

Faulkner, Pádraig

by Patrick Maume

Faulkner, Pádraig (1918–2012), politician, was born on 12 March 1918 in Dundalk, Co. Louth, the eldest of six children (four daughters and two sons) of Thomas Faulkner, farmer, and his wife Elizabeth (née Casey). While Thomas Faulkner was a staunch Redmondite and member (eventually Louth county president) of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, and followed James Coburn (qv) into Fine Gael, Elizabeth (who came from a Healyite family) was a former member of Cumann na mBan and open Fianna Fáil supporter. She was determined her children should be well educated and get on in the world. Pádraig spent his childhood at the family home in Dunleer, Co. Louth, and was educated at Dunleer national school, Dundalk CBS (latterly, Coláiste Rís) after winning a county council scholarship, and at St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, Dublin, where he trained as a national teacher (1936–8). A 1971 profile described him as 'a fairly typical product of St Patrick's College ... [who] wears the twin badges of the Irish order of merit, the Pioneer pin and the fáinne' (*Hibernia*, 30 April 1971).

Faulkner taught in Clogherhead national school, Co. Louth (1938–44), where the experience of teaching through Irish reinforced his attachment to the language. Joining the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) in 1939, he maintained his membership after entering politics. He retained strong links with the Dunleer area, including involvement in the GAA, the Local Defence Force (later the FCA), and the Fianna Fáil party. In 1944 he was appointed principal of Philipstown national school, Dunleer, and in 1950 became a committee member and treasurer of the Irish college at Rann na Feirste (Ranafast), Co. Donegal. He married (14 September 1948) Katherine Landy; they had three sons and one daughter.

After unsuccessfully contesting the 3 March 1954 by-election caused by the death of Coburn, Faulkner chose not to contest the May 1954 general election as there were two sitting Fianna Fáil TDs in the Louth constituency (one was defeated). He was elected to Dáil Éireann at the 1957 general election, receiving some personal support from traditional Fine Gael voters. In the following years he reorganised Fianna Fáil in southern Louth (the north of the county was dominated by Frank Aiken (qv), who regarded Faulkner as a protégé) and recruited younger members. Local organisation was his great strength throughout an unbroken thirty-year tenure (1957–87), underlying his emergence as constituency poll-topper from 1973.

In April 1965 Seán Lemass (qv) appointed Faulkner parliamentary secretary to the minister for lands, with responsibility for the Gaeltacht (1965–8). He travelled extensively in Gaeltacht regions promoting industrialisation, and was influential in the 1967 extension of Gaeltacht status to Rathcairn (Ráth Chairn) and Gibbstown (Baile Ghib), two small areas of Meath inhabited by Irish-speakers resettled from

Connacht in the 1930s. In the 1966 Fianna Fáil leadership election he supported George Colley (qv) against Jack Lynch (qv). At this time Faulkner barely knew Lynch, whereas he developed an immediate and lasting affinity with Colley as representative of Fianna Fáil traditionalism, and was also influenced by Aiken's support for Colley. The victorious Lynch retained Faulkner, and appointed him minister for lands and the Gaeltacht (1968–9).

After the 1969 general election Faulkner was appointed minister for education (1969–73). His tenure was marked by controversies. His house was picketed by parents from Montpelier, Co. Limerick, who objected to the closure of their local school as part of a wider policy of merging small local schools into larger units. A closure which aroused particular opposition was that of a Gaeltacht school at Dún Chaoin (Dunquin) on the Dingle peninsula in Co. Kerry, with the children being sent to Ballyferriter some distance away. This led to protests by Irish-language activists, including a march to Dublin. Faulkner was also embroiled in difficult negotiations with the Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland (ASTI) over the rejection by a government-appointed commission of a salary agreement involving unacceptable wage differentials with the other teaching unions. His appearances at teacher union conferences and other functions regularly attracted protests (which he saw as reflecting the wider instability of the period rather than his own actions).

His restructuring of the National College of Art and Design, incorporating a board nominated by the minister, provoked student protests and was denounced by some opponents (including opposition TDs such as Garret FitzGerald (qv)) as authoritarian, even fascist. After proposing that newly established community colleges should have catholic representation on their boards of management, Faulkner was also accused of sectarianism; the journalist John Healy (qv) (1930–91) compared him to the Ulster Unionist leader Brian Faulkner (qv). At the same time, the minister was accused in some quarters of seeking to drive religious orders out of education by promoting the community school model. He eventually reached a compromise with the assistance of Archbishop John Charles McQuaid (qv), whom he personally liked.

In hindsight, Faulkner saw as his greatest achievements the establishment of the regional technical colleges (first proposed by Patrick Hillery (qv) in 1963) as institutes of higher education for less academically inclined students, and the replacement of the older subject-centred curriculum by a child-centred approach aimed at accommodating pupils of differing abilities. (He supported the removal of Irish as a compulsory subject for individuals, but believed all schools should be required to make it available.) In accordance with the Kennedy report (1970), he oversaw the closure of the notorious St Conleth's reformatory at Daingean, Co. Offaly, and the Marlborough House youth detention centre, Dublin, and their replacement by modern institutions. Faulkner later stated that at the time he was completely unaware of institutional sexual abuse, and after revelations in the 1990s

expressed regret, adding that members of religious orders who worked for the less fortunate should not be tarred with the crimes of their colleagues.

