

Colley, George (Joseph Pearse)

by Patrick Maume

Colley, George (Joseph Pearse) (1925–83), government minister, was born in Dublin on 18 October 1925, the fifth child (of eight) and eldest son of Harry Colley (qv), 1916 veteran, adjutant Dublin Brigade IRA during the war of independence, and Fianna Fáil TD for Dublin North East (1944–57), and his wife Christina (née Nugent). He was educated at Holy Faith Convent, Clontarf, St Joseph's Christian Brothers' School, Marino, UCD, and the Incorporated Law Society. For his service as a corporal in the 42nd Dublin Rifle Battalion, LDF, he was awarded the 1939–46 emergency service medal. He was auditor of the Solicitors' Apprentices Debating Society of Ireland (1946–7), held the gold medal for legal, impromptu, and Irish debates in 1947, and qualified as a solicitor in 1948. From 1949 to 1954 he was a partner in Colley and Moylan solicitors, and from 1954 to 1965 practised as George J. Colley & Co.

Colley had a lifelong commitment to the Irish language and Gaeltacht development; during his ministerial responsibility for the Gaeltacht he established Raidió na Gaeltachta. He loved reading (especially history and philosophy), the GAA and golf (he belonged to Milltown Golf Club), as well as music, theatre, and opera.

In 1947 Colley recruited his Marino schoolmate Charles Haughey (1925–2006) to Fianna Fáil. Between 1954 and 1957 he was one of several young activists sent around Ireland reorganising the party machine, and in May 1955 he privately threatened to resign as constituency secretary in Dublin North East because a local candidate was linked to corrupt practices. He was reluctant to become involved in politics after seeing its seamier aspects as a solicitor, and did not seek a political career until after his father's defeat (by Haughey) in the 1957 general election.

Colley became Fianna Fáil TD for Dublin North East in 1961. (He was re-elected in 1965, for Dublin North Central in 1969 and 1973, for Clontarf in 1977, and for Dublin Central in 1981 and in the two general elections of 1982.) Sharing a constituency after 1961, Colley and Haughey competed fiercely for votes and came to despise one another. In 1964 Colley became parliamentary secretary to the minister for lands; in this capacity he was responsible for fisheries, but his predecessor, Brian Lenihan (qv), claimed that he neglected fishery development proposals begun by Lenihan.

In 1965 Colley became minister for education and was publicly criticised by Bishop Michael Browne (qv) of Galway, who denounced the closure of one- and two-teacher schools and the proposed merger of Trinity College and UCD. Browne noted that Colley was not on the register of UCD graduates. Colley gave an impromptu press conference, stressed the distinction between church and state, and pointed out that

his name was not on the register because he had qualified as a solicitor rather than taking a degree. Such public criticism of a bishop was unusual, and Colley's prestige increased considerably. (Colley and Seán Lemass (qv) had the private approval of Cardinal William Conway (qv) for the changes.)

By 1966 Colley was a party leadership contender. His modest lifestyle, and his view of Fianna Fáil as a 'national movement' and of ministers as administrators, reflected the traditional Fianna Fáil ethos, while he was committed to Lemass's modernisation agenda and improving relations with Northern Ireland. He was supported by elder statesmen such as Frank Aiken (qv), dissatisfied with the flamboyant lifestyles and business associations of some younger ministers – especially Haughey, another contender. Some younger TDs such as Bobby Molloy also thought Colley 'the ideal Fianna Fáil person. He believed in all the aims of the party . . . He had all the good qualities . . . I suppose he wasn't devious enough to survive in that milieu' (Collins, 30). Some 'mohair suit' politicians saw Colley as a dowdy and self-righteous mediocrity and called his leadership ambitions pushy. His defenders argue that he was constrained by the reluctance of senior ministers such as Jack Lynch (qv) and Patrick Hillery to seek the succession. Aiken appealed to Lemass to delay his retirement so that Colley could gain experience.

The 1966 leadership election has produced much retrospective debate. Lemass encouraged several senior figures to consider running (Colley was told to 'make republican speeches' to improve his chances). He also told some commentators that he favoured Colley rather than Haughey, and encouraged Jack Lynch as a compromise figure only after the emergence of a third candidate, Neil Blaney (qv), threatened a bitter and divisive contest. Others suggest Lemass always favoured Lynch. Molloy claims Haughey and Blaney engineered Lynch's entry to prevent a victory by Colley, as 'they were not prepared to tolerate Colley's level of integrity' (Collins, 36). Unlike the other contenders, Colley persevered after the emergence of Lynch, but was defeated by 52 votes to 19. He became Lynch's minister for industry and commerce.

