

Lenihan, Brian Joseph

by Lawrence William White

Lenihan, Brian Joseph (1930–95), politician and government minister, was born 17 November 1930 at Dundalk, Co. Louth, eldest among two sons and two daughters of Patrick James Lenihan (qv), teacher, civil servant, businessman, and politician, and Ann Lenihan (née Scanlon).

Background, education, early career While his mother came from a republican family in Co. Sligo, his paternal grandfather, Patrick Lenihan, a schoolmaster in Lickeen, Co. Clare, was a constitutional nationalist of Parnellite and Redmondite persuasion. Brian's father joined the IRA while a UCG student during the war of independence, and took the pro-treaty side in the civil war. A teacher in Belfast before working for the revenue commissioners in Dundalk, he became disillusioned with the Cumann na nGaedheal government, and was recruited into Fianna Fáil by Seán Lemass (qv). Leaving the civil service to manage the General Textiles (Gentex) factory in Athlone, Co. Westmeath, he subsequently bought and managed the Hodson Bay Hotel on Lough Ree, whither the family moved from quarters within the factory compound.

Schooled under the Marist brothers at St Mary's college, Athlone, Lenihan obtained a BA in economics from UCD (1951), and studied law at the Kings' Inns, Dublin (1949–52). Playing soccer for UCD and at amateur level for Ireland, he was a talented centre forward. Called to the bar in 1952, he practised on the midland circuit. After unsuccessfully contesting Longford–Westmeath for Fianna Fáil in the 1954 general election, he switched to the Roscommon constituency, where he built a base by service on the county council and the vocational education committee (both 1955–61). Succeeding his father on the Fianna Fáil national executive, he was among the youthful activists who assisted Lemass in a thoroughgoing reform of the party's organisation, while urging Keynesian planning as the formula for national economic regeneration. Denied a nomination by the party's Roscommon organisation for the 1957 election, but imposed by the national executive, he was the top placed of three Fianna Fáil candidates, but failed to win a seat. After serving on the industrial and commercial panel in Seanad Éireann (1957–61), he was elected on his third attempt to Dáil Éireann, unseating Fianna Fáil veteran Gerald Boland (qv), and commenced a twelve-year tenure (Roscommon (1961–9), Roscommon–Leitrim (1969–73)). He was followed into the dáil by his father, Patrick Lenihan, elected TD for Longford–Westmeath (1965–70).

The young minister Entering government on his first day in the house as parliamentary secretary to the minister for lands (1961–4), Lenihan was given responsibility for the department's fisheries division. In the cabinet reshuffle that followed the resignation of the agriculture minister, Patrick Smith (qv), he became

minister for justice (1964–8), where his foremost achievement was liberalising the censorship regime of both books and films. In appointing a new censorship of films appeals board to a five-year term (January 1965), he seized the opportunity to effect a substantial reconstitution of the body's personnel; his appointees duly transformed censorship practice, and activated a neglected provision of the original statute by introducing age-based categories of limited certification, thus reducing the extent of cuts in films. Despite the opposition of his departmental secretary, Peter Berry (qv), he carried an amendment (1967) to the 1929 censorship of publications act that decreed that the ban on any book would lapse after twelve years; on enactment, the legislation immediately lifted the ban on some 6,000 titles.

Prominent among the 'mohair-suit brigade' of brash, dynamic, and modernising young ministers elevated into government by Lemass, Lenihan was especially associated in the public mind with Charles J. Haughey (1925–2006) and Donogh O'Malley (qv). The youngest and most junior politician among these 'three musketeers', he embraced his image as the amiable, loose-tongued jester of the group. Frequent partners in energetic, conspicuous, and bibulous socialising, the trio were prominent attendees of the monthly fund-raising dinners of Taca, an organisation of pro-Fianna-Fáil businessmen. On Lemass's retirement (1966), Lenihan and O'Malley initially backed Haughey for party leader, and on his withdrawal from the contest supported the compromise candidate Jack Lynch (qv) against George Colley (qv).

