



**THE POLITICAL CAREER OF ERSKINE HAMILTON  
CHILDERS, 1905-74**

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**THESIS FOR THE DEGREE OF PHD  
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**June 2008**

## Table of contents

	Page
Acknowledgements	iii
Abbreviations	iv
Introduction	1
Chapter 1 The early political career of Erskine Hamilton Childers, 1931-51	7
Chapter 2 First ministerial challenge, Department of Posts and Telegraphs, 1951-4	50
Chapter 3 Minister for Lands, Forestry and Fisheries, 1957-9	80
Chapter 4 What price solvency? Minister for Transport and Power, 1959-69	114
Chapter 5 Tánaiste and Minister for Health, 1963-73; forerunner of the modern presidency, 1973-4	154
Conclusion	198
Bibliography	206

## **Acknowledgements**

I would particularly like to thank my supervisor, Dr Denise Dunne. From the initial guidance in choosing my research topic, Dr Dunne's patience, encouragement and guidance have been fundamental to the completion of my thesis. My thanks also to all those in the History Department, who gave generously of their time and assistance. Thanks also to the staff in the libraries at NUI Maynooth for their help and advice.

My thanks also to the staff of the National Archives of Ireland, the National Library of Ireland, the library staff in the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the record management unit of the Department of Health and Children for providing documentation and answering my many queries. Thank you to the staff of the Aidan Heavey Library, Athlone for their courtesy and assistance during my many visits while researching my thesis.

To the staff of Trinity College Manuscripts Department and University College Dublin Archives Department, thank you for your efforts and assistance.

Thanks to all those who granted me interviews and who wrote to me with comments and suggestions.

Special thanks to my sisters, Teresa and Elizabeth for their interest and encouragement throughout my period of study. To my parents, now deceased, thank you. Finally, to my son, Daniel, whose encouragement, interest, and understanding provided a constant driving force during my period of study and was paramount in the successful completion of my thesis.

## **Abbreviations**

BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CIE	Coras Iompair Éireann
EEC	European Economic Community
LC	Land Commission
NAI	National Archives of Ireland
NE	Fianna Fáil National Executive
NFA	National Farmers' Association
NHC	National Health Council
NLI	National Library of Ireland
PSC	Publicity Sub-Committee
RE	Radio Éireann
RTE	Radio Telefís Éireann
TCD	Trinity College Dublin
UCDA	University College Dublin Archives

## **Abstract**

Erskine Hamilton Childers, hereafter cited as Childers, was born on the 11 December 1905 and died during his term as President of Ireland on 17 November 1974. First elected to Dáil Éireann in 1938, Childers successfully contested all subsequent general elections until he resigned his Dáil seat to successfully contest the presidential election in 1973. Childers held the ministerial portfolios of Posts and Telegraphs, Lands Forestry and Fisheries, Transport and Power and Health. He also served as Tánaiste while Minister for Health. Childers represented the constituency of Athlone-Longford, later reconstituted as Longford-Westmeath, from 1938 until 1961 at which time he transferred to Monaghan where he remained until his resignation in 1973. Childers was educated in England but he developed a love for Ireland from a very young age. He was greatly influenced by both his parents, particularly his father, Robert Erskine Childers, who was executed by the Irish Free State in 1922.

Childers was totally dedicated to all his portfolios, he was named Minister of the Year in 1970 by *Newsweek* magazine. This thesis explores Childers political contribution and examines a number of key issues and themes throughout his political career. Such themes include the development and subsequent management of the Irish broadcasting service; the development of natural resources such as land, fisheries and tourism; the evolution of infrastructural services including train services and the Irish post and telecommunications system, and the development of the health system. Childers held responsibilities in all of these areas at different stages in his political career. Other more controversial issues which are examined include Childers decision to return to Ireland in 1931, his place within the Fianna Fáil party, the extent to which Childers ever understood the Irish political system, and the influence of the Catholic Church on his political career.

## Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to examine the political and presidential career of Erskine Hamilton Childers, hereafter cited as Childers, and thereby contribute significantly to the scant body of knowledge currently available on Childers. First elected to Dáil Éireann in 1938, Childers successfully contested all subsequent general elections until he resigned his Dáil seat to contest the presidential election in 1973. During his term in Dáil Éireann he held the ministerial portfolios of Posts and Telegraphs, Lands Forestry and Fisheries, Transport and Power, and Health. He also served as Tánaiste while Minister for Health. Childers represented the constituency of Athlone-Longford, later reconstituted as Longford-Westmeath, from 1938 until 1961 at which time he transferred to Monaghan where he remained until his resignation in 1973. He was named Minister of the Year in 1970 by *Newsweek* magazine.<sup>1</sup>

The focus of the thesis is primarily on the political life of Childers and the contributions that he made to Irish political and social life in his various portfolios. It is not biographical in approach and the thesis does not encapsulate Childers personal life. This approach is justified due to a lack of primary sources coupled with John N. Young's biographical work on Childers.<sup>2</sup> The only emphasis given to his personal life is in his early years only to demonstrate how this impacted on his entry into political life in Ireland. Childers's development as a politician is explored by way of his attitude to the electorate, his understanding of the political process in Ireland and his handling of his various portfolios. During his career Childers emerged as an effective administrator and one who fully immersed himself in whatever portfolio was assigned to him. Childers had few friends within the political circle and remained aloof from his political colleagues. When presented with the opportunity Childers displayed leadership qualities and an ability to remain in control under pressure. Childers political background was unique. Arguably, he lived in the shadow of his father, Robert Erskine Childers, and he devoted his life trying to fulfil the aspirations of both his parents. The influence of his parents, particularly his father, had a profound effect on Childers political career. His decision to return to Ireland in 1931 is explored in some detail. Having no connections in the

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<sup>1</sup> John N. Young, *Erskine H. Childers: President of Ireland, a biography* (Buckinghamshire, 1985), p.155.

<sup>2</sup> John N. Young, *Erskine H. Childers: President of Ireland, a biography* (Buckinghamshire, 1985).

