

Corish, Brendan

by Michael O'Leary

Corish, Brendan (1918–90) politician, was born 19 November 1918 in Wexford, the fourth of six children (five sons and a daughter) of Richard Corish (qv), trade unionist and politician, and his wife Catherine Bergin, daughter of Daniel Bergin, baker. The Corish family lived at William Street (1918–23) and then at 1 St Ibar's Villas, Wexford (1923–49). Educated at the CBS, Wexford, he worked as a clerical officer with Wexford county council (1939–45). As a youth he was a committed Gaelic footballer and played inter-county football for Wexford. In 1973 in *Who's Who . . . in Ireland* he listed among his recreations 'football (all codes)'.

Corish was an unassuming man, who came from a political family. Following his father's death he took his dáil seat in the December 1945 by-election and represented the Wexford constituency until February 1982 when he retired from national politics. He became vice-chairman of the Labour party in 1946, chief whip of the parliamentary Labour party in 1947 and party chairman (1949–53). In only his third year as a deputy he was appointed parliamentary secretary to the ministers for local government and defence in the inter-party government of 1948–51. In the 1954–7 coalition government he was minister for social welfare when the ravages of emigration and unemployment were exposed with the publication of the *Report of the commission on emigration*. 'I used to lie awake at night, worrying about the unemployed', Corish replied when later asked about his time in social welfare (Puirséil, 189). He was the only prominent member of the party unambiguously opposed to standing on an inter-party ticket in the 1957 election.

A deeply conservative catholic, he was also, like the then leader of the Labour party, William Norton (qv), a knight of Columbanus who backed the bishops during the Mother and Child crisis. 'I am an Irishman second, I am a catholic first', he told the dáil in 1953; 'if the hierarchy give me any direction with regard to catholic social teaching or catholic moral teaching, I accept without qualification in all respects the teaching of the hierarchy and the church to which I belong'. During the controversy over the Fethard-on-Sea boycott of 1957 (see Seán Cloney (qv)) he was the only deputy who spoke in the dáil after the taoiseach, Éamon de Valera (qv), roundly condemned the boycott, when he asked the taoiseach to ensure that 'certain people will not conspire . . . to kidnap catholic children'.

Corish succeeded Norton as Labour's leader in March 1960 but his stature in the party did not grow overnight. As if to indicate that he still called the shots, Norton continued to occupy the leader's office in Leinster House until his death while an embarrassed Corish used another desk in the same room. As party leader Corish had the assistance of a number of advisers from outside the trade union movement, including Proinsias Mac Aonghusa (qv) (1933–2003) and his wife

Catherine McGuinness (later a supreme court judge). He always remembered Norton's description of Labour party deputies as 'dervishes', in the sense that they resented any kind of discipline and were never more at home than when engaging in public recrimination and mutually destructive public attacks.

As leader Corish adopted an anti-coalition stance, which he affirmed at the 1961 general election when he became the first Labour leader for thirty years to travel to party meetings nationwide; but, with sixteen seats, the party made only half its hoped-for gains and won only a single seat in Dublin. Corish never addressed a meeting of the Dublin Labour party until 1962, two years after he became leader; he opposed Noel Browne's (qv) admission to the party, successfully in 1962 but unsuccessfully in November 1963. Norton's death in December 1963 gave Corish freedom to set his own stamp on the party and it was in 1964 that he first described Labour's policy as socialist without prefixing 'Christian'. Again in 1965 he led the party into a general election on an anti-coalition platform. During the 1960s he sought to transform the Labour party from a loose group comprising mainly Munster deputies into a strong parliamentary force. He attempted to infuse the Labour organisation throughout the country with a national identity in place of the hegemony maintained at local constituency level. He sought to win recognition that Labour was the natural party of social justice, answering the needs of a rapidly urbanising society. In the period leading up to the 1969 general election active measures were taken to ensure that a record number of candidates would stand for Labour. While the magic figure of 100 candidates was not reached, Labour challenged Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil by fielding sufficient candidates capable of providing a government composed of Labour deputies alone. Long-standing deputies now found themselves contesting the election with a second supporting candidate, breaking the hallowed tradition that sitting Labour deputies stood alone to avoid splitting the vote (the standard excuse given by the stand-alone deputy).

