

JUSTIN KEATING

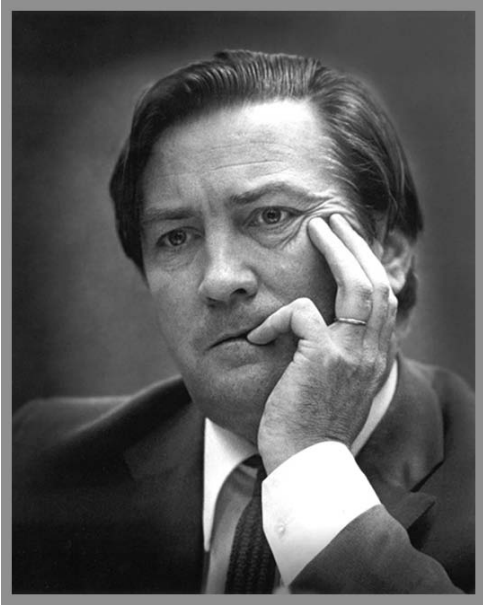


a Tribute by
Brendan Halligan

Justin Keating

1930 – 2009

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Justin Keating was a key figure in the new Labour Party created by Brendan Corish in the 1960s and served as Minister for Industry and Commerce in the National Coalition Government from 1973–77. A brilliant communicator, he was one of the best-known figures in public life for over four decades and was widely respected for the depth and breadth of his intellect.

Born in 1930 to Seán Keating, one of the most notable painters of his day, and May Walsh, a woman of strong republican beliefs, he was reared in the humanist tradition and attended secondary school in Sandford Park before studying Veterinary Science at UCD and University College London.

He excelled as a Vet and eventually became Dean of the Veterinary Science faculty in UCD and, towards the end of his career, the first Professor of Equine Science in the University of Limerick. A research scientist of note, he primarily regarded himself as a scientific rationalist and had the personality to go with it. Cool, rational and patient in debate, his forensic skills in assembling and deconstructing an argument were legendary and equipped him for the roles of teacher and politician.

He was one of a rare breed, an intellectual who took part in public life; not only that, but rose to become the Minister responsible for economic policy.

He came to public notice when he took leave of absence from TCD in 1965 to become Head of Agricultural Broadcasting in RTÉ, then beginning to find its feet as the national broadcaster. He devised and fronted “Telefís Feirme”, an agricultural education programme that became one of the most popular TV series due to his skills as a communicator. Within a year he had become a household name throughout the country and was one of the first TV personalities.

Involved in politics from his student days he had started out as a member of the Communist Party and moved on through various left wing organizations until he joined the Labour Party as the logical culmination of a long journey from doctrinaire Marxism to democratic socialism. But there was never any doubt that intellectually he remained a Marxist all his life although

becoming more vocal as a critic of communism as the contradictions of the Soviet system became more evident.

Recruited into the party by Brendan Halligan, the General Secretary, on the instructions of the leader, Brendan Corish, a public relations coup that was only matched by the recruitment of similar celebrities of the day, he stood for the North County Dublin constituency in the 1969 General Election.

Despite being a newcomer to electoral politics, and notwithstanding the presence of three running mates with strong local bases, he easily won a seat and then embarked on what he later described as the eight busiest and most exciting years of his life.

A month after his election the North exploded into violence with RUC attacks on the nationalist communities in Derry and Belfast causing the arrival of British troops to enforce the peace. Justin soon became a major strategist in shaping party policy on the North and acted as a trusted emissary to the Northern and British Labour Parties as well as the Social Democratic family in Europe.

His debating skills were to the fore in the Dáil debates on the Arms Crisis in May 1970, where he relentlessly exposed the dangers of Fianna Fáil equivocation on the use of violence for political ends.

At the request of Brendan Corish, he led the party campaign in 1972 against Ireland's entry into the European Economic Community. Despite his reservations as a committed internationalist and his belief that Ireland's economic interests lay in a large European market, especially for agriculture, he headed the campaign and brought an intellectual robustness to the Labour position that it would otherwise have lacked.

He wryly noted later in life that he had then become the quintessential European insider,

serving twice as an MEP and as a member of the Council of Ministers while in government, and enthusiastically defended Ireland's membership in all subsequent referenda on Europe, including the second Lisbon referendum just six months before his death.

Perhaps the most crucial of his many contributions during that first term as a TD was his support for Corish's decision to bring the party into coalition in the wake of the Arms Trial. They shared a common conviction that Fianna Fáil's continuation in office posed a threat to Irish democracy and that they had to be replaced. He accepted coalition with Fine Gael as a logical necessity and didn't agonise over it.

In the 1973 General Election he increased his personal vote and, on Corish's insistence, was appointed Minister for Industry and Commerce in the National Coalition government that followed.

The choice of department was deliberate on the part of Corish; he wanted Labour to have a senior economics department, as was the choice of the man, for he admired Justin's expertise as a self-taught economist.

It turned out to be a providential choice because within ten months of taking office the global economy was plunged into depression by the first oil shock.

The threefold increase in the price of oil ushered in a combination of high unemployment and high inflation, "stagflation" a combination which economists had thought impossible.

He found himself with unexpected challenges, not least ensuring the flow of oil at a time of global shortages and panic, damping down inflation that topped 22% in one year and trying to offset job losses that exceeded even the most pessimistic forecasts. No other politician of the day could have managed the crisis as well as he did.

His patient and logical explanations of the economic causes underlying the global crisis and the national policy measures necessary to save the economy ensured that the trade union movement became part of the solution, not part of the problem. But invariably he became associated in the public mind as “Mr. Prices” at the behest of Fianna Fáil and its fellow travelers in the media, including RTE. He had a growing premonition that this label would end his career as a deputy, as transpired in the subsequent 1977 General Election.

From a party perspective his greatest economic contributions in government were shaping the package of wealth taxes introduced in 1974, developing the concept of a State Development Corporation along the lines of the Swedish Statsforetag.

He promoted the IDA throughout the world and, arguably the most significant, evolving a policy on the development of our oil and mineral resources which protected the national interest while encouraging private sector engagement.

This last achievement did not come easy. It was opposed by right wing elements outside the party and left wing factions within. It gave rise to probably the best Labour Party debate in modern times at the 1973 Annual Conference held in Cork.

Coming in the wake of a succession of highly charged speeches opposing his policy, his performance at the rostrum was a masterpiece in oratory and political psychology. It was a mesmeric exposition in matching the ideal with the realistic, a combination of reason and passion. It was the apogee of his career and it won the day and thereby cemented the party in power until the general election defeat of 1977.

His political career was effectively over at that point. The greatest ever economics Minister, he went to the backbenches as a Senator and resumed his academic career while developing

new interests, such as horse-breeding and the promotion of crafts.

But an underlying illness, that of Paget’s Disease, progressively debilitated him and while he openly admitted to his health problems he never confessed to their full effect on his energies, nor did he engage in self pity or recrimination.

Instead, he lived a rich life devoted to the arts, science, teaching, some broadcasting, cooking (which he loved), the preservation of the countryside, and he eventually retired to his beloved farm in Ballymore Eustace with his second wife Barbara.

Surrounded by his wife, children and grandchildren he was waked and buried from that house in a humanist ceremony that echoed his life and beliefs. Comrades from his political past and friends from his diverse range of interests gathered in the snow to say farewell. Ruairi Quinn gave the oration over the grave and the mourners sang the “Internationale”.

A long life in the service of his country and the working class was brought to a fitting end.

- End -

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