After O'Malley's sudden death (March 1968), Lenihan succeeded him as minister for education (1968–9). He announced an ambitious plan for higher education (July 1968), which included detailed proposals for the merger (initially proposed by O'Malley) of TCD and UCD into a single, multi-denominational university of Dublin. Intended to break the impasse that had arisen over the merger, the Lenihan plan only stiffened opposition within both institutions, the proposed allocation of faculties dissatisfying UCD, and the system of governance dissatisfying TCD. More successfully, Lenihan's plan initiated the Higher Education Authority, to oversee financial and organisational issues regarding the third-level sector.

Crises of the 1970s Lenihan's awkward handling of the university issue was a factor in his demotion after the 1969 general election to the lesser cabinet position of minister for transport and power (1969–73). Amid the worsening troubles in Northern Ireland, he occupied a middle ground within cabinet between nationalist hard-liners and moderates, jocularly describing himself as 'the X in OXO' for his nimble capacity to straddle the fence. During the 1970 arms crisis, he consistently backed the position of Taoiseach Jack Lynch, who disregarded his advice not to prosecute the sacked ministers, Haughey and Neil Blaney (qv) (1922–95). His refusal to repudiate his friendship with Haughey excluded him from the inner coterie of Lynch loyalists within cabinet. He had a brief tenure as minister for foreign affairs (January–March 1973).

Losing his dáil seat amid Fianna Fáil's defeat in the 1973 general election, Lenihan served as Fianna Fáil leader in the seanad (1973–7), and was campaign manager for Erskine Childers (qv) (1905–74) during the latter's successful candidacy in the 1973 presidential election. An appointed member of the European parliament (1973–7), he led the Fianna Fáil delegation, and helped forge the party's lasting alliance with the French Gaullists. Having moved residence in 1971 from the Athlone area to 24 Parkview, Castleknock, Co. Dublin, he served on Dublin county council (1974–7). Topping the poll in the 1977 general election, he commenced an eighteen-year tenure as TD for Dublin County West (1977–81) and Dublin West (1981–95). As minister for fisheries (1977–8), and for fisheries and forestry (1978–9), in Lynch's new government, he played an important role in the difficult and protracted negotiations of the common European fisheries policy, controversially abandoning Ireland's claim to a wide internal coastal zone with exclusive rights for native fishermen, in exchange for a favourable deal on fish quotas, and a substantial EEC subsidy for the Irish fishery protection fleet.

During the bitter battle for the Fianna Fáil leadership between Colley and Haughey incumbent on Lynch's retirement (December 1979) – a contest described privately by Lenihan as a choice between a fool and a knave – Lenihan endorsed neither contender, but nursed his own outside chance as a possible compromise candidate; he probably voted for Haughey on ascertaining that the latter's narrow victory was assured. Appointed minister for foreign affairs (1979–June 1981), he implemented Haughey's policy of pursuing a negotiated initiative with the British government of Margaret Thatcher regarding Northern Ireland rather than renewed negotiations among the NI parties. After the Dublin castle summit between Haughey and Thatcher (December 1980), who agreed to conduct joint studies regarding the 'totality of relationships' between the two islands, including 'institutional change', Lenihan gave an excessively buoyant explication of the joint communiqué, equating 'institutional' with 'constitutional', and implying that the studies would consider the prospect of Irish unity. The rash remarks, probably designed to allay apprehensions within Fianna Fáil's republican grassroots, strained relations with Westminster and outraged northern unionists.

The loyal lieutenant As minister for agriculture in Haughey's second government (March–December 1982), Lenihan exercised his considerable negotiating skills, both within European structures, and in developing new markets for Irish produce, especially in the Middle East. His unwavering loyalty to Haughey during three internal Fianna Fáil heaves against his leadership in 1982–3 proved critical to Haughey's survival, and he was rewarded by appointment as the party's deputy leader. As opposition spokesman on foreign affairs (1982–7), he advised against Haughey's determination to oppose, on tenuous constitutional grounds, the 1985 Hillsborough agreement between Ireland and Britain. Nonetheless, he obediently complied when Haughey dispatched him to the USA to explain Fianna Fáil's position to leading Irish-American politicians. Despite his own liberal views on contraception, he defended as 'democracy at its best' the expulsion of dissident TD Desmond

O'Malley from Fianna Fáil for repudiating the party whip over the family planning bill of the coalition government of Garret FitzGerald (February 1985).