Athlone-Longford constituency, his successful entry into Irish politics via this constituency in 1938 is considered. When judging his political career it is important to keep in mind the personalities and qualities of the leadership of Fianna Fáil during this period. Such distinguished national personalities as de Valera, Lemass, Aiken and MacEntee were to the front of Irish politics during most of Childers's political career. Standing before a predominately Catholic electorate, Childers, a Protestant, had to overcome the disadvantages that this caused him. While his success at the polling stations speaks of his success with the public, he did have reservations concerning the promotion of his political career due to his religious beliefs. This issue is considered in the light of the influence of the Catholic Church in Ireland during the period of his political career, particularly the period from 1938 to 1965. Childers was remarkably honest and principled which on occasions led him to be politically naïve. Throughout his political career and into his short term as president, Childers constantly encouraged the development of community associations and local responsibility. Some of the decisions he took during his political career raise the question of whether he ever fully understood the Irish political class and the Irish political system. He knew what was required to be elected and continually voiced Fianna Fáil policies to aid party victories. However, in relation to his personal career he did not adjust or amend those practices which impacted negatively on his own political progress. There were many contradictions in Childers's political life and some of these are addressed in the thesis. He was somewhat of a visionary in forecasting future developments in the areas of infrastructure and services. However, this sense of vision was hampered by economic considerations in his management of the Irish rail infrastructure.

Existing secondary source material on Childers is sparse with only one exclusive contribution devoted to the life of Childers by John N. Young.<sup>3</sup> This important contribution to the Childers story concentrates on the Childers family background and the young Childers growing up in London. Young traces Childers's progression from his early school days right through to his presidential campaign in 1973. While I acknowledge Young's valuable contribution to the hitherto non-existent literature on Childers, Young nonetheless does not make use of the considerable archive material

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<sup>3</sup> John N. Young, *Erskine H. Childers: President of Ireland, a biography* (Buckinghamshire, 1985).

available. Using the sources available this thesis explores in greater detail Childers's entry into political life in Ireland, his political contributions and the major issues encountered during his career. In short, the thesis defines Childers's thumbprint following his thirty-five years in Irish political life. Other secondary sources include references to Childers's political life with varying levels of detail. In his autobiography León Ó Broin, secretary of the Department of Posts and Telegraphs during Childers's first term as minister, provides us with an insight into the broadcasting service under Childers's period as minister.<sup>4</sup> A major innovation during Childers's term was in the area of political broadcasting. Unscripted political discussions were allowed and the ban on members of Dáil Éireann removed during Childers's term as minister.<sup>5</sup> One of the more innovative actions by Childers was the appointment of Maurice Gorham as Director of Broadcasting in 1953. Gorham's book on broadcasting includes a detailed account of the processes and daily on goings at Radio Éireann.<sup>6</sup> Gorham outlined Childers term as minister and his style of management and control. Having installed a new regime and advocated independence for Radio Éireann, Childers found it difficult not to intervene.

In his book on the land question Terence Dooley analyses Childers term as Minister for Lands Fisheries and Forestry.<sup>7</sup> Childers recognised the shortcomings within agriculture and that output was hampered by the volume of small farms. He challenged the Land Commission to review its own policies but had limited success. Patrick J. Sammon stated that Childers was not only hindered by the Land Commission but also blocked by his own advisers and the political system.<sup>8</sup> Childers's efforts to reform the land allocation process is examined in this thesis. Cormac Ó Gráda painted a dreary image of Ireland's tourist industry in the late 1950s but there is no mention of Childers's efforts in the area of tourism from 1961 to 1969.<sup>9</sup>

The troubles in Northern Ireland and the internal power struggle within the Fianna Fáil Party in the late 1960s and early 1970s provided Childers with an opportunity to demonstrate that he was not merely a good administrator. His contribution to Irish

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<sup>4</sup> León Ó Broin, *Just like yesterday: an autobiography* (Dublin, 1985), pp178-83.

<sup>5</sup> John Horgan, *Irish media: a critical history since 1922* (London, 2001), p.72.

<sup>6</sup> Maurice Gorham, *Forty years of Irish broadcasting* (Dublin, 1967), pp 201-22.

<sup>7</sup> Terence Dooley, *The land for the people: the land question in independent Ireland* (Dublin, 2004), pp170-231.

<sup>8</sup> Patrick J. Sammon, *In the Land Commission: a memoir 1933-1978* (Dublin, 1997), pp55-7.

<sup>9</sup> Cormac Ó Gráda, *A rocky road: the Irish economy since the 1920s* (Manchester, 1997), pp172-3.



politics particularly during this period needs to be highlighted and recognised. According to Dermot Keogh, Childers was one of those that Jack Lynch could trust during this period of crisis within Fianna Fáil.<sup>10</sup> Lynch relied heavily on Childers during this period and political commentaries questioned why his abilities were not used more frequently by the government. Arguably, J.J. Lee's observation that it is 'sometimes said that great administrators do not make good politicians' is particularly appropriate to Childers.<sup>11</sup> Childers's style of management and communication within government, and how this affected his relationship with the taoiseach of the day is explored in this thesis.

Childers succeeded de Valera as president and according to Tim Pat Coogan his success was attributable more to the fact that he was a Protestant rather than for his ministerial record.<sup>12</sup> An increasing ecumenically minded electorate was a positive for Childers but factors such as his lengthy political career and the personality of the man were also decisive in his success. Fine Gael viewed Childers's success as a personal victory for Childers himself rather than a Fianna Fáil party victory.

There are ample primary sources available on the political life of Childers. He held a variety of ministerial portfolios over a twenty-two year period and the departmental papers deposited in the National Archives of Ireland are of prime importance. These papers cover his terms as Minister for Posts and Telegraphs and Transport and Power. The papers of the Department of the Taoiseach in particular and those of the Department of Foreign Affairs were also of considerable benefit. However, the ministerial records for his term as Minister for Lands, Fisheries and Forestry were not deposited in the National Archives of Ireland at the time of writing this thesis and efforts to locate them through the Department of Agriculture and the Land Commission have proven unsuccessful.<sup>13</sup> A similar story holds true for his term as Tánaiste and Minister for Health. The ministerial records for health were not deposited in the National Archives of

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<sup>10</sup> Dermot Keogh, *Twentieth-century Ireland: nation and state* (Dublin, 1994), p.307.

<sup>11</sup> J.J. Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985: politics and society* (Cambridge, 2001), p.367.

<sup>12</sup> Tim Pat Coogan, *Disillusioned decades: Ireland 1966-87* (Dublin, 1987), p.52. and *De Valera: long fellow, long shadow* (London, 1993), p.688.