In May 1967 Colley publicly remarked that 'some in high places have low standards'. This was widely interpreted as an attack on Haughey. In 1966–7 Colley chaired an all-party committee on the constitution. Its report proposed removing the clause recognising the special position of the catholic church, relaxing the ban on divorce, and affirming that Northern Ireland could be reintegrated only by consent; Colley's suggestion that divorce might be permitted for non-catholics brought episcopal criticism.

Haughey and Blaney saw Lynch as a stopgap, and, anticipating an early contest, each jockeyed to strengthen his position. Colley aligned himself with Lynch, who promoted some of the former's principal associates after the 1969 election (when the Gaeltacht was added to Colley's ministerial portfolio). During the 1970 arms crisis Colley continued to support Lynch, declaring that the government would

sacrifice everything rather than collude with 'men [who] cover with the cloak of republicanism . . . sectarianism and the imposition of . . . an unfree workers' republic. Reunification could only occur by peaceful means' (O'Brien, 144). Some thought this contradicted his professed republicanism, and some of his constituency activists, including P. J. Mara, transferred allegiance to Haughey. However, the Fianna Fáil republicanism to which Colley subscribed included pride in the state as a Fianna Fáil creation, to be guarded against subversion.

On Haughey's dismissal from the cabinet in April 1970 Colley became minister for finance (retaining responsibility for the Gaeltacht). He oversaw preparations for decimal currency and participated effectively in the negotiations surrounding Ireland's entry into the EEC. In 1972 he chaired the OECD Council of Ministers. However, his 1972 budget abandoned the principle of balancing current (as distinct from capital) expenditure, although senior advisers pointed to inflation and balance-of-payments problems. Colley wished to cope with rising unemployment and to adjust to impending EEC membership, but set a precedent for the fiscal irresponsibility of the 1970s, which created massive economic problems in the 1980s. With the prospective departures of Hillery (to the European Commission) and Erskine Childers (qv) (to the presidency) Colley was clearly identifiable as Lynch's heir apparent. However, Fianna Fáil's precarious dáil position and continuing grassroots support for Haughey deterred the leadership from expelling the fallen minister, who remained a focus for discontent.

Colley was Fianna Fáil director of elections for the 1973 general election; he performed badly in a televised debate with Garret FitzGerald of Fine Gael and was blamed (by the hostile Lenihan) for panic-stricken 'auction politics' on the abolition of rates. During the coalition government of 1973–7 he proved an effective parliamentary critic of the financial policies of Richie Ryan, minister for finance, exploiting hostility to capital taxation proposals. On Fianna Fáil's return to power in 1977 Colley became minister for finance and tánaiste. That same year he chaired the boards of governors of the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the International Monetary Fund.

The new government embarked on large-scale deficit financing, producing unsustainable consumer spending, increased imports, massive public-sector wage demands, and penal inflation. The rigid side of Colley's personality was displayed in February 1978, when he referred contemptuously to 'articulate, well-heeled middle-class women' campaigning for improved income-tax allowances. In his 1979 budget he introduced a 2 per cent levy on farmers' incomes, despite protests from rural politicians, then antagonised urban taxpayers as well by backpedalling on its implementation.

The government's economic setbacks, in which Colley was deeply implicated, left backbenchers fearing electoral defeat. Haughey, now minister for health and social welfare, but excluded from economic policy formation, became a focus for economic

and 'armchair republican' discontent; supporters canvassed for him. (Meanwhile, Haughey claimed credit for social welfare concessions in Colley's budgets, and Colley blocked government dealings with a property developer allegedly linked to Haughey.) After setbacks in the European elections in June and Cork by-elections in November, Lynch resigned abruptly on 5 December 1979, thinking this would catch dissidents unprepared and maximise Colley's chances.

Some commentators suggest Lynch and Colley should have sponsored a fresher candidate. Colley's supporters, assuming the party establishment would deliver victory, made little attempt to canvass: 'George didn't campaign. He was doing his job as minister for finance' (Molloy in Collins, 118). Lenihan privately spoke of choosing 'between a fool and a knave' (Downey, 107).

