

Coughlan, Stephen

by Maurice Cronin

Coughlan, Stephen (1910–94), dáil deputy, bookmaker and publican, was born 26 December 1910 in Limerick, the third child of three sons and three daughters of Timothy Coughlan, accountant, and his wife, Annie Liddy, both of Limerick. He was educated at the Presentation Sisters' school, CBS, Limerick, and Blackrock College, Dublin. He began work as an insurance clerk in 1928 with the Prudent Assurance Co., Tralee. He acquired a taste for politics in Tralee, joining a local IRA unit in 1931 and continuing as a member until 1945. Returning to Limerick, he set up as a bookmaker in 1933 and later as a publican, remaining involved in both until 1950. He opposed the Blueshirts organisation in Limerick and his last active involvement with the IRA was an abortive attempt to prevent General Eoin O'Duffy (qv) and his volunteers leaving by ship from Galway to join Franco's troops during the Spanish civil war. It was the execution of his friend, Charlie Kerins (qv) of Tralee, in December 1944, that caused him to take a constitutional approach to politics.

He was a founder member and chairman of the newly formed Clann na Poblachta party in Limerick in 1947. A member of Limerick Corporation for thirty years he was elected mayor in 1951, the year after he entered the corporation, and again in 1969. He failed to win a dáil seat in 1954, when he lost by five votes, and again in 1957, but joined the Labour party in 1961 and in that year's general election won back the Limerick east seat which the party lost at the previous election. In Dáil Éireann he became associated with former and like-minded republicans in the Labour party, such as Dan Spring (qv), Sean Treacy and Tom Kyne. He was instrumental in introducing his former Clann na Poblachta colleague, Noel Browne (qv), to the Labour party, a matter he regretted to the end of his life. He retained his Limerick east seat during the next three elections but was defeated in 1977. He represented Ireland as a member of the Council of Europe from 1963 to 1973. Fearless and outspoken during his term as mayor, there was a failed attempt by Fianna Fáil members of the corporation in 1951 to remove him from the mayoralty for remarks he made about Éamon de Valera (qv). He caused a minor crisis in the Labour party in 1969 when the anti-apartheid movement attacked him for supporting the visit of the South African rugby team to Limerick. Later he was involved in controversy when he opposed the opening of the Marxist 'little red book shops' in Cork and Limerick. He made a speech as mayor at the opening of the Credit Union League convention in Limerick in 1969 in which he chided moneylenders and appeared to defend the 1904 attack by Redemptorist priest, John Creagh (qv), on the Jewish community, some of whom were involved in moneylending in Limerick city. He denied this many times later, saying it was the 'scourge' of moneylending that he strongly opposed. Prominent Labour members, such as Brendan Corish (qv) and Michael O'Leary (qv) (1936–2006) opposed calls for his expulsion from Labour and the failure to expel him led to some resignations from the local party.

In the late 1960s, he defended the rights of Limerick citizens to travel to work when farmers blockaded roads and bridges; for this he received a number of death threats and for a time had Garda protection. He was widely known to oppose party policies on vexed matters, such as family planning, and pointedly absented himself from the dáil when there was a vote on them. During the 1977 general election campaign he was involved in a bitter row with Bishop Jeremiah Newman (qv) of Limerick over the latter's alleged support for independent labour candidate, Mick Lipper (qv), who subsequently won the seat. The fact that many of his contemporaries at Blackrock College had become distinguished churchmen, including three bishops, may have been a factor in moderating his social thinking.

He retired from active politics following the 1977 general election. Involved in business circles in Limerick, he held a number of directorships in local enterprises. He was a lifelong friend of Seán MacBride (qv), who was godfather to his daughter. His association with Jim Callaghan MP in the Council of Europe was claimed to be instrumental in securing the early release of some republican prisoners interned after the IRA border campaign of 1956–62. He married Margaret (Peggy) Hanley in 1943 and they had two sons, Thady and Stephen, and one daughter, Nellie. Thady served with him on Limerick Corporation during the 1970s and later became mayor. Stephen was a keen sportsman and a member of the Shannon Rowing Club, Garryowen Rugby Club and Shannon Rugby Club.

He died at the Regional Hospital, Limerick, after a long illness, 20 December 1994.

---

*Ir. Times*, 21 Dec. 1994; *Cork Examiner*, 21 Dec. 1994; *Ir. Independent*, 21 Dec. 1994; *Sunday Tribune*, 23 Dec. 1994; information from Stephen Coughlan jr