 'constitutional' and 'institutional' change and lost permanently the trust of Margaret Thatcher as well as credibility among journalists at home.

He faced a growing cloud of doubt and uncertainty. If he could go to the country before the full picture emerged of how bad the country's finances had become he might have done tolerably well. And to this end he aimed for an election which would have been launched immediately following the Fianna Fail Party Ard Fheis, which was held on February 14, 1981. But on the Friday night, before the event had really started, a terrible fire took place at the Stardust Ballroom, with many deaths, and the Ard Fheis had to be cancelled, as did the as yet unannounced general election.

The subsequent controversy cast a shadow over Haughey himself; the fire was in his constituency, and he behaved guiltily about it, as though he were in some peculiar way to blame, or was the recipient of money from the running of the Ballroom. The election was put off, and the true state of the economy emerged, reflecting badly on Fianna Fail.

Another factor, equally sour, came from Northern Ireland affairs. The Hunger Strike, which had started in 1980, and had then stopped and started again, in the new year, reached a point of tension by June which threw a shadow over the campaign, and which resulted in two seats which should have gone to Fianna Fail being won by Hunger Strike candidates. Votes leached away from Fianna Fail. When the election results came in, Haughey faced a humiliating defeat; the huge majority achieved by Lynch had been swept away. After less than two years he was out of power. Garret FitzGerald took his place.

That first FitzGerald administration was unstable. Its collapse over the Budget of January 1982 brought Haughey back, but at a price. He had no overall majority, and had to sell benefits to Tony Gregory, and bargain with the three Workers' Party deputies, to create an inherently untrustworthy administration which lasted nine months. The breakdown of trust between Haughey and Margaret Thatcher led to the denial of support for Britain over the Falklands War, worsening the prospects of any Northern Ireland co-operation.

Haughey's uncertain start was materially aggravated by economic difficulties which had their root in the previous decade, and in the Fianna Fail victory of 1977, which was a victory at a price. Inflation and unemployed, either held in check or modest in growth, turned into a tide of escalating statistics which undermined confidence and forced large numbers to travel abroad to find jobs.

When Garret FitzGerald won the November 1982 general election it was a convincing enough result to ensure a government which would run full-term. But it ensured also that Charles Haughey would be as devious and as cunning as he could, in undermining the new administration. The various party *putsches* against him all failed. And the first half of the 1980s was characterised quite firmly as a duel between two leaders. FitzGerald won; but he did so without sufficient skill or shrewdness to ensure the two crucial factors: firstly, that Labour would remain firmly associated with Fine Gael; secondly, that Haughey would be effectively discredited as an alternative Taoiseach. Consequently, when Dick Spring withdrew support, leading to a general election in 1987, Haughey was sufficiently secure to fight and not completely lose the election. Though in a minority, he was able to form a Government.

From 1987 to 1991 Charles Haughey headed two separate administrations, a the first a minor Fianna Fail Government, the second a coalition between Fianna Fail and the Progressive

Democrats. Disgraceful things date from this period, many of them only coming to light as a result of tribunals held at the end of the 1990s. Haughey ran a cowboy government, breaching the laws of the land, acquiring money dishonestly, or under highly suspect circumstances, condoning corruption and illegalities, and finally being forced out of office under the extreme disgrace of having lied to the people over the phone-tapping in 1982.

The decade of the 1980s was such a wasted period in Republic of Ireland history. Prodigality over money, high unemployment, high inflation, grim arguments over abortion, with inconclusive referendums, and a sustained personalised political conflict which revolved around the widespread perception that Haughey should not be anywhere near power, although at the same time he was in power. It was a decade of wasted opportunity. So many things had to be run and then re-run, including the abortion debate.

Constructive thought and action were directed at Northern Ireland. Two episodes are important: the New Ireland Forum and the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation. Both were flawed, in the sense that the Unionists in Northern Ireland failed to participate. Nevertheless, they achieved a great deal in terms of understanding and reconciliation among those who did participate.