<sup>13</sup> Confirmation with author from the National Archives of Ireland dated 25 Sept. 2005 that records for Childers term as Minister for Lands, Fisheries and Forestry are not deposited there. Also letters from the Land Commission and Dept of Agriculture dated 24 June 2005 and 5 Sept. 2005 respectively confirming the unavailability of Childers records as minister.

Ireland at the time of writing this thesis.<sup>14</sup> However, the Department of Health and Children, record management unit, have provided hitherto unseen records covering Childers's term as Minister for Health. While limited use is made of these records they are not, in the main, relevant to this thesis. The Government Information Services files, deposited in the National Archives of Ireland are very useful as they provide the speeches and newspaper reports covering all of Childers's ministerial portfolios.<sup>15</sup> Files relating to Childers's short term as President of Ireland are also deposited in the National Archives of Ireland.<sup>16</sup>

The Fianna Fáil papers deposited in University College, Dublin provide details of Childers's early political work within the Fianna Fáil organisation.<sup>17</sup> This depository also includes the papers of Sean MacEntee, Eamon de Valera, Frank Aiken and Sean MacEoin all key political figures during Childers political career.

Childers was a regular contributor during Dáil debates and this source is particularly useful in gathering information on issues concerning Childers.<sup>18</sup> His departmental estimate speeches are of considerable assistance in assessing Childers's control and development of his varied portfolios. He was always thorough in preparing memoranda for the Taoiseach and government departments and his speeches and answers to questions in the Dáil are generally similarly presented.

The private papers of Childers are deposited in Trinity College, Dublin.<sup>19</sup> These invaluable papers range from correspondence to and from his parents while Childers was at boarding school, ministerial correspondence through his political career through to press cuttings and party literature during his presidential campaign.

A measurement of Childers's achievement while responsible for the broadcasting service can be gauged by examining the additional programming and increased broadcast hours during his term as minister. The National Library of Ireland houses the *Radio*

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<sup>14</sup> Confirmation with author from the National Archives of Ireland dated 25 Sept. 2005 that records for Childers term as Minister for Health are not deposited there.

<sup>15</sup> Speeches and newspaper reports for ministerial portfolios and presidency, 1951-73 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers' Speeches, MS GIS 1/57-1/72).

<sup>16</sup> Presidential records, 1973-4 (N.A.I., Uachtaráin na hÉireann, MS 2004/25/1-2004/25/66).

<sup>17</sup> Fianna Fáil papers, 1913-95 (U.C.D.A., P176).

<sup>18</sup> Dáil Éireann debates, 1938-74 (<http://www.oireachtas-debates.gov.ie>) (27 May 2005).

<sup>19</sup> Childers papers, 1905-74 (T.C.D., MS 9935-10046).

*Review* and the annual reports and radio handbooks published by Radio Éireann during Childers's term as minister.<sup>20</sup>

Newspapers, especially local editions, are particularly useful in determining the local response to issues that confronted Childers. This source is of particular value when assessing Childers's term as Minister for Lands. Reports from the Central Statistics Office and those of the Land Commission assist in dealing with his term as Minister for Lands.

Interviews with the author and written communications with selected people, such as Nessa Childers, T.K. Whitaker, Garret Fitzgerald, Barry Desmond and Sean Sherwin, also assisted in the analysis of the development of Childers's political career.<sup>21</sup> Personal contacts and recollections of the interviewees provide evidence that has not been found in the written sources to date.

Before analysing the political contribution of Childers over thirty-five years and his efforts to redefine the role of the presidency, it is necessary to establish his Irish connections and present some aspects of his family background and the circumstances that were to influence and guide Childers throughout his entire public life.

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<sup>20</sup> Radio reviews and annual reports, 1949-54 (N.L.I., MS newspaper catalogue, hard copy, Jan 1949-Dec. 1954, MS IR621384 rl).

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Nessa Childers of Clonskeagh, Dublin 14 (2 Sept. 2005), Garret Fitzgerald of Ranelagh, Dublin 6 (20 Dec. 2007), Barry Desmond of 2 Taney Ave., Dublin 14 (22 Nov. 2005), Seán Sherwin of 65/66 Lower Mount Street, Dublin 2 (2 June 2005).  
Written communications with T.K. Whitaker of 148 Stillorgan Road, Dublin 4 (13 Dec. 2005), Barry Desmond of 2 Taney Ave., Dublin 14 (17 Oct. 2007).

## Chapter 1

### **The early political career of Erskine Hamilton Childers, 1931-51**

The Childers family can trace its ancestry back to the reign of King Edward III. Robert Caesar Childers, grandfather of Erskine Hamilton Childers, was born in 1838 and married Anna Barton of Glendalough in County Wicklow thus providing the family with its Irish connection. Robert and Anna lived in London and their second son; Robert Erskine Childers was born in 1870. Robert Erskine Childers married Mary Alden Osgood and on the 11 December 1905 their son, Erskine Hamilton Childers was born.

Erskine Hamilton Childers, hereafter cited as Childers, childhood was typical of an upper class London family of that period. His nanny would take him to the Chelsea Embankment gardens and as he grew older he was taught to appreciate nature and observe the changing seasons. His formal education commenced at a small private kindergarten school when Childers was five years old and it was also during this period that his brother, Robert was born. The highlight of the young Childers's year was the visit to Ireland. At Glendalough House, Annamoe in County Wicklow, Childers had the environment and grounds to challenge him. Fishing, hill walking and explorations of the woodlands gave the young Childers a view of life different to his own life in London.