The wide scope of the policy proposals put forward by Labour for the June 1969 general election was indicated by the title chosen – New Republic. Whatever one may say of the quality of the policy papers, it cannot be denied that they were ambitious and aimed to be comprehensive. The run-up to the 1969 election might be regarded as the time when Corish was at his most innovative and imaginative. In some ways he acted out of character, throwing caution to the wind in his attempt to forge a new tomorrow for the Labour party. Candidates included Conor Cruise O'Brien, Justin Keating and David Thornley (qv). Although the party returned the highest vote in its history (17.02%), it won only 18 seats compared with 23 in 1965. This loss of seats affected Corish greatly and caused him to conclude that his stance on not entering coalition governments might need to be altered. The arms crisis of 1970 and its subsequent fall-out impressed on him the need for a change of government; he also had to cope with bitter divisions on party policy with regard to Northern Ireland, between strong republicans such as Michael Mullen (qv), David Thornley and Dan Spring (qv) as opposed to those who thought like Conor Cruise O'Brien, whom Corish subsequently made the party's spokesman in government on

Northern Ireland. Although he led the Labour campaign opposing Irish membership of the EEC in the 1972 referendum, in the same year he opened negotiations with the Fine Gael leader Liam Cosgrave on the possibilities of a coalition government after the next general election.

Two years earlier Corish had proposed that all Labour appointments to any future coalition cabinet should be nominated by the leader alone. Up to then any Labour deputy who had the support of four or five in the parliamentary party could be assured of a cabinet seat, leaving the leader of the parliamentary party with little or no influence over the composition of the Labour members of government. In the early months of 1970 the parliamentary party accepted his proposal, a decision that put paid to the stranglehold exerted by Munster deputies on appointments to the cabinet.

With the change of government in March 1973, Corish became tánaiste and minister for health and social welfare. His conception of Labour in government can be summed up as the provision of decent social welfare provision. This led him to regard possession of the social welfare and health portfolios as the most important for Labour. While there was of course nothing aberrant in the view that social welfare and health were crucial areas of advance for ordinary people, it prevented larger policy prizes being won in the two-party government lottery of March 1973. It had the strange result that Corish turned down Cosgrave's offer of the Department of Finance, though his innate modesty also played a part in this decision.

His greatest achievement within the 1973–7 government was to maintain its unity and in particular to maintain discipline among the ranks of the Labour ministers. It was a time of rising unemployment and inflation against the backdrop of a world oil crisis. The new government had to contend with IRA and Loyalist terrorism, facilitate negotiations leading to the Sunningdale Agreement, and manage Ireland's arrival on the European stage. As minister he introduced reforms in the social welfare system by reducing the qualifying age for old age pensions from 70 to 66 years, and modifying the means test for non-contributory pensions. He provided for a deserted wives benefit and unmarried mother's allowance, as well as new allowances for single women aged over 58 and made improvements under the adoption acts. More generally he supported legislation to amend the law against subversives and legislation which strengthened and extended certain provisions of the Offences Against the State Act.

Corish did not enjoy government. Indeed he never gave the impression that he relished political office, whether the leadership of the Labour party or being tánaiste. He worried excessively. When President Erskine Childers (qv) died in October 1974, he rejected suggestions that he might stand for the presidency. Because his father had been a TD before him, he might have been expected to appreciate and reconcile himself to the particular strains of public life, but he never learned to accept the personal sacrifice required in leading a small, quarrelsome, personality-

driven band of deputies whose only brush with reality occurred at twenty-year intervals with involvement in coalition government. He never forgot, for instance, the call he received from a deputy to come to a party function in his constituency when one of Corish's children was ill. Needless to say he attended the meeting as requested but he could not help resenting the necessity of doing so. He was an ordinary man in an extraordinary role. A true democrat, he was unambiguous in his opposition to violence. He was devoid of personal ambition and had the ability to listen and to bring divided strands and diverse personalities to the cabinet table for the sake of the national good. He brought stability and coherence into government in the wake of exceptional political tensions nationally and a rising economic crisis internationally.

Corish resigned as leader of the Labour party on 26 June 1977, following the election defeat of the National Coalition government; he was succeeded as leader by Frank Cluskey (qv). Reelected to the dáil in June 1981, he did not stand in the February 1982 general election. A member of the council of state from 1964, he stood down on ceasing to be leader of the Labour party in 1977. In 1984 he was made a freeman of Wexford. He married Phyllis Donohoe of Dublin on 4 January 1949. They had three sons and lived at Belvedere Road, Wexford. He died in Wexford on 17 February 1990.

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*ITWW*; Vincent Browne (ed.), *The Magill book of Irish politics* (1981); *Ir. Times*, 19, 20 Feb. 1990; *WWW 1981–90*; Garrett FitzGerald, *All in a life* (1981); Michael Gallagher, *The Irish Labour party 1957–82* (1982); D. J. Maher, *The tortuous path* (1986); Noel Browne, *Against the tide* (1986); Brendan Hensey, *The health services of Ireland* (1988); Stephen Collins, *The Cosgrave legacy* (1996); Thomas F. O'Higgins, *A double life* (1996); Niamh Puirseil, *The Irish Labour Party 1922–73* (2007); additional information supplied by Mr Des Corish, brother; personal knowledge