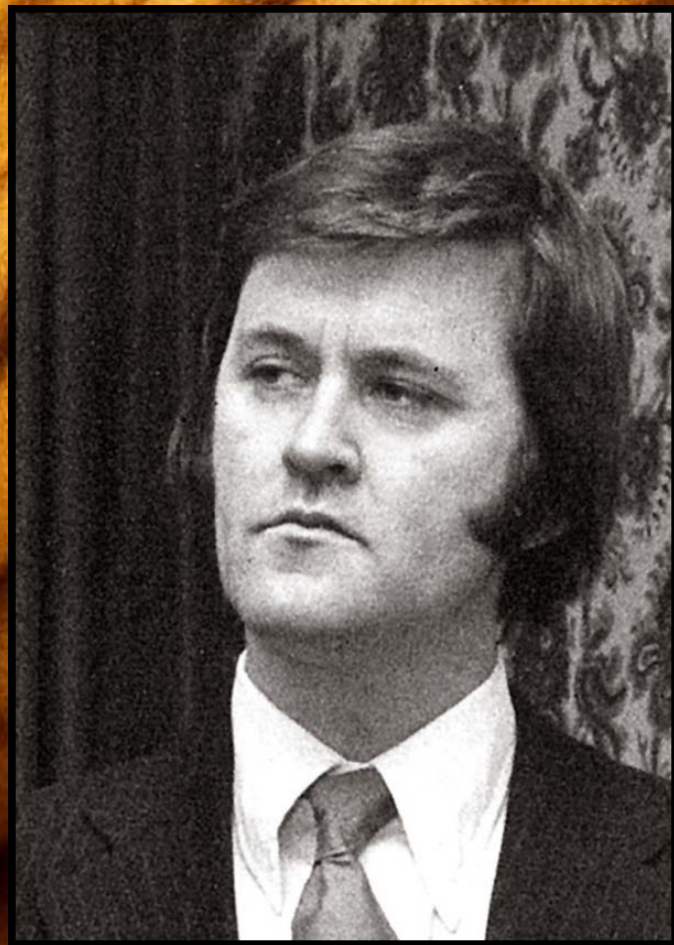


a tribute to

# Michael O'Leary



**BY BRENDAN HALLIGAN**

# Michael O'Leary

An appreciation by Brendan Halligan

Michael O'Leary, former Labour Party Leader, Minister and TD, died in France on 11th May 2006, just three days after his seventieth birthday.



*Mr John Horgan, Advisor to the Minister for Labour, Mr Michael O'Leary, TD, Minister for Labour and Mr Michael Foote, MP, British Secretary of State for Employment.*

His career in Labour politics occupied just two decades of a long and colourful life, yet they defined the man. It is for those years he will be best remembered, not just as a successful Labour politician and Minister but as an enigma. He had burst on the Labour stage in 1965 as a bright young hope but by 1982 had departed the scene having resigned not only as Labour Leader but even as a member of the party he had served since a teenager.

To the end of his days the reasons for that abrupt rupture with his past remained a closed secret except to a few intimates, and the manner of his going has tended to diminish his historic



significance in the minds of those he had left behind. Yet any evaluation of his contribution to the Labour Party in the crucial decades from the sixties to the eighties must conclude that he played a central, perhaps essential, role in modernising Irish politics in the wake of the Civil War era.

The tragedy is that his great talents went unused for what could have been the most productive period of his life. Without question he is the great lost leader of the Labour Party.

## The Man

While there can be many arguments about the controversial circumstances of his resignation there can be no contesting his many talents. Gifted with a high intelligence, graced by boyish good looks, which never seemed to fade, and blessed with an easy, engaging personality, he was the best of companions, great fun, a wonderful mimic (a deadly weapon in the world of politics) and, above all, a sparkling conversationalist in an era when talking was the main occupation of the garrulous intelligentsia to which he belonged.

His considerable, if untidy library, was proof of a mind at home with poetry, the classics, politics, philosophy, biography, and, above all, history.

A strong European side to his personality was reflected in his books and he would have been one of the first to profess himself a "European" and yet at the same time he was quintessentially Irish, indeed Gaelic, particularly proud of his Cork roots, and devoted to the language, history, art, music and folklore of Ireland. He was inconsolable at O'Riada's death, indeed so devastated you would have thought he had just lost a family member.

If he was happy to be considered Gaelic as well as European, he rejoiced at being called a socialist, in the traditional meaning of the term. Devoted to the writings of Connolly, he was well versed in Marx and was a particular disciple of

Gramsci, the Italian activist and theoretician whom he especially revered.