Childers was mature for his years and he understood his parents desire to devote themselves to Irish independence. He was greatly influenced by his father, Robert Erskine Childers. Having moved to Glendalough House, Annamoe, County Wicklow at a very young age, Robert Erskine Childers developed a great love for Ireland. A Unionist and imperialist, Robert Erskine Childers was educated at Cambridge University. Despite a career in the British civil service and armed forces his interest in home rule for Ireland grew following the Liberal success in 1906. In 1914 he used his yacht, the *Asgard*, to bring guns into Howth for the Irish Volunteers. He became increasingly republican and in 1919 he was appointed director of publicity for the Irish Republican Army. Elected to the Dáil in 1921 he was appointed its minister for propaganda. Robert Erskine Childers was first secretary to the Irish delegation in the negotiations leading up to the Anglo-Irish treaty, which he strongly opposed. Thoroughly disliked by the Free State government he was one of the first

republicans to be executed on 24 November 1922 during the Irish Civil War. Following the death of Michael Collins the IRA was forced to break up into smaller groups and move to more remote country districts. Robert Erskine Childers based himself in the hills of west Cork. He was the republican director of propaganda and according to Diarmaid Ferriter was erroneously believed by some to be ‘the military mastermind of republican opposition’.<sup>1</sup> Days before his death Robert Erskine Childers reflected on the unusual circumstances of his situation:

I have been held up to scorn and hatred as an Englishman who, betraying his own country, came here to lecture and destroy Ireland. Another and viler version is to the effect that so far from betraying England, I have been actually acting as the secret instrument of Englishmen for ruining Ireland.<sup>2</sup>

Ireland was of special interest to Erskine Hamilton Childers from a young age and he was angry at British repression and injustice; he was proud to think of himself as an Irishman. He kept a photograph of Eamon de Valera on his locker at boarding school and next to his father; de Valera was his greatest hero.<sup>3</sup> Childers was teased over this but remembering his father’s advice, he never became abusive or discourteous. In May 1921 Childers wrote to his brother Bobby stating: ‘isn’t it wonderful about father’s election aren’t you proud?’<sup>4</sup> Even at the young age of fifteen years Childers was expressing an interest in the politics of Ireland. In a letter to his parents during the summer of 1921, he stated ‘I am so longing for peace in Ireland’.<sup>5</sup> On the peace talks and subsequent conference Childers was very excited and in a letter to his parents asked ‘Why isn’t the President going?’<sup>6</sup> During the negotiations Childers hoped that: ‘father and uncle Bob will be able to come down to see me one day, they must have one or two breaks I am sure in the continuity of the conference’.<sup>7</sup> In letters to his parents Childers demonstrated the enormity of his love for them and the influence that his father, in particular, had on him. On his sixteenth birthday, 11 December 1921, he wrote of his increasing love for his parents and his desire to ‘live

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<sup>1</sup> Diarmaid Ferriter, *The transformation of Ireland 1900-2000* (London, 2005), p.262.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> John N. Young, *Erskine H. Childers President of Ireland a biography* (Buckinghamshire, 1985), p.26.

<sup>4</sup> Letter from Childers to brother Bobby, 24 May 1921 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9990/190).

<sup>5</sup> Letter from Childers to his parents, 1921 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9990/194).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., Sept./Oct. 1921(T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9990/196).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., Oct. 1921(T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9990/197).

up to father's greatness'.<sup>8</sup> Childers kept up with happenings in Ireland through newspaper cuttings sent from home. On hearing of Cathal Brugha's death on 7 July 1922 he wrote, 'to think of Mrs Brugha and those 5 quaint little children. Somebody ought to write his life. The moment I spoke to him I loved him'.<sup>9</sup> Writing to his parents in July 1922 Childers expected to read of his father's wounding and suggested that the I.R.A. would never be successful until they returned to the old style warfare. He read volumes on the history of Ireland and had a love for classical music, literature, poetry and nature in general. When he was fifteen and attending Gresham's School in Norfolk, he wrote what he described as 'one of the best essays I have ever written. It is the record in the school for length and it is top mark'.<sup>10</sup> During his political career Childers wrote many long and sometimes over elaborate memoranda which did not always receive top marks from his political colleagues.

The unrest in Ireland had a very deep effect on Childers. In a letter to his parents dated 1922 he hoped that they were well and that he:

Can't stand the fighting. It is too awful. Heaven help Rory O'Connor. I pray night and day for him. Has he any chance at all. Remember father please what I told you when I was leaving in the train. I feel I ought not to be here, while fighting goes on. Oh mother please help me in this dilemma. I long to go and help. How can I stay here while Rory is battling for the Republic.

I know I ought to be educated, but I swear I will make up for it.<sup>11</sup>

While it is not possible to definitely say that Childers was prepared to fight, neither can it be refuted that he never held such aspirations in his younger life. In a note to Childers dated 2 July 1922 his father stated that 'I am working for the Republic in the war. I am sure you will understand what it all means and I know how you are feeling...it's such a passionate joy that our boy is with us and will carry the torch when we are gone'.<sup>12</sup> Although this note can be interpreted in many ways what can be said for definite was that in his later political career Childers was totally opposed to violence. This was the last letter from his father to Childers.

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<sup>8</sup> Letter to his parents, 11 Dec. 1921 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9990/201).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., Jly. 1922 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9990/229).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 4 Nov. 1921 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9990/198).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., Rory O'Connor was one of the party that seized the Four Courts on 14 April 1922, they surrendered on 30 June. O'Connor was executed by the government on 8 Dec, one of the seventy-seven anti-treaty prisoners executed. 1922 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9990/240).

<sup>12</sup> Letter from his father to Childers, 2 Jly. 1922 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9991/332).

Robert Erskine Childers was captured on 10 November 1922 in County Wicklow whilst in possession of a hand gun given to him by Michael Collins. Childers's mother sent a note to him with the news that his father 'was arrested this a.m...he is in Wicklow jail. Pray for him that he may be kept safe...thank God he is not killed – a miracle. He is wonderful beyond words'.<sup>13</sup> On hearing of his father's arrest Childers left at once for Dublin. Despite attempts by his legal team and representations from influential friends on both sides of the Irish Sea, the Free State Government imposed the death penalty on Robert Erskine Childers. The last time Childers saw his father was in his prison cell at Dublin's Portobello Barracks. His father sought his promise that he would never refer to the Civil War and that he would do everything possible to reconcile Irishmen with one another and with Britain. Robert Erskine Childers requested his son to approach those who had signed his death warrant and convey his forgiveness. During his last days, Childers's father ensured that every action led to reconciliation and even shook hands with the firing squad at Beggars Bush Barracks.<sup>14</sup> His father's words of healing and reconciliation helped Childers to overcome the instincts of bitterness and hate which would naturally cloud the thinking of most sixteen-year-old boys in such circumstances. However, his daughter, Nessa Childers, recalled her own concerns with death bed promises.<sup>15</sup> Childers would subsequently spend his entire political life living up to the promises he made to his father and this arguably limited his career prospects.

