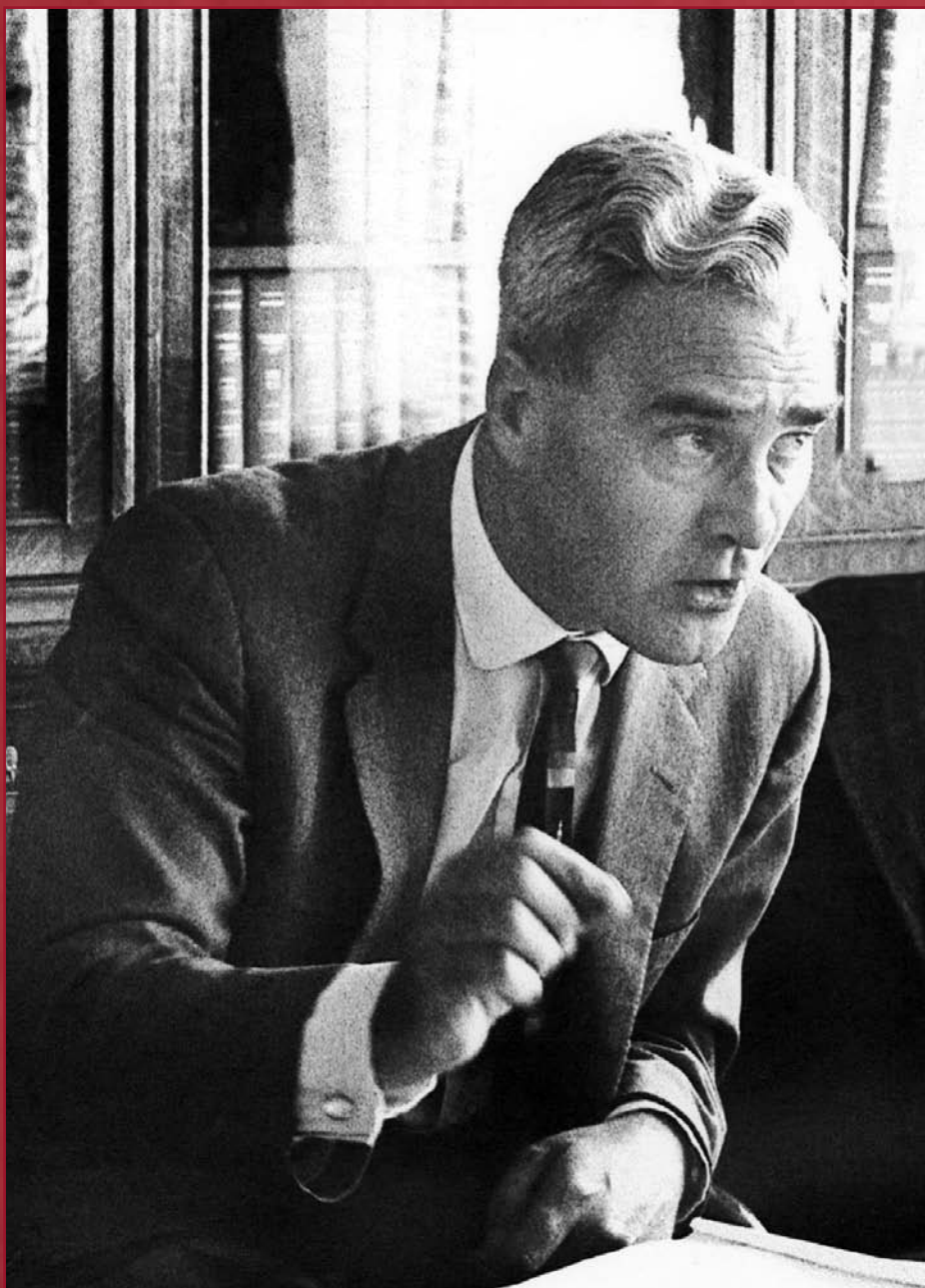


BRENDAN CORISH



A tribute
by Brendan Halligan

Brendan Corish

1918 – 1990

Of Brendan Corish, the man, a great deal has already been said here this morning. I need only add that the man I loved and for whom I worked during ten glorious years was indeed as he has been described, honest, kind, modest, decent, witty, humane, committed, selfless and without guile or ambition, above all, authentic, especially loyal to his roots as a Labour man and a Wexford man. He was all of these things. They are the personality traits with which he was born and which he never distorted or betrayed.