During the arms crisis (1970), he was a staunch supporter of Lynch. In August 1969 a cabinet subcommittee consisting of Neil Blaney (qv), Charles Haughey (qv), Faulkner and Joseph Brennan (qv) (1913–80) was appointed to oversee assistance to vulnerable nationalists in Northern Ireland. Faulkner later revealed that the subcommittee met only once, after which Blaney and Haughey acted on their own. He stated that he had been completely unaware of their activities (admitting this might have been because he was known to oppose any suggestion that weapons be sent north), and believed Lynch had been similarly unaware. He praised Lynch's subsequent actions as prompt, decisive, and undertaken in the national interest. As a border-county TD, Faulkner believed he had a better understanding of the Northern Ireland situation than excitable idealists further south, and that a northern settlement could only be secured by mutual agreement. After the acquittal of the arms trial defendants, Faulkner helped to organise a decisive show of support for Lynch in which most of the Fianna Fáil parliamentary party welcomed the taoiseach on his return to Dublin Airport on 26 October 1969.

In opposition, Faulkner was front-bench spokesman on social welfare. When Fianna Fáil returned to office in 1977, he became minister for the departments of Posts and Telegraphs and Transport and Power (soon reconfigured as a single Department of Tourism and Transport) (1977–9). He oversaw a number of decisions with significant long-term consequences, notably the development of the Dublin Area Rapid Transit (DART) electrified rail scheme, the acquisition of an up-to-date digital telephone system, and the separation of the postal and telephone systems leading to the creation of the semi-state bodies An Post and Telecom Éireann. He was, however, widely criticised for failing to secure a speedy resolution to a four-month postal strike in 1979.

Faulkner supported Colley in the December 1979 Fianna Fáil leadership election. While more active than other Colley allies in seeking support, he later lamented that they had been overly confident and failed to coordinate their efforts. After Haughey's victory, Faulkner became minister for defence (1979–80), later denying rumours that his appointment had been dictated by Colley. After the death of Joe Brennan, Faulkner was elected ceann comhairle on 15 October 1980, but reluctantly stepped down on 30 June 1981 to give Fianna Fáil an extra vote in the hung dáil created by the recent general election. He subsequently let it be known that he had no desire for further ministerial office, and would have retired if the two general elections of 1982 had allowed sufficient time to prepare the succession.

Faulkner disliked the flashy and money-obsessed atmosphere surrounding Haughey. (He himself was rigidly honest: after his death, his private secretary recalled that as minister for education he refused to use the official post to pay personal bills.) Believing Haughey's intrigues against Lynch permanently divided

the party and undermined the ethos of loyalty which gave strength to previous Fianna Fáil leaders, he was associated with the party's anti-Haughey faction, but was closer to Colley's traditionalism than the more abrasive Desmond O'Malley. In October 1982 Faulkner, from the back benches, was one of twenty-two deputies who supported an unsuccessful no-confidence motion in Haughey's leadership, and on 7 February 1983 was one of thirty-three TDs who supported a similar motion after the revelation that the justice minister in the 1982 government, Sean Doherty (qv), had been involved in tapping journalists' telephones. Faulkner opposed withdrawing the whip from O'Malley for criticising Haughey's response to the report of the New Ireland Forum (1984), but subsequently tried to persuade O'Malley and Mary Harney to avoid expulsion from the party. His Fianna Fáil loyalties precluded any possibility that he might follow them into the new Progressive Democrats. Faulkner was appointed to the Council of State (of which he had previously been a member as ceann comhairle) by President Hillery in 1984. By then, the death or retirement of friends and contemporaries had made the dáil less congenial, and he retired at the 1987 general election.

In retirement, Faulkner was active in the County Louth Historical and Archaeological Society, publishing articles on the history of education and of the catholic clergy in Dunleer. He developed a friendship with the controversial Drogheda-based Augustinian priest Fr Ignatius ('Iggy') O'Donovan, and in 2006 was present when O'Donovan publicly (and illicitly) concelebrated mass with a Church of Ireland clergyman. Faulkner published a memoir, *As I saw it* (2005), which drew particular attention for its account of the arms crisis. Though somewhat pedestrian, it is of interest for charting such social changes as rural electrification and factory employment (which he noted strengthened Fianna Fáil in Dunleer, since previously the main local employers had been Fine Gael-supporting strong farmers who expected their men to share their political allegiance).

Never in the front rank of government, Faulkner was an administrator and manager of changes begun by such figures as Donogh O'Malley (qv), rather than their initiator. Most of his government experience was in spending departments, and he benefited from distributing the proceeds of Ireland's belated economic modernisation, but he should not be underestimated. The stubbornness noted by some critics (and visible in his lifelong defence of the famously disastrous 1977 Fianna Fáil election manifesto) had its counterpart in decisiveness and pragmatism. He was instinctively conservative, but not reactionary or revivalist. A recurring theme of his self-representations is the belief that he knew the needs and wishes of the plain people better than romantics or blowhards, that he was willing to take the trouble to investigate local conditions before making decisions, and that he drew his strength from rootedness in the civil society of Dunleer to which he returned.

After a short illness, Pádraig Faulkner died on 1 June 2012 at Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital, Drogheda, Co. Louth, and was buried in Mosstown cemetery, Dunleer.

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*Ir. Times*, 6 May 1965; 10, 11 Mar., 7 Sept. 1967; 18 June, 20, 26 Sept. 1968; 21 Nov. 1969; 10 Nov. 1970; 17 Feb., 7, 20, 27 May, 4, 5, 18, 30 June, 5 Nov., 17 Dec. 1971; 28 Jan., 3, 4, 15 Mar. 1972; 27 Mar., 13, 28 June, 28 July, 18, 25 Oct. 1973; 2, 9, 19 June 2012; *Hibernia*, 30 Apr. 1971; Pádraig Faulkner, *As I saw it: reviewing over thirty years of Fianna Fáil and Irish politics* (2005); *Dundalk Democrat* (county ed.), 5 June 2012; *Argus* (Dundalk), 6 June 2012; *Drogheda Independent*, 6 June 2012; *Drogheda Leader*, 6 June 2012

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