

Blaney, Harry

by Patrick Maume

Blaney, Harry (1928–2013), public representative, was born on 18 February 1928 in Rossnakill on the Fanad Peninsula, Co. Donegal, one of eleven children (five daughters and six sons) of Neal Blaney TD (qv) and his wife Nora (née Sweeney). Neil Blaney (qv) was his eldest brother. Harry began political activism aged fifteen, canvassing and postering in the 1943 general election. Educated locally, he lacked enthusiasm for school, preferring farm work and playing soccer for Swilly Rovers. He was on the team that won the 1953 FAI Junior Cup, and in October 1950 had a trial for Glasgow Celtic football club. In later life he helped organise the Fanad United soccer team and oversaw the annual Donegal sports star awards.

After his parents' early deaths, Harry took responsibility for the farm. While siblings moved away, he spent his life cattle farming and growing potatoes in Rossnakill, living in the whitewashed thatched cottage where he grew up. (Neil spent summers in a second cottage on the seventy-acre farm; by 2001 the farm had grown to 125 acres and was run by Harry's son Liam). Harry supplemented farm income by working for the Department of Posts and Telegraphs (1953–6), as an artificial insemination technician for the North-West Cattle Breeders' Association (1956–9), and as a cattle ear-tagger on the bovine TB eradication scheme for the Department of Agriculture. In July 1965 he married Margaret Conaghan, who he met while working for the Department of Agriculture; they had five daughters and two sons. Blaney later combined ownership of the Milford Inn pub with farming.

After Neil Blaney inherited their father's dáil seat in 1948, the brothers constructed a political machine centred in the Fanad/Milford area. Harry was organiser-in-chief, with his genial personality and wealth of local knowledge (he always carried a notebook to record constituents' concerns). He was accessible and sociable compared to his brother, and unlike Neil was not a teetotaler. When Neil became a cabinet minister in 1957, Harry inherited his county council seat in the Milford electoral area. He regularly demanded improved roads, housing, communications, water supply and economic development for his constituents, exploited clientelist opportunities opened by an expanding national economy and Neil's national prominence, and showed genuine concern for his remote and underdeveloped community while ruthlessly squashing potential local rivals. Political opponents acknowledged that at council meetings he was 'first to arrive and last to leave and never left his seat' (*Donegal Democrat*, 26 June 1987). He was prominent among Donegal activists sent across the country to Fianna Fáil by-election campaigns in the 1960s, and was chairman of Donegal County Council (1967–8).

The Northern Ireland Troubles, and Neil's involvement in the Arms Crisis with Charles Haughey (qv), produced dissension within Donegal Fianna Fáil, with former

ally Senator Bernard McGlinchey siding with the party leadership against Blaney. During the 1971 Public Accounts Committee enquiry following the Arms Trials, the head of Special Branch claimed that from September 1969 Neil and Harry Blaney gave IRA members money and arms. Neil pointed out that Harry was never detained or questioned about this allegation. After demanding unsuccessfully that his legal representative cross-examine the witness, Harry denied the allegations before the committee, saying the witness was 'a liar himself [or] listening to people who had been telling lies' and the 'unconstitutional' inquiry was blackening Jack Lynch's (qv) opponents before the forthcoming Fianna Fáil ard fheis (*Ir. Press*, 12 February 1971).

In June 1972 Harry denounced Neil's expulsion from Fianna Fáil as illegal. Preparations began for a separate Blaneyite party, while Harry complained (ironically given the Blaney machine's record) that Lynch's men were creating fake branches and purging Blaney supporters. In May 1973 Harry, four other county councillors and three members of urban councils were expelled for supporting Neil's independent candidacy in the general election. This became the nucleus of Independent Fianna Fáil (IFF), founded later that year. IFF combined hardline republicanism (the Blaneys regularly demanded that Britain announce a deadline for withdrawal from Northern Ireland) and brokerage politics driven by Donegal particularism and a sense that the county was economically neglected.

In July 1974 Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil excluded IFF councillors from council committees, but they obtained representation on the general purposes committee through systematic obstruction of council business. In subsequent years Blaney combined representations on behalf of Donegal potato growers – demanding that council bureaucrats be sacked instead of labourers, lobbying to obtain European funds for Donegal drainage and enthusiastic support for Section 4 motions (allowing one-off housing developments as exceptions to council development plans) – with participation in protest rallies against the denial of political status to republicans in the 'H-blocks' of the Maze prison and advocating for the expulsion of the British ambassador.