As a politician, O'Leary was a "natural", as the Americans say of the gifted sportsman. "I'm a thoroughbred" he once said, "good for nothing else except politics".

Having cut a dash in Liberty Hall as a branch official in the ITGWU, the first of a new breed of graduates serving the trade unions, he had shot into the public eye with a spectacular victory in the 1965 general election, one of six new Labour deputies. Given little hope in the inner constituency of Dublin North Central, he campaigned ceaselessly in the old style, speaking at street corners, in shops and schools, outside churches, all through a loud speaker slung over a shoulder, pounding the streets and knocking on doors.

O'Leary proved himself to be a brilliant campaigner - unexpectedly so - to the disbelief of the traditionalists, and narrowly won the seat on a low first preference vote buttressed by transfers from across the board.

In the following election he proved himself a real politician - he held onto his seat and increased his vote, being elected on the first count. Nearly a decade later he would again prove what a great campaigner he was by winning a seat in the first directly elected European Parliament.

His style and panache helped shape the new Labour Party of Corish and gave it a radically different sense of itself: young, modern, educated, impatient and committed to principle. Little wonder he was later promoted to the cabinet as if it were nature taking its course.

He hated mediocrity, then the acceptable standard for so much of Irish life and his sense of style stood out. At a time when designer gear was unknown, O'Leary was always impeccably dressed, with an aura of casual elegance which his anguished rivals could never match but which was overtly admired by a wide range of women, many of whom were to be seen adorning

his arm in the few fashionable restaurants then in Dublin.

There was, of course, a darker side to him. Perhaps because of his high intelligence he did not suffer fools gladly and he could be abrupt, sometimes cruel without thinking. He brooded and nursed grievances. While he could be the best of friends he was also undoubtedly the worst of enemies; it was not wise to cross him. But the same man could return in tears from a clinic anguished by the poverty he had encountered at first hand and these experiences fuelled an anger that only burned out at the end of his career.

His impatience gave the false impression of a lack of gravitas or what the English politicians call 'bottom'. Yet in the midst of what seemed to be the chaos of overcrowded diaries, lost files, late arrivals and early departures there was a steely spine of getting things done. It was because of his effectiveness as a politician that, amongst other reasons, Corish later appointed him to the Cabinet and entrusted him with the supremely delicate task of managing the unions.

## The Politician

The first part of his career, up to his appointment as Minister for Labour in March 1973, was unquestionably the most brilliant and almost certainly the most significant. It would be absurd to claim that Corish would never have attempted to rewrite political history without O'Leary at his side, but the constant presence of his brilliant acolyte made it easier for Corish to defy convention and it is not too fanciful to claim that O'Leary was the midwife of 'The New Republic'.

His relationship with Corish was tantamount to that of an indulgent father and a sometimes wayward son. His arrival within the Parliamentary Party and Administrative Council, as the National Executive was known, gave Corish an indispensable ally who was as good at in-fighting as he was at fashioning

ideas. On the one hand O'Leary was crucial to the drafting of 'The New Republic' delivered by Corish to the 1967 Annual Conference and, on the other, central to defending the electoral strategy of going it alone, as he did with such effect at the 1969 Conference when it came under sustained fire.

Following the deep disappointment of the 1969 General Election setback, he was indispensable to Corish in winning time and space to reflect on the outcome. He was central to the integration of the influx of professors Cruise O'Brien, Thornley and Keating, into the Parliamentary Party, being the only deputy who straddled the worlds of the professional vote-getter and the university don. That sense of common purpose, fragile at times, was essential when the Arms Crisis broke in 1970. O'Leary's performance in the Dáil and the media were particularly effective in shaping Labour's message on political violence.

Later that year when a change in the electoral strategy was proposed by Corish and a special party conference held in his hometown, O'Leary helped prepare and manage the process to success. No small feat, it may be said.

When the time came, he helped in the private and open negotiations with Fine Gael on the formation of the National Coalition. His relationships with key Fine Gael members cemented the alliance and made the drafting of the Joint Programme for Government easier than it would have been.

In retrospect, his parliamentary career 1965-73 comes across as intensely crowded with incident, initiatives and crises, so much so that it is impossible to capture all his activities, such as the Party's engagement with Northern Ireland, which was very much his personal project. It led to the formation of the Council of Labour in 1968 and the creation of a network of contacts in Belfast and London. He pioneered the party's membership of the Socialist International and its participation in the Socialist Group in the EEC.

And all through this period he was very much the public face of the party.

