Dooge, James Clement Ignatius ('Jim')

by Terry Clavin

Dooge, James Clement Ignatius ('Jim') (1922–2010), academic and politician, was born on 30 July 1922 in Grange Road West, Birkenhead, near Liverpool, the only son of Denis Dooge, marine engineer, and his wife Veronica (née Carroll). The Dooges were a family of engineers, most notably Jim's grandfather, John Publins Dooge (1862–1954), of Barrisky, Co. Wicklow, who worked for thirty-two years with the Burma Railway Company before returning to Ireland in 1921 and becoming a long-serving Fine Gael representative on Dún Laoghaire Borough Council and Dublin County Council, acting as chairman of both.

Jim Dooge was educated in Liverpool before his family moved to Dún Laoghaire, Co. Dublin, where he attended the local CBS and became fluent in Irish. Entering UCD in 1939 with first place in the Dublin County Council university scholarship competition, he graduated B.Sc. and BE (Civil) with first-class honours in 1942, winning the Pierce Malone scholarship. He played hockey for Monkstown, engaged in amateur theatraics, and was active in local debating societies and the Irish Film Society.

In 1943 he was hired by the Office of Public Works as assistant engineer on the design and survey of river improvements. While in UCD, he met Marie Veronica ('Roni') O'Doherty from Belfast, and married her in 1946; they lived first in Booterstown, Co. Dublin, and had two sons and three daughters. He joined the ESB's hydrometric design section in 1946 and conducted studies for hydroelectric schemes, developing an interest in hydrology (hydraulic engineering dealing with floods, drought, rainfall and evaporation). His research therein was published in professional and scientific journals from the late 1940s and yielded a stream of prizes from the Institute of Civil Engineers of Ireland (ICEI) and also an ME from the NUI in 1952.

Attracted by family connections and the party's support for economic planning, he joined Fine Gael in 1947 and was installed as constituency secretary by local TD Liam Cosgrave. Elected to Dublin County Council in 1948 and Dún Laoghaire Borough Council in 1950, Dooge served as chairman of Dublin County Council (1950–51 and 1953–4). His catholic faith nurtured a social conscience that was not very evident during his local government career, where he attracted notice as a notably able, but fairly conventional Fine Gael representative.

In 1954 he took leave of absence from the ESB and resigned from local government to become a research associate at the University of Iowa's world-renowned institute of hydraulic research. After taking an M.Sc. there in fluid mechanics and hydraulics, he returned to Ireland in 1956 and resumed at the ESB as senior design engineer with responsibility for hydraulic model experiments. In recognition of his
internationally acclaimed research, he was appointed professor of civil engineering at UCC in 1958 and moved to Bishopstown, Cork. Focusing on the unit hydrograph method for modelling rainfall runoffs in river catchments, he helped pioneer the application of mathematical systems theory to hydrology. Although of limited practical usefulness, the model outlined in his 1959 paper 'A general theory of the unit hydrograph' represented a fundamental advance in unit hydrograph principles and won the Horton award of the American Geophysical Union.

Shouldering a heavy teaching workload to deter accusations of being distracted by his renewed political activism, he was successively elected a Fine Gael senator on the labour panel (1961–9) and the industrial and commercial panel (1969–77). His learned speeches, mainly on economics and education, fell on deaf ears, but he believed that technical seanad criticisms informed subsequent legislation. (While serving as president of the ICEI (1968–9), he negotiated its merger with Cumann na nInealtóirí and shepherded the required legislation through the oireachtais.) Eager to base himself nearer to the political cockpit, he returned to Dublin in 1969 when he was appointed professor of civil engineering in UCD. He lived thereafter in Monkstown, Co. Dublin.

The new Fine Gael leader, Dooge’s mentor Liam Cosgrave, nominated him for leas cathaoirleach of the seanad (1965–73) and relied on him to formulate party policy, until they became semi-estranged in 1966 over Dooge’s association with Fine Gael's emergent progressive wing. Advocating social pluralism and mildly redistributionist economic policies in implicit opposition to Cosgrave’s cautious leadership, Dooge unsuccessfully proposed that the party rename itself ‘Fine Gael – The Social Democratic Party’ at the 1968 ard-fheis.

Despite tensions between Fine Gael’s liberal and conservative factions, Dooge was respected across the party and crucial to its underdeveloped national organisation, as academic commitments restricted him to a covertly influential backroom role. (Conversely, his political interests led him to turn down a number of prestigious academic appointments abroad.) He was sensitive to suggestions that he had been disloyal towards Cosgrave, who continued to seek his advice and included him in negotiations for the joint general election manifesto with the Labour party in 1973. Upon the ensuing election of the Fine Gael–Labour coalition, Dooge became cathaoirleach of the seanad, an undemanding role that he performed with aplomb for the next four years.

Following the coalition’s general election defeat in 1977, he retired from the seanad to concentrate on his still-flourishing academic career, eventually accumulating some one hundred publications as sole author and over fifty as joint author. The most comprehensive elaboration of his theories on systems hydrology – which likened hydrological phenomena to a mechanical network obeying predictable rules – was his 1973 publication Linear theory of hydrologic systems, which endurably influenced the management of water resources worldwide. Unlike some promoters
of linear theory in hydrology, he readily acknowledged the inherent randomness of water flow and fretted that many of his academic colleagues suffered from a lack of practical engineering experience.

