

Fitt, Gerard ('Gerry')

by Patrick Maume

Fitt, Gerard ('Gerry') (1926–2005), politician, was born Gerald Martin on 9 April 1926 in the infirmary of Belfast workhouse, son of Rose Martin, unmarried servant, and an unknown father. Shortly after birth, Fitt was fostered out to George Patrick Fitt, cigarette factory worker, and his wife Mary Anne (née Murphy), domestic servant, who informally adopted him and raised him as the third of their six children (they had two other sons and three daughters). A brief attempt by his biological mother to reclaim him ended badly; he later attributed an eye defect to infantile convulsions suffered in her care. He regarded the Fitts as his parents; when Rose Martin attempted to contact him in the 1960s he refused to respond. Fitt only spoke of these matters to close family members, but it was widely known in west Belfast; during the 1969 Belfast riots a loyalist pirate radio station repeatedly played the song 'Nobody's child', dedicated to Fitt.

Early work experience and political activity Fitt grew up in the Sailortown area around the Belfast docks, north of the city centre. The family's circumstances were further reduced after George Fitt died of gangrene in 1934; Gerry worked as a grocer's delivery boy in the mornings before school. Fitt was intermittently educated at Star of the Sea convent primary school, Halliday's Road, and St Patrick's Christian Brothers' School, Donegall Road; despite his extensive mitching, some teachers were struck by his interest in language. Fitt experienced the 1941 Belfast blitz, during which the family lived in a disused farmhouse at Bell's Hill, Co. Down, thirty miles outside Belfast; Fitt formed a lifelong attachment to the area. After working as a newsboy and in a barber's shop, in March 1942 Fitt became a merchant seaman: first as stoker on a ship between Belfast and Salford, then as cabin boy on transatlantic convoys, finally (in 1945) on the Arctic convoys supplying Russia. His brother George joined the Irish Guards and died in action in Normandy in 1944. Fitt claimed that the poverty he witnessed in the West Indies and post-war Europe confirmed his commitment to socialism (he was introduced to the writings of James Connolly (qv) in 1938). He married (5 November 1947) Susan Gertrude Doherty from Strabane, Co. Tyrone. They had six daughters, one of whom died in infancy; the survivors were popularly known as 'the Miss Fitts'.

Fitt remained a seaman till 1953, combining this work with increasing involvement in labour politics in the Stormont constituency of Belfast Dock. Belfast nationalist politics were dominated by feuding labour splinter groups, usually based around charismatic individual leaders. In 1951 there was a major split between Jack Beattie (qv) and Harry Diamond (qv). Fitt privately supported Beattie, canvassing for him in the 1951 Westminster general election, but the Dock Labour Party, where Fitt rose to prominence, consisted of former Diamond supporters. In 1955 Fitt unsuccessfully stood for Belfast Corporation in Dock. In a corporation by-election in Falls (1956), he

was defeated by Paddy Devlin (qv) of the Irish Labour Party. Fitt supported his family by a variety of jobs, including insurance collector and door-to-door salesman; at one point he became a construction worker on a hydroelectric project in Perthshire.

Belfast Corporation, Stormont, and Westminster In March 1958 Fitt unsuccessfully contested the Dock seat for the Irish Labour Party in the Stormont elections, but was elected to Belfast Corporation the following May (served 1958–81). As a city councillor he added to his reputation as a 'dole queue lawyer' who advised benefit claimants on their rights; this assisted him in winning re-election to the corporation in 1961 with some protestant support. In the May 1962 Stormont general election he became MP for Dock, occupying the seat for ten years (1962–72) till the suspension of the Stormont parliament in March 1972. Now a full-time political representative, in 1965 Fitt bought a house at 85 Antrim Road, Belfast, where his family lived till 1983.

In October 1963 Fitt and Diamond formed the Republican Labour Party, under whose banner Fitt took the West Belfast seat from Jim Kilfedder (qv) of the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) in the 1966 Westminster general election; the contest was marked by traditional election abuses on both sides. Holding the seat at successive elections, Fitt was Westminster MP for West Belfast from 1966 to 1983. His presence at Westminster considerably raised the profile there of catholic/nationalist grievances; he was a good mixer, and his wartime service and working-class background enabled him to mix easily in a parliament where working-class Labour MPs were much more numerous than in the more professionalised 'new labour' parliamentary party later in the century. Fitt helped to publicise the developing civil rights campaign in Northern Ireland; Ian Paisley's *Protestant Telegraph* responded with a call to 'Arrest Fenian Fitt', which Fitt raised as a breach of parliamentary privilege. He regularly challenged the parliamentary convention that matters reserved to the Stormont parliament could not be raised at Westminster. Fitt's political opponents noted that he emphasised his socialist or labourist credentials at Westminster (generally supporting the British Labour party in the lobbies), while in Northern Ireland he used nationalist or republican language. At the same time, Fitt prided himself on gaining some protestant votes because of his constituency work and socialist identification. As the civil rights campaign developed, Fitt sometimes made emotive statements which he attributed to anger over disregard for minority concerns at Stormont and in Belfast Corporation. He denounced those who 'are prepared to let Terence O'Neill [(qv)] walk over them in bedroom slippers because Paisley would walk over them in hob-nailed boots', and stridently declared: 'If constitutional methods do not bring social justice, if they do not bring democracy to Northern Ireland, I am quite prepared to go outside constitutional methods.' While he later asserted to have consistently opposed the IRA, republicans claimed that he had had various casual contacts with them at this time.

