

Boland, Kevin

by Patrick Maume

Boland, Kevin (1917–2001), cabinet minister and republican, was born 15 October 1917 in Fairview, Dublin, the son of Gerald Boland (qv), Fianna Fáil TD and cabinet minister, and his wife, Annie (née Keating), former Cumann na mBan and Gaelic League activist. The Bolands traced their republican pedigree to the Manchester rescue of 1867. Childhood memories of the civil war and Free State searches of the family home in Marino, Dublin, deeply influenced Boland's later attitudes. He once remarked half-humorously that the failure of Éamon de Valera (qv) to live up to the standards of republicanism set by the Bolands reflected the absence of such a tradition in his family. This sense of pedigree also influenced his attitude to Charles Haughey (1925–2006), whose father had served in the Free State army; Boland described his cabinet colleague as 'that bloody little Blueshirt'. He learned to equate Fianna Fáil with the nation; other parties were mere factional interests and non-Fianna-Fáil governments were not fully legitimate.

After training as a civil engineer and serving as a lieutenant in the army during the Emergency (he participated in attempts to break the German legation's codes) Boland worked in the Fianna Fáil party organisation. He was one of the young activists entrusted by Seán Lemass (qv) with the task of rebuilding the party machine after the 1954 election. (In this he again imitated his father, who travelled the country building up the party's organisation in the late 1920s.) Boland was first elected to the dáil for Dublin County in the 1957 general election, after standing unsuccessfully in 1951 and 1954 and serving on Dublin corporation. He was re-elected for Dublin County in 1961 and 1965 and Dublin South County in 1969. On his first day in the dáil he became minister for defence – (this was widely interpreted as de Valera's consolation to Gerry Boland, dropped from the new cabinet). He held this post until 1961, overseeing the internment of IRA members. He then served as minister for social welfare (1961–6) and minister for local government (1966–70).

Boland's ministerial record was mediocre. As minister for social welfare he assisted the introduction of the farmers' dole and expressed suspicion that planning legislation endangered the rights of property-owners. (He himself owned a farm near Rathcoole, Co. Dublin.) Neil Blaney (qv), Boland's predecessor as minister for local government, blamed him for the disastrous development of Ballymun Flats (conceived by Blaney). Boland's verbal outbursts against 'belted earls and their ladies and left-wing intellectuals' who advocated the preservation of Dublin's Georgian architecture symbolised the philistine demolition and speculative rebuilding of the era. (One cartoonist portrayed him as King Kong trampling Dublin underfoot.) In retrospect, some commentators recognised that Boland was more sensitive to the fabric of the city than other holders of his office – not an exalted standard. He vetoed some reckless schemes, including a proposal to make the Grand Canal

a five-lane motorway, and he also oversaw the first tenant purchase scheme for council housing. Boland kept a certain distance from Taca, the party fundraising organisation associated with Charles Haughey and Blaney, which he thought made Fianna Fáil excessively dependent on large donors. While some planning decisions were attributed to Taca influence, Boland protested: 'I never did a thing within my department for a Taca member.'

Boland, like his father, was uneasy at some of the economic policies of Seán Lemass. He regretted the abolition of restrictions on foreign ownership of Irish businesses, but acquiesced: 'I had thousands of ill-nourished people in my constituency' (*Up Dev!*, 117). He was an enthusiastic advocate of the Irish language, wore a fáinne, and always signed official documents as Caoimghín Ó Beoláin. In 1966 he supported Neil Blaney in the Fianna Fáil leadership election following the retirement of Lemass. (He decided not to stand himself because he was incapable of paying formal tributes on the deaths of men whom he despised.) Like Blaney, he eventually supported the compromise candidate, Jack Lynch (qv), who notably lacked a republican pedigree, telling Blaney: 'Let him on so long as he does what we tell him' (Rafter, 40). Boland verbally abused Frank Aiken (qv) for nominating George Colley (qv). His dislike for Colley increased when the committee on the constitution chaired by the latter proposed in its December 1967 report to remove Article 3 (claiming jurisdiction over Northern Ireland). Boland later claimed – inaccurately – that the report had been foisted on Fianna Fáil committee members by Fine Gael and that Lemass could not have approved of it.