## The Minister

Brendan Corish secured five cabinet places for Labour in the National Coalition Government of 1973-77. He sought and secured from the Parliamentary Party the right to select the party's Ministers and nominated O'Leary as Minister for Labour, concrete proof of his esteem. It was a fortuitous choice, because while maintaining accord with the unions would have been indispensable in normal times, it was vital in the aftermath of the 1973 oil shock and the depression that engulfed the global economy sometime afterwards. O'Leary was ideally equipped for the task of educating the unions to the new economic realities, even if his relationship with former boss, Mickey Mullen of the ITGWU, was sometimes fraught.

His management of the unexpected but devastating crisis was faultless apart from educating, cajoling, coercing, persuading (and charming where necessary) the unions he had to do the same with the employers. The incomes policy devised by the government as a response to the novel phenomenon of 'stagflation' was very much his doing (helped by the group of Ministerial advisors). It seemed every weekend there was a strike calling for some creative response by thinking outside the box, as it is now called. At the Party Conferences he defended the government's economic response to the crisis, sometimes with great force and passion and, to the surprise of the firebrands, with consistent success.

His response to another challenge at the time – Jack Lynch being described as the 'real' Taoiseach – was more than a joke, and was greatly underestimated at the time. It was subsequently to establish the government's authority after sixteen years of Fianna Fail rule. In common with other Labour Ministers, O'Leary had to put his stamp on the department, leading to

the election. O'Leary won that battle. He made it clear he was a stickler for government policy, such as introducing worker directors onto semi-state boards. He was the informal manager of Labour's insistence that the capital tax package in the Statement of Intent would be honoured in full. In fact, many of the surreptitious meetings of Labour Ministers took place in his ministerial office and he saw the campaign through to success.

If he was unlucky with the oil crisis, he struck gold with Ireland's new membership of the then EEC. He had to oversee the transposition into Irish law of large swathes of EEC equality and worker rights directives and if he took more credit for that than he should have, it was merely the politician doing what politicians do.

## The Leader

It was never any secret that O'Leary intended to follow Corish as Party Leader, but neither was it a secret that Frank Cluskey wanted to do the same. The two had gradually shifted from being comrades who had entered the Dáil together to being bitter rivals, something that distressed Corish greatly. When Corish resigned immediately after the 1977 defeat of the National Coalition Government, the two rivals contested the leadership election and to their joint horror each won half of the votes cast by their fellow deputies. Immediately a second ballot was held and Cluskey won by 9 votes to 7.

O'Leary never overcame this defeat. He withdrew into himself and from the life of the party. All communication was cut off with anyone whom he suspected of having supported or aided Cluskey, and this list seemed to grow in his mind as time passed. All attempts at reconciliation were repulsed and almost as a consolation he stood for the European Parliament in 1979 and won a seat in the Dublin Constituency. But it meant nothing to him, it seemed and he was never really interested in the Parliament.

Life being as capricious as it is, Cluskey lost his Dáil seat in the 1981 General Election and he and O'Leary swapped roles, O'Leary becoming the new Leader by acclamation. In this dramatic reversal of fortune, O'Leary treated his rival with great sensitivity, which spoke volumes for the man and which Cluskey very much appreciated.

But this is where the mystery deepens. His elevation as Leader seemed like ashes in his mouth. Outwardly, at least, the black mood that had descended on his soul when losing to Cluskey refused to lift. He went through the motions of forming a government with Fine Gael, leaving it to others to do the real negotiation. He made a perfunctory appeal to Conference to approve going into government, which the delegates did without much enthusiasm or debate. And then he became Tánaiste as well as Minister, yet the mood persisted.

This government, one of the shortest lived in history, was undistinguished and is mainly remembered for its failure to deal with a crisis brought on by snow. It collapsed and O'Leary, again in opposition, brooded on a strategy that would confront Fianna Fail with an opposition organised into a permanent alliance. It was not clear what this meant for the independence of the Labour Party and a subsequent conference chose to endorse Labour's separate and distinct personality rather than following his strategy.

It would appear that a second rejection, this time by Party members, was too much. Within days he had resigned his party leadership and membership, winding up in a somewhat bewildered Fine Gael, for whom he subsequently won a Dáil seat. But his career was over. Effectively he had become a political orphan and the man who had been the quintessential insider was now a forlorn outsider.

As Brendan Corish lay dying some seven years later, O'Leary made his peace with his former friend and idol and spoke, on the insistence of the Corish family, at a function commemorating Corish directly after the funeral.

Many years later when Ruairí Quinn decorated the Parliamentary Party meeting room in the new wing of Leinster House, he insisted that O'Leary's portrait should hang in the gallery of Labour Leaders.

It was a proper and generous tribute to the Leader the party had lost and whom we now mourn as a lost friend.

END

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