After his father's execution on 24 November 1922, Childers returned to England but was feeling very miserable. Writing to his mother in December 1922 he recounted a meeting with a journalist who sat down beside him for dinner. The journalist remarked that 'it was jolly good thing that fellow Childers was executed'.<sup>16</sup> Childers responded with dignity and an enormous amount of restraint saying that 'it may be for some people. My feelings might be different as I am his son'.<sup>17</sup> Childers's mother was a remarkably strong person and a great comfort to the young Childers. In a letter dated 5 June 1923 he tells his mother of the 'wonderful spirit you have to suffer so bravely as you do. I don't know what I would do if I hadn't the example of

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<sup>13</sup> Letter from his mother to Childers, 10 Nov. 1922 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9991/351).

<sup>14</sup> *Uachtaráin*, TG4 documentary series, Wed. 9 May 2007.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Letter from Childers to his mother, Dec. 1922 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9990/250).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

you, and those mothers I saw, to follow'.<sup>18</sup> He was living in a world where 'half of everything is blotted out obliterated and refilled with that awful suffocating sorrow that I never knew of before'.<sup>19</sup> He sought for meaning in the sorrow he experienced and turned to his religious beliefs to provide him with a beacon of light. In the same letter he continued:

Sometimes I want to thank God that he gave me this to bear when young to help me to understand the suffering of the world. It is hard to do that because it seems to contradict so many wonderful God given things, such as the deep personal love between father and me. What a wonderful friend he was.<sup>20</sup>

Some weeks after his father's death, Childers met his grandmother in London following her arrival from the United States. Ruth Ellen Dow, whom his grandmother had met on her journey from the United States, joined them on a visit to the British Museum. Both were searching to fill voids in their lives at that time and they immediately struck up a rapport that was to grow and flourish. Ruth Ellen Dow would become Childers's first wife on 26 September 1925.

His deep sense of loss was still with him as he wrote to Ruth on 17 April 1925:

I am feeling so lonely at this minute....This afternoon I have been reading father's letters and missing him, missing things he could give to us which no human mortal can, missing him with an ache of misery....I feel exhausted with loneliness...the horror of it all makes me lose my breath....Why does life do these things, out of suffering cometh joy. And I know I cannot give in. I cannot accept human nature and become disillusioned as most mortals....I want to cry my heart out and I can't.<sup>21</sup>

The August 1923 general election coincided with school holidays and Childers returned to Ireland to campaign for Robert Barton who was in prison at this time. With most of the leading opponents of the Treaty in prison or in hiding, the youth and women of Sinn Féin carried on much of the electioneering. At a rally in O'Connell Street, Dublin in August 1923 Childers made his first public address. He addressed the crowd as republican comrades and continued:

In the name of Erskine Childers, my beloved father, I stand here to protest against the arrest of our President and great leader, Mr de Valera, a friend

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<sup>18</sup> Letter from Childers to his mother, 5 Jun. 1923 (T.C.D., Childers papers, 9990/269).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Letter from Childers to his wife, Ruth, 17 Apr. 1925 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9984/256).



to every one of us. Does the Free State Government believe that they are promoting peace when they take him away from us?

Though we are deprived of his inspiring guidance we will remember his noble example and what he has taught us, and will do all that in us lies by faithful labour and, if need be, sacrifice, to strengthen the Republic....I ask you to pray night and day for his safety and that Ireland may never again be stained by the blood of her faithful sons.<sup>22</sup>

In an article for *The Republican Leader: Wicklow Edition* dated 22 August 1923 Childers pleaded with the electorate to vote for Robert Barton, and to remember Barton's self-sacrifice for Ireland and the ideals for which he stood. The land of Ireland for the people of Ireland held in complete freedom. In a rare comment on his father's death, the young Childers stated:

For believing in and working for this Gaelic ideal my beloved father, who was Robert Barton's dearest cousin, friend and fellow-worker, was shot in Beggar's Bush Barracks by Irishmen who have betrayed Ireland's freedom.

But Robert Barton, by the mercy of God, still lives to accomplish his work and to vindicate my father's life and death.

Is my father's sacrifice for you to be in vain? The answer rests with you.

I ask you in his name to vote for Robert Barton and to redeem our National Honour.<sup>23</sup>

In the same publication dated 26 August 1923 Childers made a final appeal to the Wicklow electorate on Robert Barton's behalf, referring once more to his father's death:

Can you see him facing the foreigners' squad? Do you hear the shots of the rifles? He died for your sake. His last prayer was "God grant to our people victory and peace". Be true to his memory....Show to England that Erskine Childers and the Martyrs of Ireland have not died in vain.<sup>24</sup>

In England the newspapers featured the O'Connell Street rally and showed pictures of Childers on the platform.<sup>25</sup> Pressure from the British establishment led to the headmaster of Gresham's School asking Childers to leave the school in July 1924. Childers recalled that the headmaster was 'not in the least disappointed with me and says that I am to remember that it is entirely circumstances connected with me not any

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<sup>22</sup> Childers speech to crowd in O'Connell St. Dublin, Aug. 1923 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9965/1).

<sup>23</sup> Newspaper article, 22 Aug. 1923 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9959/87).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 26 Aug. 1923 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9959/88).

<sup>25</sup> John N. Young. *Erskine H. Childers President of Ireland a biography* (Buckinghamshire, 1985), p.41.

fault in me'.<sup>26</sup> He was successful in the entrance examination for Cambridge and passed through the Great Gate of Trinity College, Cambridge in October 1924.