While serving as a minister, Boland oversaw the party organisation with Neil Blaney. (Boland handled by-elections in safe seats; marginal contests were left to Blaney.) He resisted attempts to professionalise organisation and policy formation, fearing a weakening of the party's ethos. (He also resisted attempts to supplement the civil service with outside experts.) His failure to separate the roles of minister and party activist provoked intense hostility. In 1968 he spearheaded a failed attempt to abolish proportional representation by referendum, addressing the seanad for six and a half hours. After the defeat of the proposal, he oversaw a gerrymander of constituency boundaries. During the 1969 general election Boland participated in a 'Red scare', warning that the Labour Party had been taken over by communists such as 'Conor Cruise Castro God Bless Albania O'Brien' bent on wholesale confiscation. He later mourned that a coalition government in 1969 could not have been less republican than Lynch, and Fianna Fáil in opposition might have taken a more republican stance on the outbreak of the troubles in Northern Ireland. Boland's disdain for Lynch was graphically revealed when the new dáil met on 2 July 1969. As Boland exchanged insults with opposition deputies about the election campaign, the ceann comhairle urged him to desist. Lynch handed him a note asking him to obey the chair; Boland threw it away. Lynch is alleged to have said: 'Kevin has a commitment that frightens me' (Rafter, 44).

As rioting broke out in Derry city in August 1969, Boland joined Blaney in urging that Irish troops should be sent across the border. He briefly resigned from the cabinet over its refusal to recall Irish troops from UN peacekeeping in Cyprus, but was persuaded to remain by President de Valera, who argued that the government might be replaced by a Fine-Gael-led coalition. Thereafter he avoided direct participation in cabinet debates on Northern Ireland, but regularly prompted Blaney with notes. Boland had no direct involvement in the attempted importation of arms for northern nationalists, but publicly associated himself with Blaney's view, in speeches made in December 1969 and January 1970, that the use of force should not be ruled out. These were implicit challenges to Lynch's equivocal position. Boland always claimed the cabinet knew in general terms of plans to arm northern nationalists. (After the arms trial Boland assisted the family of Captain James Kelly (qv) (d. 2003), the military intelligence officer involved, whom he saw as betrayed by his superiors.)

On 5 May 1970 Boland resigned from the cabinet after the dismissal of Haughey and Blaney over the attempted arms importation. He accused Lynch and the Garda special branch of 'Gestapo tactics' (maintaining surveillance on cabinet ministers), declaring that, while the IRA were not entitled to subvert the southern state, southern nationalists were morally obliged to assist northern nationalists resisting British occupation. (He simultaneously maintained that the southern state as a product of the treaty was fundamentally illegitimate and must be sacrificed to end partition.) After the arrest of Haughey, Blaney, and others on 27–8 May, Boland publicly accused Lynch of 'felon-setting' (exposing northern nationalists to arrest). He resigned as party secretary and was expelled from the parliamentary party. Although he sought grassroots support against the leadership, he found the other ex-ministers unwilling to cooperate. After the acquittal of the arms trial defendants on 23 October 1970, he joined calls for Lynch's resignation but was soon isolated. He resigned from the dáil on 4 November 1970, considering himself bound by his party pledge but refusing to endorse perjured evidence in a vote of confidence: ' . . . there is nothing left to me but my own personal honour, such as it is – and I propose to retain that' (*Dáil debates*, 3 Nov. 1970). Boland tried to organise a grassroots revolt at the Fianna Fáil ard fheis on 19–21 February 1971; it was defeated riotously, Patrick Hillery, minister for foreign affairs, proclaiming: 'You can have Boland but you cannot have Fianna Fáil' (*Ir. Times*, 22 Feb. 1971). Boland found that grassroots discontent and the principles he ascribed to Fianna Fáil shrank before the ethos of obedience to the leader and fear of 'letting in the Blueshirts'. He left Fianna Fáil in May 1972. The following month, encouraged by his father, he founded a republican party, Aontacht Éireann, which ran thirteen candidates (including Boland in Dublin South County) in the 1973 general election; all were defeated.