When Fitt was batoned while leading a banned civil rights march in Derry city (5 October 1968), the heavy-handed police tactics were witnessed by journalists and

British Labour MPs, and recorded by television cameramen; Fitt refused to wash his face so that news cameras would show a bloodied MP. After the Belfast riots of 1969 and the intervention of British troops (which Fitt personally telephoned the home secretary to request), Fitt was regarded by many unionists as the man who started the Troubles. Loyalists regularly attacked his Antrim Road house (located near a sectarian flashpoint), which became known as 'Fortress Fitt' or 'Fort Knox'. It was widely believed that during the large-scale sectarian violence of 1969 to 1970 Fitt appealed for the government of the Republic of Ireland to send weapons northwards for communal defence. In later years he was very sensitive on this point, and sued writers who repeated these accusations. The former IRA man, arms-trial defendant, and Sinn Féin assemblyman John Kelly (1936–2007) made an affidavit during one of these cases (settled out of court) stating that, on more than one occasion in his presence, Fitt had requested guns; Kelly repeated these allegations in interviews with a Fitt biographer, Michael A. Murphy.

SDLP leader In August 1970 Fitt became the founding leader of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP); the term 'Labour' was included in the party's title at his insistence. Accustomed to operating off the cuff, Fitt was ill at ease in his new position, rarely attended executive meetings or opened mail, and disliked most middle-class party activists from outside Belfast as green nationalists rather than social democrats. He was uneasy with and resentful toward people who had gone through formal education rather than the 'university of life'. Attempts to debate policy and plan ahead appeared to him as socially condescending and controlling; such matters were left to other activists, notably John Hume. Relaxing in pubs with cronies, Fitt complained that he was 'up to my arse in fucking teachers'; other party members complained that Fitt was spending too much time at Westminster and was excessively fond of its clubbable atmosphere.

Fitt had little interest in building up party organisation (most of his former activists stayed with Paddy Kennedy (qv) in Republican Labour; in 1974 there were only two SDLP branches in West Belfast). His principal achievement for the party was in giving it international credibility and access to his extensive contacts at Westminster and elsewhere. Fitt grew increasingly hostile to the IRA, and developed a degree of sympathy for the security forces through contact with his police bodyguards. He was unhappy with the SDLP's decision to boycott Stormont and local government bodies in protest against internment (August 1971). Matters were not helped by personality clashes with Paddy Devlin, who might on policy grounds have been an ally within the party. As early as mid 1973 Fitt considered leaving the SDLP, and might have done so but for the murder of his closest ally, Paddy Wilson (qv), by loyalists.

After re-election to Belfast Corporation for Area G (replacing Dock Ward) on 30 May 1973, Fitt was elected for North Belfast to the Northern Ireland Assembly on 28 June 1973. In the executive formed under the December 1973 Sunningdale agreement, he was deputy chief executive without departmental responsibility (he took little interest in administration). Fitt's principal role was as social lubricant between the

different parties; he was more sympathetic to the difficulties of Brian Faulkner's (qv) position than other SDLP executive members, and later complained that the Irish government's insistence on pushing for the establishment of a Council of Ireland helped bring down the executive – concerns that he did not express adequately at the time, partly because he lacked confidence in policy debate. After the resignation of Faulkner and the UUP ministers on 28 May 1974, Fitt was technically acting chief minister for nineteen hours, till the executive's collapse. He represented North Belfast in the Constitutional Convention (1975–6), which failed to reach agreement. In the following years the SDLP's internal tensions increased, and Fitt was increasingly isolated; he was criticised by some SDLP members for sustaining a Labour government at Westminster whose Northern Ireland secretary, Roy Mason, pursued tough security policies and was seen as pro-unionist. On the night of 8/9 August 1976, Fitt's house was invaded by a republican mob, whom he held off at gunpoint. Fitt's efforts to prevent an increase in the number of Northern Ireland's Westminster seats (seen as a move towards integration) were unsuccessful, though he was proud of his role in extending health and disability legislation to Northern Ireland. He eventually helped bring down James Callaghan's Labour government by abstaining on a vote of no confidence in protest against Mason's policies; the government was defeated by one vote (28 March 1979).