On Fianna Fáil's return to power as a minority government in March 1987, Lenihan became tánaiste and minister for foreign affairs (1987–9). His amiable style helped smooth longstanding tensions between Haughey and officials in both Iveagh House and the British Foreign Office. Consequent to Fianna Fáil's volte-face, once in government, on the Anglo–Irish agreement, he fully implemented the inter-governmental mechanisms established by Hillsborough. He signed a bilateral agreement with the UK that divided an area of the north Atlantic continental shelf, thereby avoiding international arbitration, and considerably increasing Ireland's seabed jurisdiction (November 1988).

Suffering a serious decline in health from December 1987, Lenihan was diagnosed with diabetes and a grave liver condition, necessitating several spells in hospital. In May 1989 he had a successful liver transplant operation at the prestigious Mayo clinic, Minnesota, USA. The manner of payment for the overseas treatment became a matter of subsequent controversy, included among investigations into Haughey's private finances by the Moriarty tribunal of inquiry. During his convalescence in Minnesota, Lenihan contested *in absentia* the June 1989 general election, topping the poll over quota with 11,109 first-preference votes. Returning to Dublin for the first sitting of the new dáil, he was prominent in the external negotiations and internal party debate that resulted in formation of the Fianna Fáil–Progressive Democrats coalition government, being especially effective in persuading the party grassroots to accept the idea of coalition. Remaining tánaiste, but moved to the less demanding portfolio of minister for defence (1989–90), he adroitly handled a thorny dispute within the defence forces over pay and conditions, by establishing a commission and acting swiftly on its recommendations, including the creation of representative bodies for officers and other ranks.

Presidential candidate Lenihan was Fianna Fáil candidate in the November 1990 election for president of Ireland. During the campaign he vigorously denied allegations that, on the night in January 1982 when the minority Fine Gael–Labour government was defeated in a dáil budget vote, he telephoned Áras an Uachtaráin in an attempt to persuade President Patrick Hillery (1923–2008) (a former Fianna Fáil cabinet colleague) to exercise his discretionary constitutional powers by refusing a dissolution of the dáil to FitzGerald, the Fine Gael taoiseach, and by calling on Haughey to attempt the formation of an alternative minority government without recourse to a general election. The controversy intensified when details emerged of a taped interview granted by Lenihan in May 1990 to a UCD post-graduate student in which he seemed to contradict this denial in describing his telephone conversation with Hillery on the night in question. When portions of the tape were made public, Lenihan insisted that his statement to the student was inaccurate, and that his 'mature recollection' was that he had not made the alleged phone call.

Under pressure from the Progressive Democrats, Haughey dismissed Lenihan (who refused to resign) from his ministry, while continuing to support him in the presidential election. Though Lenihan, his credibility tattered, slumped badly in opinion polls immediately after the revelations, he soon rallied on a tide of public sympathy over the manner of his sacking. He topped the election poll on forty-four per cent of first preferences, but was overtaken on the second count by the independent left-wing candidate Mary Robinson, who was elected on the transfers of the Fine Gael candidate, Austin Currie. The first Fianna Fáil candidate to lose a presidential election, Lenihan subsequently claimed that he had no memory of the interview with the student, at the time of which he was in a confused state of mind while under heavy medication for his liver condition and related medical complications.

Last years Lenihan spent the remainder of his career on the backbenches. Having long mooted the pragmatic and ideological advantages of a Fianna Fáil–Labour coalition, he invited transfers between the two parties in his constituency in the 1992 election, and helped broker the ensuing programme for government. Throughout the coalition's tenure he was chairman of the oireachtas joint committee on foreign affairs (May 1993–January 1995), and occasionally acted behind the scenes to facilitate the Northern Ireland peace process. Five weeks after hospitalisation with an acute illness, he died 1 November 1995 in the Mater Misericordiae hospital, Dublin, and was buried in Cornanagh cemetery, Athlone.