In 1974 Boland sued the Irish government, claiming the Sunningdale agreement of December 1973 violated the Irish constitution. Although he lost the case, the government was obliged to argue that the agreement did not abandon the constitutional claim to jurisdiction over Northern Ireland, thereby antagonising unionists and hastening the collapse of the agreement: 'This was my intention and

it is an achievement of which I am proud' (*Fine Gael: British or Irish?*, 99). Aontacht Éireann expired in 1976; Boland unsuccessfully contested Dublin South-West as an independent in the 1981 general election.

In the 1970s and 1980s Boland produced several small books on Irish life and politics. These include *We won't stand (idly) by* (1972), his version of the arms crisis, *Up Dev!* (1977), a fuller account mourning the acquiescence of his lifelong hero in Fianna Fáil's apostasy, *The rise and decline of Fianna Fáil* (1982), *Fine Gael: British or Irish?* (1984), accusing that party of desiring a united Ireland within the UK, and *Great my shame* (c.1984), excoriating historical and political 'revisionism'. Despite their self-referential, bigoted, fragmented, and often paranoid nature, these books provide interesting insights into the history of Fianna Fáil. The political commentator John Healy (qv) noted of *Up Dev!*: 'There is an honest stupidity about it which forces you to say that politics is the last vocation that he should have considered . . . how then can he understand Fianna Fáil – or the people who gave his former party 84 seats?' (quoted *Ir. Times*, 29 Sept. 2001).

Boland occasionally hoped Haughey might return to the republican path as Fianna Fáil leader, but he felt Haughey 'existed on a diet of humble pie for so long he became addicted to it' (*Rise and decline*, 84). Such hopes were finally extinguished after the 1987 general election, when Haughey as taoiseach maintained the 1985 Anglo-Irish agreement and extradited republican prisoners to Northern Ireland. (Boland lost £10,000 by going bail for a potential extraditee who absconded.) In 1988 Boland denounced Haughey in his polemic *Under contract with the enemy*; by the early 1990s he predicted a speedy return to the union and Haughey's ennoblement as duke of Kinsealy, accompanied by the duke of Limerick (Desmond O'Malley) and the duke of Dublin 4 (Garret FitzGerald). In his last years Boland associated with fringe republican and anti-European groups; he also briefly went on hunger strike against a county council threat to demolish a building erected on his farm without planning permission, and brought libel suits against commentators who described him as having been dismissed rather than resigning from the cabinet. When Prince Charles visited Dublin on 31 May 1995 Boland stood outside the Mansion House reception, shouting abuse at councillors.

Boland died 23 September 2001 after a short illness. He and his wife Cecilia had two sons and two daughters. By the time of his death the memory of the partisan bullyboy of the 1960s was coupled with recognition of his adherence to principle. He combined rigid arrogance with a strange innocence; unable to reassess his family's ideological inheritance, he was destroyed by it, 'raising a limp flag in a sad hour' (McIntyre, *Through the Bridewell gate*).

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Tom McIntyre, *Through the Bridewell gate: a diary of the Dublin arms trial* (1971); Kevin Boland, *We won't stand (idly) by* (1972); Kevin Boland, *Up Dev!* (1977); Kevin Boland, *The rise and decline of Fianna Fáil* (1982); Michael Gallagher, *The Irish Labour Party in transition 1957–82* (1982); Kevin Boland, *Fine Gael: British or Irish?* (1984); Kevin Boland, *Great my shame* (c.1984); Frank McDonald, *The destruction of Dublin* (1985); Dick Walsh, *The party: inside Fianna Fáil* (1986); Kevin Rafter, *Neil Blaney: a soldier of destiny* (1993); Kevin Boland, *Indivisible faith* (1997); Mary Daly, *The buffer state: the historical roots of the Department of the Environment* (1997); John Horgan, *Seán Lemass* (1997); Michael B. Yeats, *Cast a cold eye* (1998); Eunan O'Halpin, *Defending Ireland: the Irish state and its enemies since 1922* (1999); Stephen Collins, *The power game: Ireland under Fianna Fáil* (2000); Barry Desmond, *Finally and in conclusion* (2000); Justin O'Brien, *The arms trial* (2000); *Irish Examiner*, 24, 25 Sept. 2001; *Ir. Times*, 24, 29 Sept. 2001; *Irish Independent*, 25 Sept. 2001; *An Phoblacht*, 27 Sept. 2001; *Saoirse*, Oct. 2001; personal information