

What were the contributions of Charles Haughey and Garret FitzGerald to Irish Affairs?

Charles Haughey and Garret FitzGerald were the two dominant men of Irish politics in the 1980s. In many ways they were polar opposites, Haughey was a working-class Northsider who craved power, while FitzGerald was a privileged, idealistic Southsider. Both were forced to make huge decisions which would set the course of the country, sometimes for better, sometimes for worse.

Haughey had a huge influence on Irish affairs even before he became Taoiseach. He entered his father-in-law Séan Lemass' cabinet in 1961 as Minister for Justice, as part of a new breed of young, dynamic ministers who would help reinvent Ireland. He introduced the Succession Act which guaranteed financial entitlement and stability for widows. He brought similar reform to the Department for Agriculture from 1964 to 1966. Under Jack Lynch he served as Minister for Finance, and in that position he introduced tax exemptions for artists, free travel for the elderly and free electricity allowance for pensioners also. However, in 1970, along with Minister Neil Blaney he was accused of using public monies to smuggle illegal arms to nationalists in the North. As a result of this 'Arms Crisis' Haughey was dismissed from cabinet and would spend most of the 1970s slowly working his way back up the Fianna Fáil ranks. When Fianna Fáil next came to power in 1977 he was appointed Minister for health and Social Welfare. In this position he introduced the first anti-smoking campaign and a controversial family planning bill.

Fitzgerald also held considerable responsibility before becoming Taoiseach. Under Liam Cosgrave, from 1973-77, he served as Minister for Foreign Affairs. This was a particularly important role at the time for two reasons. Firstly, on 1st January 1973 Ireland joined the EEC and Fitzgerald's role was pivotal in establishing good relations with our European neighbours. He helped secure a favourable CAP deal for Irish farmers and served as President of the council of Ministers in 1974. In addition, Fitzgerald helped bring together the belligerent parties in the north and was instrumental in negotiating the Sunningdale Agreement. This was a short-lived plan to establish a power sharing executive up north and a cross-border 'Council of Ireland'. These were largely positive contributions to Irish affairs.

Undoubtedly though, Haughey and Fitzgerald's greatest contributions came as Taoisigh. Both tried to address the recurring problem of sectarian violence in the north. When Haughey defeated George Colley in a leadership contest in 1979, he inherited this problem and a set of rather tense Anglo-Irish relations. He held two summit meetings with the British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in 1980. Initially they enjoyed a good working relationship, and agreed to establish a formal inter-governmental council. However this trust was broken by Haughey over-selling the talks and claiming that Irish unity was on the cards. Overall Haughey did little to resolve the burning issue of the north.

Fitzgerald was more successful in this regard. First he tried to get unanimity on the nationalist side by establishing the 'New Ireland Forum' consisting of the leaders of the major parties north and south of the border including John Hume (SDLP), Dick Spring (Labour) and Haughey himself. This group set out three possible solutions to the troubles including creating a federal state, a joint authority state or a unified state. Then in 1986, Fitzgerald and Thatcher signed the 'Anglo-Irish Agreement' which established a permanent secretariat in Northern Ireland

containing both Irish and British civil servants. This did not end the cycle of violence in the North, but it was a monumental step forward and possibly Fitzgerald's greatest contribution to Irish Affairs.

Both Fitzgerald and Haughey also had a large impact on the Irish economy. During Haughey's first tenure as Taoiseach (1977-79) he recognised the country was "living beyond its means" but just exacerbated the problem by cutting taxes and increasing spending. However in later years, his Minister for finance Ray McSharry adopted a policy of fiscal rectitude, which involved cutting spending and implementing a national wage agreement. This economically responsible approach helped pave the way for the prosperity of the 1990s.

As Taoiseach, Garret Fitzgerald had a poor record on economic matters. To deal with the economic downturn of the 1980s he introduced austerity measures which plunged the economy into a negative cycle. Unemployment soared to record levels (17.5% in 1986) as did emigration. He did manage to slowly bring down the rate of inflation, which had peaked at 21% in 1981 and from 1986 onwards the economic situation began to slowly improve. Eventually his government fell due to the inherent economic policy differences between Fine Gael and Labour. This poor economic management somewhat undermines his other contributions to Irish affairs in other areas.

One of these areas was that of social reform. Fitzgerald was quite socially progressive and wanted to launch a 'constitutional crusade' to modernise Ireland. For example in the 1982 'Right to Life' referendum he went against the Catholic Church and various pro-life groups to advocate a no vote. The amendment passed regardless. In 1986, Fitzgerald was very vocal in calling for divorce to be legalised, but again he was resoundingly defeated by a majority of

63%. In fact, the only real piece of liberal legislation he passed was the Act introduced by Min. Barry Desmond in 1985, which allowed the public sale of contraceptives to married and unmarried persons alike. One could argue that Fitzgerald had in reality little impact on Irish societal issues, however you could also argue that he helped challenge deeply entrenched, conservative views.

Garret Fitzgerald and C.J Haughey were two of the most influential Irishmen of the twentieth century. Both made huge contributions to Irish affairs in a broad range of domains such as Anglo-Irish relations, EEC membership and the Irish economy, to varying degrees of success.