But he was more, of course. A consummate parliamentarian, a skilled debater, an inspiring orator, the industrious committee man, a great talker, a good listener, a loyal comrade and a great companion. These were attributes which were an inherent part of his personality, and which remained a constant throughout his life.

A constant student too, who easily acknowledged what he didn't know and kept learning; kept developing as a result. Like Yeats, he was a late developer and was at his best in middle age. All this is true, even if it sounds like a hagiography, but it serves as a backdrop to the Brendan Corish I believe is of greater historic interest and significance.

I want to talk about the Leader, which, after all, is how most of us who knew him still remember him.

Leadership is neither learned nor acquired, nor can all the spin-doctors or make-over artists construct a leader out of the wrong material. It is what somebody is, that turn to the personality which the rest of us don't have. The Greeks were fascinated by the phenomenon, they attributed an indefinable quality they called charisma to a leader. The Romans too, were fascinated but being more concrete, or less cerebral, assigned qualities to leadership and gave them names: auctoritas, gravitas, dignitas – authority, gravity, dignity.

Brendan Cornish looked like a leader, spoke like a leader and behaved like a leader, which meant that this is what he was, this is what singled him out, this was the defining characteristic, or as the Greek logicians would have demanded in framing a definition, the specific difference from the rest of the genus, or herd.

Looks, physical presence, are, of course, essential – think of poor Richard the Third railing against his mis-shapen body or of the demands of Celtic society about how a chieftain should look – these instinctive needs are deep in our collective psyche and Brendan met them all.

Tall, muscular, athletic, deep voiced with a mane of hair he quite simply looked the part, and got better looking as he grew older.

Both the Greeks and Romans had an additional insight into leadership - or greatness, for the two were synonymous: destiny or fortune.

Looking at his career, it seems that those around him simply accepted as a matter of fact that he was to be promoted. There never was any question but that he was heir to his father as a Dáil deputy and the stuff of ministerial material, for within three years of entering the Dáil he was appointed a Parliamentary Secretary and six years later a Minister. Within the party organisation he had become Deputy Chairman and then Chairman, and within the Parliamentary Party he was appointed Chief Whip.

In modern parlance, this was a good career path, but not one at which he either contrived or conspired. It was the career, or vocation, destiny had ordained. And then without looking for it he became Party Leader in 1960. Now, being made a leader and actually being one are not quite the same thing. One never knows what you have got until you get it.

The origins were hardly auspicious. The fifties, in which he had twice served in office, were a time of failure, failure all round when the experiment of independence was actually being questioned and many gave their verdict by emigrating. In Brendan's case, the experience of office seared his soul and he brooded on the economic and political failure of the second Inter-Party government for the rest of his life.

Against that background what Brendan did next, just three years after the collapse of that government, was quite astonishing; he tried to undo history, he set to re-fashioning

Irish politics, he attempted to put the two main parties out of business on the grounds they were historically redundant, and to create a new Labour Party on the grounds it was politically essential.

This ambition could have been derided as pure hyperbole or the nonsense of a small mind from a small town grown drunk on trappings of position. Perhaps, at first, it was greeted with indulgence by the aficionados and the worldly-wise.

But when he had brought the Labour Party successfully through two general elections, and had increased seats and votes on both occasions, he had to be taken for real. By the mid sixties, this was primarily happening in the party and trade union movement and that larger body of people who might be taken as naturally sympathetic to Labour.

If the distance between derision and respect is perilously narrow, then he had braved that danger and had emerged triumphant by 1966, the point at which the party took off in the giddy excitement of believing that anything was politically possible.

It is great to be alive in such times, and better still to be young. At the Annual Conference that year, most of the delegates sensed that something new had happened, even if they could not articulate what it was. Everybody knew that this transformation from a party that was worthy but dull into a furnace of ideas, hopes and beliefs was due to one man, the one they called "The Leader" and who kept stating his beliefs with growing authority and fluency. And they were swept along.

Where his inner belief came from was never clear. But the well of his inner convictions ran deep because now he

escalated his ambitions and began to preach a vision which, in retrospect, seems missionary in content and style. It fitted the mood of the sixties of course and *The New Republic*, as he named his vision, didn't seem unnatural, unusual or unique at that time. It just seemed inevitable.

