

FAREWELL: A photo of Austin Currie carried during his Requiem Mass at the Church of the Immaculate Conception in Allenwood, Co Kildare last Friday. The founding member of the SDLP and former TD died at the age of 82

Courage of Currie and his family was inspiring



Deaglán DE BRÉADÚN

ONE night in May 1989, after a meeting of the Coalisland branch of the SDLP, Austin Currie made a phonecall to Garret FitzGerald, who had been trying to contact him earlier.

The first words of the former taoiseach were: "How would you like to stand for a safe seat in the Dáil?"

It was a stagnant period in northern politics and, after consulting family members, Currie accepted the offer. In the general election a month later, he was elected as a Fine Gael TD for Dublin West.

So far so good. The following year, he was asked to become the party's candidate in the election for President of Ireland. In his autobiography *All Hell Will Break Loose* he writes that his initial response was completely negative: indeed he laughed out loud. But eventually he was persuaded to let his name go forward. The other two candidates were Brian Lenihan sr of Fianna Fáil and Labour Party nominee Mary Robinson.

Voting was scheduled for November 7 and a fortnight beforehand I was assigned to follow his campaign on the ground and write daily reports. The first location was Waterford and Austin arrived in dramatic fashion by helicopter from Ballinasloe. In the course of the day, I followed him from Waterford to Dungarvan, Cappoquin, Clonmel and Cahir as well as other places. A Fine Gael party worker remarked: "You would need a pair of roller-skates to keep up with him."

Next day he was canvassing in the Dublin district of Tallaght with the Fine Gael leader at the time Alan Dukes. A day later again, I was on the same flight as Austin to Farranfore airport in Co Kerry. Fianna Fáil rival Brian Lenihan was in serious trouble over allegations that he had made a phonecall in 1982 to then-President Patrick Hillery, seeking to persuade the head of state to refrain from exercising his authority to dissolve the Dáil for a general election, which didn't suit Fianna Fáil at the time.

Currie was back in Dublin 24 hours later for a fundraising lunch at £100 a plate. Then it was on to Navan, Co Meath, where he got a warm reception except for a woman who said: "Go back to the north, go back where you came from." Austin reacted with amusement on that occasion although this type of provincialism did give him cause for concern.

Next day he headed off to Limerick. An audiotape was played on the radio in which Lenihan had told a postgraduate researcher in May 1990 that he did indeed phone President Hillery. Currie said there were implications for then-Taoiseach Charles Haughey who had also allegedly made a phonecall. I included his comments in my daily report for *The Irish Times*.

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As I recall, we fetched up at a late stage in Listowel where a torch-lit Fine Gael street rally was taking place. It was now well past my deadline and space was tight, so I took the opportunity to spend time in the company of the legendary playwright, and author of *The Field*, John B Keane, which to me was the equivalent of meeting Shakespeare in Stratford-upon-Avon. Austin told me afterwards that, in my position, he would have done the same thing, but he later expressed some understandable disappointment.

In our last conversation prior to the election, Currie told me he expected to get more first preference votes than Robinson, whose transfers could then help him win the contest. In the event, Robinson got 39 per cent on the first count, five points behind her Fianna Fáil rival but well ahead of Austin at 17 per cent and, thanks to his preferences, she overcame Lenihan to become Ireland's first woman president.

Aspects of Austin Currie's political career mentioned in the aftermath of his recent passing included the dreadful physical threats and violence he and his family faced over the years, involving more than 30 attacks on their home from different quarters. Their courage was inspiring. It was some time since I last met him and it would have been interesting to hear his views on the Sinn Féin surge in opinion polls south of the border. No doubt he would have combined acute observation with a touch of humour.

When the late Rodney Rice of RTÉ was reporting on his 1990 presidential campaign, Austin introduced the pair of them to a voter in a shopping centre as follows: "We're Currie and Rice."

ON THIS DAY

NOVEMBER 17 1921

Craig stands firm

THE two outstanding events of the weekend were (1) the holding of a meeting of the Dáil Eireann Cabinet and (2) the announcement by Mr Milne Barbour [a Belfast industrialist], apparently with the authority of Craig that 'the only concession Ulster could make would be to accept Dominion Home Rule for herself, but as a separate and distinct unit'. Much importance is attached to the meeting of the National Unionist Association at Liverpool on Thursday when the vote on the Irish issue will largely decide Mr Lloyd George's view as to the necessity of a general election.

Talks outlook 'not promising'

AT a meeting in Derry on Friday night a resolution was adopted calling upon Sir James Craig and the members of his Cabinet to refuse to surrender any of the rights, privileges and liberties conferred upon the people of Northern Ireland by the Government of Ireland Act, 1920.

The Daily Chronicle [a Conservative organ] says: The Ulster Cabinet's irrevocable opposition to an all-Ireland parliament may have the gravest consequences. There is grave disappointment in British Government circles for the situation is unpromising. Mr Lloyd George's policy is to go to the extreme limit of concession, and the country will expect the parties in Ireland to do the same in order that the kingdom may be spared the bitterness and ruin of civil war. If the Irish negotiations break down – and at the moment it is, unfortunately, only too probable that they will – this will be followed by the immediate resignation of the Prime Minister and a general election.

Inspector stopped, man shot

ON the Glen Road, a Belfast suburb at the weekend a young man was wounded during a sensational hold-up of police officers by bodies of men.

The incident resulted in the wounding of a young man named Percy Bloomer of Clondara Street. District Inspector Dudgeon of Lisburn was proceeding by motor with Sergeant Frazer when they came up to a body of men stated to number about 150. The men spread across the road and called upon the district inspector to stop. The officer put on full speed but one of the men jumped on the footboard. A shot rang out from the car and the man fell on the roadway wounded.

(Pressed by Lloyd George on November 10 1921 to accept an all-Ireland Parliament, Craig not only rejected the idea but mischievously suggested that the north might become a separate dominion like Canada. This idea was ejected by an angry Lloyd George as creating an unjustified hard border in Ireland. However, Craig knew he had Tory 'diehard' support for his stance.)

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