

Devlin, Paddy

by Brendan Lynn

Devlin, Paddy (1925–99), politician and trade unionist, was born 8 March 1925 at 46 Lady St. in the Falls Road area of Belfast, eldest child among four daughters and three sons of Patrick Devlin, ex-serviceman and later flour-mill worker, and his wife Anna, of Belfast, daughter of Patrick Lillis, labourer. He was educated at a school on Beechmount Parade and then at St Paul's in Cavendish Square, before beginning work at 14 as a messenger boy in various retail outlets and then in a butcher's firm in Hollywood, Co. Down.

His first entry into political activity landed him in prison. From an early age he had become involved with Na Fianna Éireann, the youth wing of the republican movement, before moving into the ranks of the IRA as the second world war got under way. As the republican movement was banned by the Northern Ireland government, the outbreak of war prompted a further crackdown and late in 1942 he was arrested and interned in Crumlin Road prison until September 1945. During his imprisonment his political beliefs underwent a radical transformation. In prison he read widely, and in debates with fellow internees he began to reconsider the methods and objectives that underlay the ethos of Irish republicanism. For answers he looked to socialism and the need to develop and strengthen the labour movement as the means by which political, social, and economic progress could be made. These ideas were further strengthened by his experiences in the postwar period as he struggled to find regular employment before (with the help of his father) securing a job as a store man in Andrews Flour Mill. These experiences led directly to his participation in the trade union movement and in 1956 his election to Belfast city council as a councillor for the Irish Labour Party, representing the Falls ward.

After losing the seat in 1958 he joined the Northern Ireland Labour Party, becoming its chairman (1967–8) and winning the Falls constituency for the party at the Stormont election of 1969. In the face of the outbreak of widespread civil unrest in the summer of 1969 he became even more determined in his belief that progress could only be made by offering an alternative to the sectarian politics that afflicted Northern Ireland. Thus within the demands for civil rights lay the opportunity to unite working-class protestants and catholics in a broad-based labour party, which would campaign to further their interests, leading to the creation of a conventional pattern of left–right politics. This was the basis of his decision to participate in the establishment of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) in August 1970. With the suspension of Stormont in March 1972 and the introduction of direct rule from London, he participated along with his colleagues in the negotiations that produced the Sunningdale agreement of 1973. In the power-sharing executive, which was now given the role of administering Northern Ireland, Devlin became minister of health and social services.

In many ways this marked the high point of his political career, as within a few months the executive was brought down by a general strike organised by loyalists. The stalemate that followed disillusioned him, and in 1977 he resigned from the SDLP in protest at what he perceived as its failure to evolve into a genuine non-sectarian labour party. In addition he opposed the party's determination to pursue as a basis for a future settlement the formal participation by the Irish government in the administration of Northern Ireland. For Devlin this was something that unionists would never accept. Instead, he favoured a more flexible approach, whereby some form of power-sharing would be reintroduced; as this developed over time, links with Dublin could be formed.

Having left the SDLP he worked once again within the trade union movement; having become full-time district secretary of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union in 1976, he remained in this post until retiring in 1985. He helped to form the United Labour Party and stood unsuccessfully for it in the 1979 election for the European parliament. In the 1981 local government elections he managed to retain his seat in the Lower Falls ward on Belfast city council, but his strong opposition to the hunger strike of that year made him a target for republicans. Later this involved threats to his family and home, and as a result he was forced to move out of west Belfast. Thus by the time of the next local elections in 1985, with the growth of Sinn Féin in catholic areas, his involvement in active politics came to an end when he was unable to win a council seat, this time in north Belfast.

Away from politics, he pursued other interests – for instance, as a columnist in the *Sunday News* and later the *Sunday World*. He sat (1981–91) on the board of governors of the Linen Hall Library in Belfast, as the library fought against possible closure. His interest in writing also developed and his first play, 'Strike', was performed in 1984 at the Arts Theatre in Belfast. Then in 1985 he revived Sam Thompson's (qv) portrayal of sectarianism in the Belfast shipyards, 'Over the bridge', at the Arts Theatre. In addition, having returned to education in 1985 he also obtained a M.Sc. from Cranfield College of Technology in England. His thesis on the outdoor relief riots in Belfast in the 1930s was subsequently the basis of his book *Yes we have no bananas* (1981). Although his writing was affected by failing eyesight, a side effect of diabetes, he managed to complete his autobiography *Straight left* (1993), which went on to win the Irish Times Literary award in 1995. A year later his contribution to politics and community work was rewarded with honorary degrees from QUB and the University of Ulster. The final recognition of his activities came in the new year's honours list of January 1999 with a CBE and in accepting it he stressed that he was doing so to acknowledge his contribution to the labour and trade union movement in Northern Ireland. He died on 15 August 1999.

He married (26 October 1950) Theresa Duffy, who survived him, together with five children, Anne, Moya, Patricia, Joe, and Peter. His private papers are deposited in PRONI (D/3909).

---

W. D. Flackes and S. Elliot (ed.), *Northern Ireland: a political directory 1968–88* (1989); Paddy Devlin, *Straight left: an autobiography* (1993); Gerard Murray, *John Hume and the SDLP* (1998); *Ir. News*, 16 Aug. 1999; *Ir. Times*, 21 Aug. 1999

Downloaded from <http://dib.cambridge.org> by IP 100.103.238.216 on Wed Dec 02 13:15:49 UTC 2020 Dictionary of Irish Biography Online © 2020 Cambridge University Press and Royal Irish Academy. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.