Childers and Ruth Ellen Dow continued to write to each other and their talk of marriage led to his grandmother advising Ruth that nothing was to interfere with her grandson's studies.<sup>27</sup> However, the marriage of Childers and Ruth took place on 26 September 1925 at Exeter, New Hampshire. Back at Cambridge they lived in a tiny flat and Ruth obtained a secretarial position to finance them. By Christmas 1926 Ruth was pregnant and Childers missed a term which necessitated a further year's study. He needed a summer job and wrote to Carlos Drake, a Chicago hotel and travel magnate. Childers was successful and spent the summer acting as a courier for Americans touring England. The highly enjoyable courier work led Childers to visit Paris in October 1927 to consider further possibilities. He returned to Cambridge with two offers of employment secured and studied hard to graduate as a Bachelor of Arts in June 1928. A character reference from Trinity College, Cambridge described Childers as having 'an unblemished character. His conduct and diligence have given satisfaction to the authorities of the college'.<sup>28</sup>

Childers returned to Paris after the June 1928 examinations and commenced work in the Drake offices. He coped well with the complexities of international travel and was made Travel Manager. Childers's detailed planning and attention to detail was all part of his day's work. The position allowed Childers to demonstrate his administrative abilities and he shared in the firm's success. He bought a car and the family moved to a large apartment in a more fashionable suburb of Paris. It is worth noting the detail and service offered by the Drake organisation to its customers. This would have contributed to the success of the company and its ability to remain open during the world depression of the late 1920s. Attention to detail suited Childers well and this would be very evident in his style of working during his political career. An example can be gleaned from an extract of the itinerary prepared for Mrs. Emil W. Wagner. After arriving at Bremen the client was met by a company representative and assisted through customs control. Once through customs the client was taken by a

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<sup>26</sup> Letter to his mother, autumn 1923 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9990/283).

<sup>27</sup> John N. Young, *Erskine H. Childers President of Ireland a biography* (Buckinghamshire, 1985), p.52.

<sup>28</sup> Reference from Trinity College, Cambridge, 4 Oct. 1927 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 10041/1).

company agent to her hotel. All activities were arranged for the client and an English speaking representative provided when necessary. The tailor made itinerary for the client was in the form of a pocket sized booklet comprising thirty-four pages of details and a map of the travel destinations.<sup>29</sup> In early 1929 Ruth returned to Dublin for the birth of their second child and work pressures prevented Childers from travelling to Dublin to see his new-born son. Childers's letters to Ruth tell of how busy he was at C.C. Drake and that he had lots of clients. During this period he was promised a considerable increase in salary and he was advised that he had 'a very big future' in the firm.<sup>30</sup> In a letter to Ruth dated February 1929 he stated that 'the most tremendous thing in my life is Ireland'.<sup>31</sup> He dreamed of being in Ireland making election speeches and with the experience gained away from Ireland he naively speculated on starting a business in Ireland that would employ all in the Republican movement. In a note to Ruth, probably dated early April 1929, Childers informed her that his new salary was 6,350 francs and that 'this is secret will explain when I see you'.<sup>32</sup> Despite the continuing good fortunes at C.C. Drake this was a period of economic turmoil and it appears that Childers's mother was at least preparing the ground work for Childers's return to Ireland. She wrote to him on 29 July 1930 outlining his options in Ireland as she saw them. After consulting with de Valera and others she suggested the possibility of a minor position in the planned Fianna Fáil newspaper but she was anxious that Childers not commit himself 'to any party policy'.<sup>33</sup> Another suggestion for Childers to consider was that of lecturing but his mother advised him that the salary was 'starvation wages'.<sup>34</sup> Childers's best prospects lay, according to his mother, in the legal profession. This letter is important as it shows that his mother did not exert any undue influence on Childers to enter politics in Ireland. However, in relation to the legal profession, she did state that 'most of the Irish patriots came forward out of that profession'.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Client itinerary, undated (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 10042/10-54).

<sup>30</sup> Letter from Childers to wife, Ruth, 1929 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9985/364).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, underlined by Childers, Feb. 1929 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9985/369).

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, Apr. 1929 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9985/386).

<sup>33</sup> Letter from his mother to Childers, emphasis in original document, 29 July 1930 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9991/442).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

The world depression of the late 1920s and early 1930s changed the world order and provoked extreme nationalism paving the way to dictatorship and the Second World War. The turmoil had an inevitable effect on the tourist industry and the financial pressures experienced by Childers were taking their toll on him. Childers's third child and second son, Robert Winthrop was born in Paris in June 1931 and as soon as he could travel, Ruth and the children travelled to America.<sup>36</sup> The intention was that Childers would join his family in America for a brief holiday. However, by 27 August 1931 the situation at C.C. Drake was 'gloomy not hopeless everyone sacrificing one months salary'.<sup>37</sup> Writing to Ruth on 13 September 1931 Childers stated that up to September the loss at Drake for the year was 4,000 US Dollars 'which in view of the crisis is rather satisfactory'.<sup>38</sup> Constantly outlining their cash position in letters to Ruth, he stated that 'I never want any more children. We have one too many already, God bless him, for people of our probable income'.<sup>39</sup> By 16 October 1931 Childers had decided to see what was available for him in Ireland when he next visited there. His desire to return was also driven by the fact that 'I see no way with my means of learning more about businesses'.<sup>40</sup> He considered going to America for one year to study but his financial situation prevented him from doing so. The issue of Childers's return to Ireland is one which requires some consideration. It is true that the depression of 1929 placed a financial burden on him and hastened the date of his return to Ireland. However, it is clear that his intention was always to return to Ireland and enter politics. There is plenty of evidence to support this view. In a letter to his mother in 1924-5 Childers pondered his future career and stated that: 'I wish to follow father in perhaps at some date being a TD if I can attain to this'.<sup>41</sup> The influence of his father 'inspired me to work for Ireland and I owe everything to his influence and to his name'.<sup>42</sup> Childers was sad leaving Paris particularly his office but 'real life is in Ireland and the rest is momentary reaction'.<sup>43</sup> A letter to Childers, dated

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<sup>36</sup> John N. Young. *Erskine H. Childers President of Ireland a biography* (Buckinghamshire, 1985), p.67.

<sup>37</sup> Letter from Childers to his wife, Ruth, 27 Aug. 1931 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9985/431).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 13 Sept. 1931 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9985/437).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, underlined by Childers, Sept. 1931 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9985/446).

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 16 Oct. 1931 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9985/453).

<sup>41</sup> Letter from Childers to his mother, 1924-5 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9990/307).

<sup>42</sup> Copy of interview entitled 'Interview with Mr Childers', undated (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9999/78-9).

<sup>43</sup> Letter from Childers to his wife, 14 Dec. 1931 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9985/464).