Regularly lecturing abroad and acting as a consultant to aid agencies, he made a leading contribution to international cooperation in hydrological research, particularly in eastern Europe and China. Also keen to encourage inter-disciplinary research, he was among the first to urge hydrologists to collaborate with atmospheric and oceanic scientists in monitoring the earth's climate, and was in 1978 involved in some of the earliest discussions on climate change. He was president of the International Commission on Water Resources Systems (1971–5) and of the International Association of Hydrological Sciences (1975–9); chairman of the scientific advisory committee of the World Climate Impact Studies Programme (1980–90); secretary general (1980–82) and president (1993–6) of the International Council for Science; and secretary (1978–81) and president (1987–90) of the RIA.

The liberal takeover of Fine Gael following the succession of Garret FitzGerald (1926–2011) as leader in 1977 drew Dooge back into politics, particularly since he and FitzGerald had grown close while serving together in the seanad in 1965–9. Valued by FitzGerald as a more considered foil for his own quicksilver intellect, Dooge was pre-eminent within the urbane, extra-parliamentary inner circle that drove Fine Gael's transformation into a professionally run party. Dooge's report, as chairman of the election committee, on candidate selection and vote management, provided the blueprint for Fine Gael's sweeping gains in the 1981 general election. In tandem with Alexis FitzGerald (qv), another of Garret FitzGerald's confidants, Dooge oversaw policy formation and scriptwriting, and assisted Garret FitzGerald in negotiating coalition agreements with the Labour party in 1981 and 1982.

Offered foreign affairs in the June 1981 coalition cabinet, Dooge accepted, while foreseeing that this unprecedented ministerial elevation from outside the oireachtas would infuriate the mass of Fine Gael deputies jealous of FitzGerald's unelected personal clique. There would have been an open mutiny had it been known that FitzGerald was guided by his wife, Joan FitzGerald (qv), who argued that Dooge was the only candidate he could trust in such a sensitive portfolio. Before formally assuming his position, Dooge had to be appointed to the seanad as a taoiseach's nominee in August 1981 and ratified as minister by the reconvened dail in October. Until then, he could not draw a ministerial salary, use a state car or attend cabinet meetings, and was accompanied at diplomatic negotiations by an acting foreign minister. Moreover, FitzGerald's ill-advised attempts to resolve the hunger strikes in Northern Ireland caused immediate complications.

The unrest within Fine Gael accompanying Dooge's appointment faded thanks to his obvious merit and diligent cultivation of backbenchers; it helped that he was strikingly unassuming for such an accomplished man. Lauded by Foreign Affairs officials, he conducted a cunning rearguard action against British attempts to reform
the common agricultural policy, and upheld Ireland’s neutrality during discussions on EEC security. Yet he was barely three months in office when FitzGerald’s government fell in January 1982.

Rebuffing FitzGerald’s pleas to run for the dáil in the February general election (in which the coalition was defeated), Dooge topped the poll for the NUI seanad panel in April, doing so again in February 1983, and resumed as a key member of FitzGerald’s campaign team for the November 1982 general election that returned the Fine Gael–Labour coalition. Citing his fading eyesight, but probably in acknowledgement of the opposition within Fine Gael to his re-appointment, Dooge ruled himself out of FitzGerald’s second cabinet (no minister has since been chosen from outside the dáil). His influence waned thereafter, as Fitzgerald became increasingly dependent on his media handlers. He served as government leader in the seanad (1983–7), ensuring that it dealt with more legislation than any previous seanad.

Declining the offer of an EEC commissionership, Dooge accepted FitzGerald’s nomination (July 1984) as chairman of an EEC committee established to propose ways of advancing progress towards European unity. Little was expected of the so-called ‘Dooge committee’, and in September the West German government attempted unsuccessfully to replace Dooge with a more prestigious figure. His subtle chairmanship defied the critics and won Ireland significant kudos by providing cover for the French government’s integrationist agenda. Speedily completing its work, the committee’s report (March 1985) forensically clarified the parameters of the debate and provided a politically realistic basis for the inter-governmental negotiations that produced the Single European Act (1987), a far-reaching advance for the EEC.

Dooge did not seek re-election to the seanad in 1987 and retired definitively from politics. Resigning his UCD professorship in 1984, he concentrated on developing climate change models first with his team of researchers at the department of engineering hydrology in UCG and then at the Centre for Water Resources in UCD from 1988. He was chairman of the organising committee of the second world climate conference (1990) and also chaired the inaugural world conference on water (1992), which formulated a set of internationally accepted principles governing water management.

A founding father of modern hydrology, he was showered with academic distinctions, including eight honorary doctorates, the international prize in hydrology (1983), an honorary professorship at the East China Technical University of Water Resources (1986), the Bowie medal of the American Geophysical Union (1986), the International Meteorological Organisation Prize (1999), the Prince Philip medal of the Royal Academy of Engineering (2005), and the RIA gold medal (2006). Amongst others, he was a foreign member of the Accademia Patavina (Padua) and of the academies of science for Poland, Russia and Spain, and a fellow of the Institution of
Civil Engineers (London), the Royal Academy of Engineering, the American Society of Civil Engineers and the American Geophysical Union.

Regularly visiting Italy, he relished its art, food and wine. In retirement, he remained active with St Vincent de Paul, the Refugee Trust and the pastoral council for Blackrock parish. Having all but completed his memoirs, he died in his Monkstown residence on 30 July 2010 and was buried in Dean's Grange cemetery. His personal papers are in the UCD archive, and his will disposed of €1.1 million.