Throughout the 1980s IFF co-operated with Provisional Sinn Féin inside and outside the council chamber, protesting about the cost of border security and criticising Garda searches for republican activity in Fanad. The emergence of Charles Haughey as Fianna Fáil leader and Neil Blaney's support of his 1982 minority government aroused speculation that IFF might rejoin FF. In 1985 Harry Blaney and Bernard McGlinchey negotiated a local IFF–FF pact; Blaney became county council chairman (1986–7). Haughey slowly organised new unity talks, intensified when the 1987 general election meant Neil Blaney's vote might be vital for a Fianna Fáil minority government. Haughey, however, rejected IFF's demands which included a cabinet seat for Neil Blaney, withdrawal from the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement, and repeal of Section 31 of the Broadcasting Act (prohibiting broadcasting interviews with members of subversive organisations). Although Neil

Blaney voted for Haughey as taoiseach, prospects for unity collapsed after Fine Gael's 'Tallaght strategy' of supporting government measures for national recovery undercut IFF's clout. Differences between Fianna Fáil and the Blaneys widened when Haughey allowed extradition to Northern Ireland, accepted the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement, and introduced stringent cutbacks in public spending (the Blaneys believed they had secured promises of state spending on the construction industry).

While chairing a Donegal County Council debate on a motion of sympathy for eight IRA men and a civilian killed at Loughgall, Co. Armagh, Blaney denounced the government as 'rotten to the core ... in relation to their actions on Northern Ireland', and claimed that the Anglo-Irish Agreement secured partition (*Donegal Democrat*, 29 May 1987). This led to heated exchanges and a walk-out by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael councillors. Relations between IFF and Fianna Fáil were further compromised by Harry Blaney's prominence as chairman of the Donegal anti-extradition committee, and his accusing Chief Justice Thomas Francis O'Higgins (qv) of 'running riot' with the constitution by extraditing Dominic McGlinchey (qv) (*Donegal Democrat*, 1 April 1988), and by a Garda search of Neil Blaney's cottage on the family farm. On several occasions Harry Blaney posted bail for republicans facing trial for paramilitary activities. He concluded Haughey was 'a friend when he wanted to be and was looking for something ... [he] did not do very much for Donegal' (*Donegal News*, 16 June 2006).

Blaney served on the North-Western Regional Health Board (1987–99) and on the Donegal Vocational Education Committee. In June 1988 he claimed the incidence of child sexual abuse was exaggerated since he had never encountered it (*Donegal News*, 25 June 1988). (Numerous cases were subsequently revealed in Donegal.)

The departure of Haughey and the development of the Northern Ireland peace process improved relations between Fianna Fáil and IFF. After Neil Blaney's death in 1995, Harry became leader of IFF and opened unsuccessful talks with Fianna Fáil about running a joint by-election candidate. Although Blaney lost the by-election to a Fianna Fáil candidate he polled strongly, and before the 1997 general election reorganised the IFF machine. He opposed the 'liberal agenda', denouncing provision of vasectomies at Letterkenny Hospital, opposing the introduction of divorce, and demanding a referendum to restrict the scope of the 1992 'X case' ruling which permitted abortion in certain circumstances. This reflected both personal conviction and awareness of the political vulnerability of the socially liberal Fianna Fáil TD, Dr Jim McDaid.

At the 1997 general election Blaney took the third seat in Donegal North-East from Fine Gael; at sixty-nine he was the oldest person to be elected a first-time TD. For the next five years, he was one of three (later four) independents who sustained the Fianna Fáil-Progressive Democrat coalition government led by Bertie Ahern in return for local concessions. Blaney's maiden speech outlined the underdeveloped status of Donegal. He presented Ahern with an eighteen-item 'shopping list' including

(as well as housing, rural road construction and a regional water scheme) the construction of a bridge across Mulroy Bay. Since boyhood Blaney had dreamt of a bridge permitting a 400-metre crossing from Fanad to Rosguill rather than a nearly fifty kilometre round journey; he had advocated for it since 1986 but the county engineer dismissed its #20 million cost as excessive. Blaney was surprised when Ahern agreed to it and accepted the rest of the 'shopping list' without demur. The Harry Blaney Bridge, completed in 2009, was described as 'the bridge to nowhere' by critics who argued priority should have been given to a bridge over the Swilly at Letterkenny and West Donegal residents who lamented their area received only 'crumbs off the master's table' (*Donegal News*, 1 June 2009).

Blaney rarely spoke in Dáil Éireann (1997–2002), though he was vice-chairman of the joint oireachtas committee on agriculture and food. Supporting the government on all but three of 400 motions, he briefly threatened to oppose the 1998 Belfast Agreement because it involved the removal of the Republic's constitutional claim to Northern Ireland, and voted against Irish membership of the NATO-linked 'Partnership for Peace' which he saw as endangering Irish neutrality. He also led protests over the location of mobile phone masts, blocked changes to licensing laws which might affect rural pubs, and continued to campaign for his brother Neil to be cleared of acting illegally during the Arms Crisis. Blaney joined other pro-government independents in blocking abolition of the 'dual mandate' allowing TDs to serve simultaneously on local authorities, and in pressing for new restrictions on abortion. (The referendum on this last proposal was narrowly defeated in March 2002; Blaney blamed the government for dividing opponents of abortion by an insufficiently strict wording.)