27 November 1931, from his former headmaster at Gresham's School in Norfolk stated that it was always Childers's desire and intention to return to Ireland:

I am glad that you are going back to Ireland. I always knew you would because you felt a call to carry on your father's work. I should like to say "God-speed" to you. You will take it up with the right sort of ideals and enthusiasm, and I very much hope you will feel, by the time that you have lived to my age, that you have done something to create "the simple harmonious civilisation in Ireland" which is your aim.<sup>44</sup>

In a letter to Ruth in 1923 he spelled out the sort of Ireland he hoped to see in the future. He did not want to see Ireland industrialised, if Ireland could not survive and prosper on agriculture, then it should stay poor.<sup>45</sup> He goes on to say in the letter that he hopes people will not try to bring Ireland 'into line with the foremost nations of the earth. Let her remain pure and simple in frugality'.<sup>46</sup> This aspiration would have pleased de Valera who echoed it so famously many years later. Childers was most likely reflecting something of a romantic view of Ireland. There is no evidence to suggest that Childers shared de Valera's vision of a Gaelic Ireland. Childers refused to learn Irish, and in his letter, dated 10 February 1948, to Tom Mullins, General Secretary of Fianna Fáil, he stated that: 'whether it is right or wrong to teach Irish intensively, the men brought from the Gaeltacht to become teachers in many cases have neither the personality nor the qualifications for such work...our supporters...have little hope that the Taoiseach will achieve his ideal'.<sup>47</sup> No clear demonstration by Childers of his support for de Valera's Gaelic Ireland. Later in his political career Childers's aspirations for a frugal Ireland would change significantly. The influence and support provided by Ruth may be judged in her correspondence with Childers. In late 1927 she wrote: 'I would follow you to the ends of the earth – my torch bearer'.<sup>48</sup> In February 1929 Ruth was in Ireland and wrote to Childers: 'I am terribly lonely for you here in Ireland'.<sup>49</sup> Ruth considered living in France and was certain that she did not want to live in America. Circumstances dictated that she spent some time in America, but she wrote, 'of course I shall never want to live anywhere

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<sup>44</sup> Letter from former headmaster to Childers, 27 Nov. 1931 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9993/54).

<sup>45</sup> John N. Young. *Erskine H. Childers President of Ireland a biography* (Buckinghamshire, 1985), pp 39-41.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p.41.

<sup>47</sup> Letter from Childers to Tom Mullins, 10 Feb. 1948 (U.C.D.A., Seán MacEntee papers, MS P67/299).

<sup>48</sup> Letter from his wife, Ruth, to Childers, 1927 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9987/429).

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, Feb. 1929 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9987/468).

but Ireland'.<sup>50</sup> In a letter to Childers in 1930 Ruth suggested that the C.C. Drake Company would not survive the depression but she is 'not in the least depressed and my confidence in my darling Erskine is complete and sure'.<sup>51</sup>

Ruth's suggestion of the demise of the Drake Company proved incorrect. Childers resignation from C.C. Drake was 'accepted but with deep personal regret'.<sup>52</sup> His reference from the C.C. Drake Company tells us much about Childers and his return to Ireland. Signed by C.C. Drake, President of the company, it detailed the period Childers had worked in the Paris office and that:

He is leaving us of his own accord in order to engage in work which he has long wanted to do in his own country. We appreciate the motive causing him to resign as Manager of our Paris Office....Mr. Childers is a young man of absolute honesty, strong will, and extraordinary ability. He carried on his work....with intelligence and imagination under many difficult conditions....And he was always one in whom a management abroad could place the greatest confidence.

We feel that any organization employing Mr. Childers is fortunate to have such a young man.<sup>53</sup>

C.C Drake survived the great depression of the late 1920s and early 1930s largely due to its reputation for more individual service. In fact when Childers resigned to return to Ireland a notice to this effect was published and his replacement notified to the public. The piece goes on to say 'though some travel agencies are restricting their activity, Drake is extending its facilities, expecting France to attract even more tourists next year'.<sup>54</sup> In an autobiographical article for *Town & Country* in November 1946, Carlos Drake described Childers as 'enthusiastic and almost absurdly boyish-looking'. Drake referred to Childers's one ambition, 'to become President of Ireland'.<sup>55</sup> It would appear that Childers harboured aspirations of becoming President of Ireland as far back as the late 1920s or early 1930s. It should be noted that becoming president prior to 1937 was different to becoming president after 1937. Childers maintained contact with his former employer. The relationship that existed

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 1930 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9987/514).

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., emphasis on original document, 1930 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9987/523).

<sup>52</sup> Telegram from C.C. Drake to Childers accepting his resignation, 19 Nov. 1931 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9996/51).

<sup>53</sup> Extract from reference, 14 Dec. 1931 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 10041/3).

<sup>54</sup> Taken from notification of Childers leaving company, late 1931 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 10042/80).

<sup>55</sup> Extract from article, Nov. 1946 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 10042/1-9).

between Childers and Carlos Drake is represented in a letter from Drake to Childers received in the Department of Transport and Power on 7 December 1961. In the letter Drake apologised for failing to write to Childers and invited him to his home as they 'would have so much to talk about before a warm fire. I could think of nothing more enjoyable'.<sup>56</sup>

In Ireland, the political scene was changing quite radically. The formation of Fianna Fáil in the La Scala Theatre in Dublin in 1926 was 'to transform Irish politics'.<sup>57</sup> The party's formation followed 'divisions within anti-Treaty Sinn Féin...about the future direction of Irish republican politics'.<sup>58</sup> De Valera, President of Sinn Féin, had his motion to work towards the removal of the oath of allegiance to the English Crown defeated at the Sinn Féin Ard Fheis of 1926. He resigned as president and launched the Fianna Fáil party, which soon eclipsed Sinn Féin. Following the assassination of Kevin O'Higgins an Electoral Amendment Act was introduced by Cosgrave in 1927 which required parliamentary candidates to swear that if elected they would take the oath of allegiance. This presented de Valera with a problem which he solved according to J.J. Lee by:

Reassuring his conscience that inscribing his name in the book containing the oath, which the clerk of the Dáil kept in his office, while placing the bible in the furthest corner of the room, face downwards, and covering the words of the oath while he was signing his name, insisting all the time that he was taking no oath....thus, seeing no oath, hearing no oath, speaking no oath, signing no oath, the Soldiers of Destiny shuffled into Dáil Éireann in August 1927.<sup>59</sup>

De Valera had considered the launching of a newspaper to represent republican aims and in September 1931 the first edition of the *Irish Press* was launched. Childers returned to Ireland for a few days and was warmly greeted by de Valera when he went to see him. Childers wrote to Ruth on the 30 October 1931 that:

I have been to see Dev and he can almost certainly get me a job on the paper. Miserable salary to begin with of course. He wants me to become a T.D. as soon as the oath is abolished as he says the party needs young blood....Remember that our life is going to be tough, is there any way

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<sup>56</sup> Letter from Drake to Childers, 7 Dec. 1961 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9996/98).

