

A man of innate decency, who did much for Ireland

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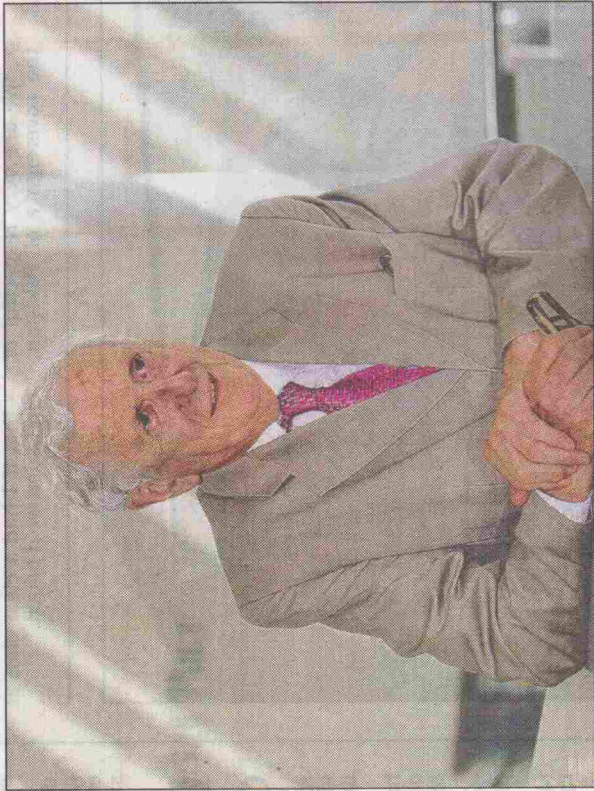


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WHEN Elizabeth and I arrived in Dublin on Thursday to attend the concert and reception to mark the Queen's historic visit to the Republic, we noticed at once flags flying at half mast. When we turned on the television in our hotel to watch accounts of the Royal progress during the day, it was to find that Garret FitzGerald had passed away after a diverse and extraordinary life. Although I had known of his serious illness, the news came as a real shock. While I did not, as I shall explain, share all his views, I had found him a man of innate decency over a period of more than 50 years. We first met in early 1960. Garret, wearing the journalistic hat he

never entirely set aside, had come to interview me about my appointment to head Northern Ireland's search for inward investment from North America. He was still five years short of his arrival on the political scene by election to the Senate, and seemed more economist, statistician and journalist than aspirant politico; and in reality, as a son of the Free State's first minister for external affairs (a title encapsulating the infant county's status as 'not quite foreign'), politics was a strand of his DNA.

By 1973 he had inherited his father's old portfolio, as minister for foreign affairs. There had been unproductive contacts during Brian Faulkner's ill-fated premiership, but by December 1973 the Stormont parliament had been prorogued, direct rule introduced and inter-party talks chaired by Willie Whitelaw had laid the foundations for power-sharing,



Former taoiseach Dr Garret FitzGerald, who was laid to rest yesterday

twinned with "an Irish dimension" as the key elements of a possible settlement. But the power-sharing element would not be operative unless and until the nature of a mutually acceptable "Irish dimension" had been negotiated. I was firmly of the view that trust should be sought gradually rather than seeking to create an executive, as distinct from a consultative, all-Ireland body before mutual confidence had been built up.

My own status at the crucial Sunningdale conference was curious. I would be there as a "British" rather than a "Northern Irish" delegate, and in that capacity I would represent the British interest in the conference sub-group on the Council of Ireland.

Garret would represent the Republic

"solutions" behind the backs of a vital element in any credible and binding settlement. It was all too predictable that official unionism would stand apart from the New Ireland Forum, although the McGimpsey brothers offered views as individuals.

All the Dublin obituaries identify the Anglo-Irish Agreement as FitzGerald's crowning achievement, and the essential step towards the Good Friday Agreement and all that has followed from it. If one challenges that view, one is liable to be labelled a reactionary. It was, therefore, fascinating to hear former Irish President Mary Robinson making it clear why she had been dubious about the merits of a "settlement" negotiated behind the backs of a crucially interested party. I was myself, by then, head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service and second permanent under secretary of state at the Northern Ireland Office, but apparently I did not "need to know". The talks culminating on that famous Good Friday illustrated the reality that a robust conclusion to any enduring dispute requires the participation of those most directly involved.

Through those years I would encounter Garret in various settings. Once, as taoiseach, he was due to address the British-Irish Association at one of its annual Oxbridge conferences. He had to pull out at the last minute for some pressing reason and it was arranged that his party colleague, Paddy Harle of Donegal, would read out his prepared script.

Paddy, who conceived the idea of the Messines Peace Park and the first encounter between Queen Elizabeth II and President McAleese, greatly diverted us all by inserting into his leader's remarks a kind of running commentary ["When you come to think of it, that's not at all a bad idea."].

But if I did not always agree with Garret, I never for a moment doubted his decency, concern and good intentions. He did much to create a new and more liberal society in Ireland, challenging - if he thought it necessary - the received wisdom. In late 1999 I had just retired from the board of the BBC and received an invitation to lead a conference for bright young people at an Oxford college - to make the keynote address and choose the principal speakers. At my invitation, Garret decided to come.

By and large one expected a former prime minister to talk for an hour, answer a few questions, drink a cup of tea, and depart. Not so with Garret FitzGerald. He stayed for the whole event, chatted to all the young people and left the image of a concerned servant of the people. And of course, before the sad death of his disabled wife, it had been moving to witness his love and care for her. In the last few years I would see him steeped in another of his disparate enthusiasms. If not a "time lord" in the broadcasting sense, he had always been the lord of the timetables.

On becoming the northern vice-president of the Railway Preservation Society of Ireland I would sit at AGMs alongside my southern counterpart, none other than Garret FitzGerald. He would preside at one AGM in Dublin, which for some reason was passionate and prolonged. At its conclusion I sympathised in terms of "that was pretty heavy going".

"You know," said Dr FitzGerald, "I used to chair meetings of European prime ministers and they were all far easier than that." What a pity that Garret did not live to see, as I did on Thursday night, a British monarch and an Irish president consigning to the dustbin the idea that we cannot be close friends as well as near neighbours.