But he was a practical man too, and the party was re-organised with an injection of managerial professionalism coming from young people, like Niall Greene and Barry Desmond.

Brendan also began looking for the best brains to be found in public life, successfully with Justin Keating, Conor Cruise O'Brien, David Thornley and unsuccessfully - unfortunately - with Garret FitzGerald and Declan Costello. This was leadership par excellence, to recruit people of outstanding talents, whom others might see as potential leadership rivals but whom he saw as the brightest and the best.

And to top it off, he set out a vision for Irish society that effectively re-branded the Labour Party and attempted to re-cast Irish society and politics.

The *New Republic* experiment launched in 1967 and crashing to earth in June 1969 may have been short-lived, and, to many, a failure but it was a gloriously thrilling experience which only Garret FitzGerald's constitutional crusade matches in the history of our democracy for its courage, ambition and daring.

We will never know how the "go it alone" policy, the attempt to be the midwife of a new history, would have fared in the seventies, because history snapped back and re-wrote the political agenda, to which Brendan had to accommodate. Well, he could have refused and either walked away or carried on blindly. He did neither. He did what Lord Keynes

said he did when circumstances changed - he changed his mind. And Keynes went on to ask, what do you do?

The Arms Crisis of May 1970 changed everything, utterly, and Brendan concluded, almost immediately it seemed to me, that providing an alternative government to Fianna Fáil was in the national interest, a much derided phrase, and took precedence over his political strategy.

Most leaders usually act by instinct and act instantly. I'm personally convinced that his mind was made up immediately on the afternoon of that Wednesday when the crisis broke following a private meeting with the Taoiseach, Jack Lynch.

Now he had to tell his followers he was changing course a hundred and eighty degrees and swallow his words about going to the back benches should the Party even decide to go into coalition. His speech at the Special Delegate Conference on 13 December 1970, personally proposing the change of electoral strategy, was delivered from the floor as a delegate not from the stage as a Leader - a psychological master stroke.

The record of the National Coalition Government that ensued is, for me anyway, a proud one. The challenges were individually awesome and collectively terrifying; the oil crisis which plunged the world into economic depression; unemployment and inflation, IRA and Loyalist terrorism, bank raids, kidnappings, car bombs. Add to that the challenge of managing Ireland's entry into the unknown experience of European Community membership.

Brendan's greatest achievement in that government was political; he maintained its unity and it fought the subsequent general election on a united front. From a Labour perspective, the plus side of the balance sheet

contained the sweep of social welfare reforms which he and Frank Cluskey introduced, in which Tony Brown was so central, the capital taxes damned by the media, worker rights and equality legislation from Michael O'Leary and so on.

But perhaps the most illuminating way to judge that government is to consider what would have happened had Brendan not shown the leadership circumstances demanded of it: another five years of Fianna Fail; an even earlier arrival of Charlie Haughey; no Garret FitzGerald to devise and implement the European strategy that has served as the cornerstone of our EU success; no social progress, particularly in the face of the world economic depression; and God knows what on Northern Ireland or, indeed, from the continuation of one party rule under a malevolent Fianna Fáil.

There can be no doubt that of the four phases of his leadership, 1960 - 66 preparing the ground, 1967-69 trying for the impossible, 1970-72 accommodating to the arms crisis, 1973 - 77 ruling in the eye of the storm. The last period was the most trying and, emotionally, the most demanding.

The vision of the sixties now had to be limited by the tyranny of facts. The art of governing is not an easy one for an idealist; in his case, the tension between the ideal and the real became almost intolerable.

He was not sorry to lay down the leadership just after the 1977 general election. He left with his dignity intact, as a leader should, and handed over to a most worthy successor, as a leader must.

His legacy is clear enough. He was pivotal in transforming Irish politics; during a decade of global change Ireland kept pace with change elsewhere; he re-wrote the grammar and vocabulary of politics; he created space for the accomplished and he set social reform on a path that could not be reversed; for many his greatest achievement. He ensured the Labour Party and Labour Movement became a bulwark against political terrorism and that, with Fine Gael, the democratic institutions of the state were protected from subversion.

He left Ireland a better country than he found it.

And that, for a leader, is the best epitaph of all.

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