Later career On 22 November 1979 Fitt resigned from the SDLP after supporting the proposal of the secretary of state for northern Ireland, Humphrey Atkins (qv), for renewed inter-party talks aimed at power-sharing without a guaranteed Irish dimension (rejected by the SDLP membership). From December 1980 Fitt publicly denounced republican prison protests; he declared that paramilitary prisoners should not be granted political status, regretted having supported political status in the early 1970s, and criticised what he saw as the excessively sympathetic attitude taken towards the prisoners by catholic churchmen such as Tomás Ó Fiaich (qv). (Fitt was himself a believing catholic, and declared himself profoundly moved by the plea to end violence made by Pope John Paul II in Drogheda (1979).) This aroused violent hostility, and the Fitts' house came under repeated attack by republicans.

In the local elections of 20 May 1981 Fitt lost his Belfast Corporation seat. Standing as independent socialist, he lost his Westminster seat in the 1983 general election, coming third behind Gerry Adams (Sinn Féin) and Dr Joe Hendron (SDLP); Fitt emphasised that he had received significant support from Shankill Road unionist voters. On 3 July 1983 the Fitt home in Belfast was wrecked and burnt by republicans; Fitt moved permanently to London, where he and his wife already spent most of their time. His daughters moved away from Belfast, realising there was nothing in such a society for them. Fitt accepted a life peerage and entered the house of lords as Baron Fitt of Bell's Hill (1983), to the derision of many Irish nationalists and socialists. He remained a convivial and highly popular member of the Westminster social club; for critics this confirmed his status as a 'stage Irishman' and 'Uncle Tomás' (*Irish Times*, 31 August 2005). He continued to raise matters of concern to former constituents, and was strongly involved in the campaign for the

release of the Guildford Four (convicted in 1975 for carrying out lethal bombings in Britain, and released in 1989 after revelations that they had been convicted on the basis of police fabrications).

In both public and in private Fitt was bitterly critical not only of Sinn Féin and of the IRA but of the SDLP as green nationalists pandering to tribal solidarity. Even sympathetic observers felt that he was excessively influenced by personal bitterness, and that his view of Northern Ireland was stuck in the 1980s (though he revisited the province regularly). Although Fitt continued to believe that eventual Irish reunion was desirable, he placed increasing emphasis on the need for unionist consent; he opposed the 1985 Anglo–Irish agreement because it lacked unionist involvement, and was openly suspicious of the Hume–Adams talks of the early 1990s and the subsequent peace process, because he saw such initiatives as legitimising murderous paramilitaries on both sides. When a loyalist delegation including one of Paddy Wilson's murderers visited 10 Downing Street, Fitt had to be restrained from protesting (22 July 1996); he subsequently commented that at least Sinn Féin had significant electoral support. He spoke in the lords against the re-naming of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (8 November 2000), on the grounds that police abuses against which he had protested had now been corrected, and the re-naming represented appeasement of a 'Sinn Féin/IRA' campaign to humiliate and demonise policemen and their families.

In his later years he suffered from stomach ulcers and heart disease, undergoing a quadruple bypass operation in 1986. After his wife died on 23 January 1996 from an MRSA infection contracted in hospital, Fitt delivered a passionate speech on hospital conditions. He died 26 August 2005 of heart failure in Ashford, Kent (where three of his daughters lived), and is buried with his wife in Godmersham churchyard, Kent.

Assessment Both opponents and admirers have often compared Fitt to Joseph Devlin (qv): Gerry Adams in *Falls memories* (1982) presents Devlin – and by extension Fitt – as a populist opportunist seduced by Westminster into betraying those he represented; when the pro-Sinn Féin *Andersonstown News* carried out vox-pop interviews after Fitt's death, some participants raised the comparison in reference to Fitt's constituency work and social concern. The comparison underrates Devlin's political stature and organisational abilities; Fitt was always a maverick and individualist, the last and most successful of the one-man-band labour nationalists who dominated Belfast catholic politics from the second world war to the Troubles. Fitt did not retain private papers. Chris Ryder's biography, based on extensive interviews with Fitt and family members, gives the best available insight on the older Fitt's self-image, and is indispensable for his background and early life. Michael Murphy's more critical biography (combining archival research and interviews with Fitt and his political contemporaries) emphasises his opportunism, ideological instability, and limited political effectiveness.

'Obituary: Gerry Fitt', BBC News (26 Aug. 2005), news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/1673279.stm; 'Political tributes to Lord Fitt', *idid.* (26 Aug. 2005), news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/4188634.stm; *Guardian*, 26 Aug. 2005; *Daily Telegraph, Independent* (London), *Times* (London), 27 Aug. 2005; *Ir. Times*, 27, 30, 31 Aug. 2005; *Ir. Independent*, 27, 29 Aug. 2005; *Sunday Independent*, 28 Aug., 4 Sept. 2005; *Andersonstown News*, 29 Aug. 2005; *An Phoblacht*, 1 Sept. 2005; *The Caucus* (Fall 2005), newsletter of The Mediation Agency; Chris Ryder, *Fighting Fitt* (2006); Michael A. Murphy, *Gerry Fitt: a political chameleon* (2007); Gerry Fitt archives, Slugger O'Toole, www.sluggerotoole.com (websites accessed June 2011)