Character and assessment From his first election to Dáil Éireann, Lenihan served in every Fianna Fáil government for nearly three decades, holding a greater variety of portfolios than any other minister in twentieth-century Ireland. Apart from the three taoisigh in whose cabinets he served, he was the leading figure in Fianna Fáil over that period. A heavy drinker for many years, he was tall and sturdily built, with a wide, ready grin, and pleated tiers of black, wavy hair. One of the most popular politicians in Irish history, he commanded a deep affection among Fianna Fáil's rank and file, a product of his bluff cheer, genial availability, affable and self-deprecatory sociability, and lack of pretension. His celebrated catch-phrase 'no problem' was a ready response to favours sought by constituents, political crises, and affairs of state.

A liberal on social issues, and a flexible moderate on the national question, he regarded both his personal political ideology and that of his party as social democratic. Such opinions notwithstanding, he was renowned for steadfast loyalty to the party line, and to the party leader of the moment, a loyalty enthusiastically asserted even in the most awkward of circumstances. He customarily gave the warm-up speech for the party leader at Fianna Fáil's annual ard-fheiseanna and, given his talent for glib verbosity, often represented the party in media interviews and debates. Deeply interested in international affairs and comparative politics, he was widely knowledgeable and erudite in Irish, British, and European history and biography. Prone to breezy overstatement and verbal gaffes, he was dismissed

by some observers as a mere bluffer and blusterer, at times a buffoon. However, the windy rhetoric and popular image masked a keen, inquisitive mind, and shrewd political judgement.

Family Lenihan married (1958) Ann Devine (b. 1937), of Athlone; they had five sons (one of whom died of leukaemia at age five) and one daughter. His wife, Ann Lenihan, co-authored *No problem: to Mayo and back* (1990), an account of his illness and operation. *For the record* (1991) is Lenihan's own memoir of the 1990 presidential campaign and relevant prior events. His eldest son, Brian Lenihan Jr (b. 1959), won the by-election to fill the vacancy created by his father's death, becoming TD for Dublin West and serving as a minister of state in several departments, minister for justice, equality, and law reform (2007–08), and minister for finance. His third son, Conor Lenihan (b. 1963), elected TD for Dublin South-West (1997), was minister of state in several departments. Lenihan's sister Mary O'Rourke (b. 1937), a member of Seanad Éireann (1981–2, 2002–7), and TD for Longford–Westmeath (1982–92, 2007–) and Westmeath (1992–2002), was minister for education (1987–91), for health (1991–2), and for public enterprise (1997–2002), and leader of Seanad Éireann (2002–7). She and Brian were the first sister and brother to serve together in an Irish cabinet (1987–90).

Vincent Browne and Michael Farrell, *Magill books of Irish politics* (1981); Ann Lenihan and Angela Phelan, *No problem: to Mayo and back* (1990); Cairnduff (1991); Brian Lenihan, *For the record* (1991); Emily O'Reilly, *Candidate: the truth behind the presidential campaign* (1991); Department of the Environment, *Toghcháin uachtaráin 1938–1990: presidential elections* (1992), 18–20; J. V. Luce, *Trinity College Dublin: the first four hundred years* (1992); Walker; Nealon's *guide to the twenty-seventh dáil and seanad: election '92* (1993); *Daily Telegraph*, 2 Nov. 1995; *Ir. Independent*, *Ir. Times*, 2–4 Nov. 1995; *Times*, 3 Nov. 1995; *Sunday Independent*, *Sunday Tribune*, 5 Nov. 1995; *WWW*, ix (1995); James Downey, *Lenihan: his life and loyalties* (1998); Donal McCartney, *UCD: a national idea: the history of University College Dublin* (1999); Stephen Collins, *The power game: Fianna Fáil since Lemass* (2000); Kevin Rockett, *Irish film censorship: a cultural journey from silent cinema to internet pornography* (2004); Kenneth Ferguson (ed.), *King's Inns barristers 1868–2004* (2005); *Report of the tribunal of inquiry into payments to politicians and related matters*, i (2006), 124–52, 558–61; Houses of the oireachtas: members database, www.oireachtas.ie/members-hist (accessed 3 Aug. 2007); Department of the taoiseach: taoiseach and government: history of government, www.taoiseach.gov.ie (accessed 9 Nov. 2007)