On 7 December 1979 Haughey defeated Colley by 44 votes to 38 amid accusations of bribery and intimidation (these gloss over the outgoing leadership's control of voting procedure). The defection of Colley's protégé and junior minister Ray McSharry created particular bitterness. Colley and some allies considered voting against Haughey's nomination as taoiseach. Colley eventually agreed to serve under Haughey provided he remained tánaiste, approved the general structure of the government, and could veto potential ministers for justice and defence (implying Haughey might endanger counter-subversive operations); he himself became minister for energy. After Haughey claimed that Colley had pledged him 'loyalty and support', Colley publicly declared that, while he supported Haughey as taoiseach, Haughey was not entitled to loyalty as Fianna Fáil leader, since Lynch had not received loyalty. Divisions within the cabinet persisted; after fresh revelations about the arms crisis in 1980, Colley allegedly approached Garret FitzGerald about a possible vote of no confidence in Haughey. During the 1981 election campaign Colley and his allies threatened dissent if Haughey made irresponsible promises.

Colley remained deputy leader following the party's narrow defeat in the June 1981 general election. After Fianna Fáil failed to win an overall majority in February 1982 he participated in abortive attempts to overthrow Haughey; he was refused reappointment as tánaiste, turned down the Department of Education, and retired to the backbenches. The leadership of the anti-Haughey faction now passed to Desmond O'Malley, though Colley may have entertained residual ambitions. He supported the attempt to depose Haughey in October 1982. With Fianna Fáil back in opposition in December 1982, he co-drafted the unsuccessful motion of no confidence moved by Ben Briscoe on 7 February 1983 after revelations that journalists' phone conversations (including some with Colley) had been tapped by Haughey's minister for justice. During these 'heaves' Colley suffered physical and verbal abuse and his family received obscene phone calls.

By September 1983 Colley had developed angina, and his base in Dublin Central was being undermined by a strong pro-Haughey constituency rival, Bertie Ahern. (The independent deputy Tony Gregory claimed Fianna Fáil voters were told to

transfer to Gregory rather than Colley.) During tests in Guy's Hospital, London, on 7 September Colley suffered a major heart attack. He received emergency surgery, but died 17 September 1983. His death was marked by widespread tributes to his integrity, in implied contrast to Haughey. Molloy attributed his death to repressed tension: 'He suffered enormously for the truth . . . he kept everything in and didn't let fly' (Collins, 158).

Colley met his future wife, Mary Doolan, on Irish-language courses in the Kerry Gaeltacht. They married on 27 September 1950 and had three sons and four daughters. Their relationship was very close; during the 1966 leadership contest Colley provoked derision from rivals by consulting his wife before remaining in the race. Their daughter Anne was Progressive Democrat TD for Dublin South (1987–9).

George Colley's historical reputation is enmeshed in the controversies over the legacy of Charles Haughey; his early death contributed to his historical eclipse, and he has not yet been fully assessed in his own right. He appears to have been a capable, uncharismatic administrator, better suited to a less televisual age and a less fractured party. His defeat sprang from his own failings as well as his enemies' malice; although his considerable abilities crucially fell short of his honourable ambitions, he served the state and its people as he saw best.

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Vincent Browne, 'How Charlie won the war: the battle for the leadership of Fianna Fáil', *Magill* (Feb. 1983); 'Bertie Ahern', *Magill* (Mar. 1983), 81; Bruce Arnold, 'Haughey: his life and unlucky deeds', *Sunday Press*, 18 Sept. 1983; *Sunday Tribune*, 18 Sept. 1983; *Cork Examiner*, 19, 21, 25 Sept. 1983; *Irish Independent*, 19, 21 Sept. 1983; *Irish Press*, 19 Sept. 1983; *Ir. Times*, 19 Sept. 1983; Gene Kerrigan, 'Wigmore', *Magill* (Oct. 1983), 62; Joe Joyce and Peter Murtagh, *The boss: Charles J. Haughey in government* (1983); Fergal Tobin, *The best of decades: Ireland in the 1960s* (1984); Frank McDonald, *The destruction of Dublin* (1985); J. J. Lee, *Ireland 1912–85* (1989); Tim Ryan, *Mara, P. J.* (1992); John Horgan, *Lemass: the enigmatic patriot* (1997); James Downey, *Lenihan: his life and loyalties* (1998); T. Ryle Dwyer, *Short fellow: a biography of Charles Haughey* (1999); Stephen Collins, *The power game: Fianna Fáil since Lemass* (2000); Justin O'Brien, *The arms trial* (2000); Bruce Arnold, *Jack Lynch: hero in crisis* (2001); information from Mary Colley (widow) and Anne Colley (daughter)