In 1999 Blaney retired from Donegal County Council and associated bodies, and was succeeded by his son Niall; at the 2002 general election Niall succeeded his father as IFF TD for Donegal North-East, and was in turn succeeded on the county council by his brother Liam. Harry Blaney remained leader of IFF, and oversaw clandestine negotiations which led to its reunion with Fianna Fáil in 2006. Although this was opposed by Neil T. Blaney's (Dublin-based) children and some Donegal Fianna Fáil loyalists, it reflected awareness that IFF's vote was in long-term decline as older activists died off and Sinn Féin support grew, while the growing national consensus on Northern Ireland policy softened its differences with Fianna Fáil. (In irenic retirement, Blaney claimed he had never extended county council disputes beyond the council chamber.)

Niall Blaney was re-elected as a Fianna Fáil TD in 2007, but in 2011 withdrew unexpectedly because of personal problems (though he later twice unsuccessfully contested Seanad elections for Fianna Fáil). MacDara Blaney (son of Neil) stood for the constituency in 2011 as an independent but made little impact, and although Liam Blaney remained a county councillor, Harry Blaney's death in Letterkenny General Hospital on 29 April 2013 after a short illness was widely seen as

symbolising the end of the dynasty. He was buried in Massmount church cemetery, Fanad.

Blaney's republican ideological commitment, and his genuine concern for his constituents should not be dismissed, but above all he was a classical clientelist politician, unconstrained after 1973 by national party structures. Without his organising skills, Neil Blaney's political base would have been less secure; if Harry rather than Neil had inherited their father's dáil seat, he might have been a respected backbencher but would probably never have attained the same national prominence.

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*Donegal News*, 6 July 1974; 31 July 1976; 30 Sept. 1978; 31 May, 29 Nov., 13 Dec. 1980; 20 Mar., 17 Apr., 30 July 1982; 30 May, 18 June 1987; 25 June 1988; 2 June 1990; 23 May 1992; 2 Apr., 7 May 1994; 4 Mar., 29 Apr. 1995; 22 March 1996; 23, 30 May, 20 June, 7 Nov. 1997; 7 Aug. 1998; 22 Jan., 7 May 1999; 27 Oct. 2000; 16 Mar., 20 Apr., 30 Nov. 2001; 15 Mar., 29 Nov. 2002; 16 Mar. 2003; 18 Feb., 24 June, 22 July 2005; 16 June, 28 July, 22 Sept. 2006; 2 Apr. 2007; 20 Mar., 1 June, 12 June 2009; 14 June, 1 Oct. 2010; 31 Jan. 2011; 3 May 2013; *Donegal Democrat*, 3 July 1959; 29 Sept. 1961; 2 Apr., 23 July 1965; 14 July 1967; 5 July 1968; 30 July 1976; 14 Apr., 29 Sept. 1978; 6 Mar., 31 July 1980; 10 Apr., 29 May, 12, 23, 26 June, 14 Aug., 18 Sept. 1987; 1 Apr., 19 Aug. 1988; 11 Aug. 1989; 5 Apr. 1991; 16 June 1994; 23 Nov. 1995; 25 Jan., 8 Feb. 1996; *Ir. Independent*, 10 Feb. 1971; 27, 29 June 1972; 8 Feb. 1973; 9 June 1987; 26 May, 13 June 1997; 23 Apr. 1998; 22 Mar., 26 May 2001; 8 Mar. 2002; 10 Aug., 12 Nov. 2004; 30 Apr. 2013; *Ir. Press*, 10, 12 February, 21 Apr. 1971; 26 May, 9 June, 24 Nov. 1987; *Cork Examiner*, 18 May 1973; 10 Nov. 1990; 26 Mar., 22 Apr., 6 Sept. 1997; 13 Mar. 1998; 22 June, 14 Oct. 1999; 20 June 2001; *Evening Herald*, 17 Jan. 1990; 10 June 1997; 17 Apr. 1998; 1 June 2004; *Sunday Independent*, 8 Aug. 1999; 5 May 2013; *Ir. Times*, 29 July 2006; 7 May 2008; 12 Feb. 2011; 7 Aug. 2012; 30 Apr., 2, 4 May 2013; Paul Martin Sacks, *The Donegal mafia* (1976); Kevin Rafter, *Neil Blaney: a soldier of destiny* (1993); Bertie Ahern, *Bertie Ahern: the autobiography* (2009); Liam Weeks, *Independents in Irish party democracy* (2018)