It is often said, in amelioration of Charles Haughey's great shortcomings, that he also did some good. When people are questioned as to what this was, the giving of free travel to pensioners features high on the list. Then mere generalisations follow. The truth is that he did very little. He handled the economy and wage restraint ineptly. He never confronted powerful interests. He was abject and hypocritical about the Church, and balked at any social change with a moral dimension which might direct on his head clerical criticism. He allegedly did things for the arts. The only thing of lasting significance was his tax provision for artists, and this was, and is, almost certainly unconstitutional, and is part of his creation of elites, the worst of which, of course, were the gangs of privileged men and women who were encouraged to evade tax by his management of the country's affairs.

Legislative reform was achieved, improving the lot of workers, changing many of the old-fashioned and outdated circumstances surrounding health and social welfare. But it was less a result of reformist thinking than of Ireland's obligations under EEC membership. Ireland did what it had to do.

The 1990s, closing decade of the Century, have seen the strong focus of attention on Northern Ireland, with successive Dublin Governments working effectively to establish fresh thinking and new approaches. Left alone, the economy grew successfully, and turned into a monster of productivity and profit aptly named the Celtic Tiger.

Haughey had consistently failed to win an overall majority. Reynolds was in the same boat. In due course Bertie Ahern would face the electorate's coolness, but, with help, would form a government. We had Reynolds with the Progressive Democrats to begin. He was a reluctant partner for them, and openly expressed his wishes to restore Fianna Fail to power on their own. But his approach to this objective was a deeply flawed one. He made the mistake of doubting O'Malley, and suffered the humiliation of being forced to go to the country under the shadow of being deeply distrusted by his predecessor's partners in power. Astonishingly, when he lost seats, Labour, who had been expected to go into government with Fine Gael, chose to join Reynolds.

We had political musical chairs. The enormities of the past, represented in the Beef Tribunal, haunted Government. The enormities of the past, in the person of Brendan Smith, who represented the abuse of children by the Church, haunted Government. The enormities of the past, built up and created and exploited by Charles Haughey, haunted Government, and haunted particularly the figures of Albert Reynolds and Bertie Ahern. They did not know how

to extricate themselves from the black treacle of their involvement. And the administration of law and executive authority suffered.

With the passing from power of Charles Haughey, however, an obsessive sense of his threatening power was removed, and the political principle, decisive for democracy, of consent, returned. Public good was more important than the abuse of power and the control based on fear. And the result was a more open and more constructive view of Northern Ireland, which really began the slow movement towards the Peace Process. This dated from the late 1980s, but flourished increasingly under Albert Reynolds. It was his most significant contribution.

Where do we stand, at the end of the 1990s? The literary and artistic culture, central in the 1960s because there was so little else, fell into place as a part of the picture, finding its relevance beside growth in economic development, wealth, employment, social change and reform, and a new confidence among the young to succeed.

Ireland has found itself to be like other countries and other people. The unique Celtic character is a myth. There is nothing special or different about the race. It has all the problems of developed European society, urban crime, social indifference, gross cultural tastes, incipient violence, no special aptitude for hospitality, no real gift of the gab. The country's new religion seems to be shopping, and the new churches to which people are drawn as if by faith, are the shopping malls. Money, rather than prayer, is the essential commodity. Its prodigal deployment, by the young in particular, is founded on economic success and on the idea of work, jobs, double incomes, European opportunities, education, and self-confidence.

The growth in self-confidence has been a phenomenon during the whole of this forty-year period. When I started out, Irish people were confident of their writing skills, quite good at sport, not particularly good at theatre, though they thought they were, garrulous, rather witty, heavily oppressed by the Church, essentially cowardly towards authority, both clerical and political, dominated by the public service, and fundamentally conditioned to see opportunity as inextricably linked to emigration. They were not confident about much else. Now, in sport and dance, in inventiveness and business skill, in entrepreneurship and the creation of wealth, in the making of films, in comedy, in chat-show hosting, in Irish dancing, Ireland equals and indeed surpasses the rest of the world.

But in this achievement Ireland has become indistinguishable from the rest of the world. The country and its people have lost, or are losing, what was special, whatever it was, and have become like everyone else. Perhaps only in their dreams were the Irish people special, after all.

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