<sup>57</sup> Diarmaid Ferriter, *The transformation of Ireland 1900-2000* (London, 2005), p.309.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> J.J.Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985: politics and society* (Cambridge, 1989), p.155.

your father could give you an allowance....We have got to manage without it being drudgery for you.<sup>60</sup>

All was settled by 24 November and in a letter to Ruth, Childers stated:

It is wonderful to be really going back to Ireland to our real life together....There is so much to do that it almost overwhelms one. You and I are going to do it together hand in hand....in spite of all the difficulties. It's all too wonderful.<sup>61</sup>

Childers would be in the Dáil as soon as a suitable seat was available. In the meantime he accepted the position of Assistant Advertisement Manager with the *Irish Press* and was promoted to the position of Advertisement Manager within a few months. Childers frequently cycled to his office and took every opportunity to head to the west or southwest for breaks. Hill climbing was his way of escaping life's pressures. The Irish Youth Hostels Association was founded in 1931 and Ruth took a keen interest in its activities. Childers believed that if young people could visit Ireland at a reasonable cost they would see for themselves the beauty of the country. At the *Irish Press* Childers actively encouraged a Buy Irish campaign. In a letter to the General Manager of the *Irish Press* dated 21 January 1935 Childers stated that his personal affairs dictated that he increase his income. He proposed to do this by taking directorships while continuing to work at the paper. Childers was considering having one permanent directorial interest as it was his intention 'to go seriously into political life (if the fates permit!)'.<sup>62</sup> Childers's other choice was to take up an interest 'in one of the best firms in Dublin....but this would preclude me from being a salaried official in "The Irish Press"'.<sup>63</sup> Coming from his background in C.C. Drake, Childers found his position in the *Irish Press* frustrating. His activities were 'supervised, and proposals for publicity submitted are held up for too long periods....Plans I suggest, such as future Spring campaign do not receive the attention they should in a modern organization'.<sup>64</sup> Childers resigned from the *Irish Press* and joined Arks Limited, advertising agents, as Director in 1935. On 26 February 1938 he applied for the

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<sup>60</sup> Letter from Childers to his wife, Ruth, 30 Oct. 1931 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9985/454).

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 24 Nov. 1931 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9985/462).

<sup>62</sup> Letter from Childers to General Manager, 21 Jan. 1935 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 10041/5-8).

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. Emphasis in original document.



position of General Manager at Aer Rianta and requested that his application 'be regarded as absolutely confidential'.<sup>65</sup>

The year 1932 was the beginning of a new era in Irish politics and also the start of a new phase of Childers's life. Fianna Fáil electoral success over Cumann na nGaedheal in March 1932 led to a period of tariffs and trade restrictions. Tariffs did initially boost industrial output and employment and the balance was tipped away from the large farmers to the small farmers and farm labourers. Protectionist policies of the early 1930s did have their critics, but as Cormac Ó Gráda correctly asserts, 'evidence of the damage caused was elusive before the 1950s....It was only when the rest of Europe left the Irish economy standing in the 1950s that the bankruptcy of the old policies became clear to policy-makers'.<sup>66</sup> Childers was full of enthusiasm, energetic and very active in political matters from the moment of his return to Ireland in the early 1930s and he hoped to become a Wicklow deputy in due course.

After the Fianna Fáil success in 1932 Childers set about establishing a format to gather information on the economic and social position of Ireland. Childers showed imagination and analytical skills not common in politics during the period concerned. However, it must be noted that he was not an economist and it is difficult to establish if the Fianna Fáil leadership placed any value on Childers's contributions on economic matters. T.K. Whitaker recalled that he was unaware that Childers claimed 'to be versed in economic theory relating to development. My impression is that government colleagues would tend to regard some of his proposals as too idealistic'.<sup>67</sup> Childers's contribution in the area of economic development lay not in breaking new ground but, according to Whitaker, in using his 'fertility of mind and facility of expression'.<sup>68</sup> A memorandum penned by Childers, dated 9 April 1934, is enlightening on a number of levels. While it was not original in concept it demonstrated Childers economic and social outlook, his view of how to measure and inform the public and the Fianna Fáil party of its successes, and it was a blue print on how Childers would communicate during his ministerial career. Throughout his

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<sup>65</sup> Letter from Childers to Aer Rianta, 26 Feb. 1938 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 10041/11).

<sup>66</sup> Cormac Ó Gráda, *A rocky road: the Irish economy since the 1920s* (Manchester, 1997), p.49.

<sup>67</sup> Letter from T.K. Whitaker to the author dated 13 Dec. 2005. Economist and author of *Economic Development* in 1958. Retired from Dept. of Finance in 1969 to become Governor of the Central Bank. Former member of the Seanad and Council of State. Chancellor of the National University of Ireland from 1976 to 1996.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

political career Childers answered questions in Dáil Éireann by way of statistics whenever possible. Memoranda by Childers to government colleagues and to personnel within his departments were elaborate and sometimes confusing. The main thrust of his April 1934 memorandum was to collect and present information to the public to ensure Fianna Fáil's success at the polls. To achieve his plan Childers set out the information required to establish the economic and social position of the country in 1932. This information could then be compared with the actual results achieved by Fianna Fáil in subsequent years. The plan included data on unemployment, emigration, agricultural and industrial activity, exports to England and the issue of the land annuities which Childers considered an 'illegal imposition'.<sup>69</sup> The plan also required information on land and the number of landless persons requiring land and the cost to the government of supporting landless men. Uneconomic holdings were still not addressed and much food was being imported which, in Childers view, could be produced in Ireland. On the social side, people living on the verge of destitution were practically ignored. Children lacked proper care and there was insufficient milk available, these areas and others were neglected because there was 'no constructive policy to meet these by previous administration'.<sup>70</sup> While the issues selected by Childers were very topical in the early 1930s, these very same concerns were to occupy Childers throughout most of his political career.

However, gathering the information required for comparative purposes was only identifying a potential problem. Childers also sought to remedy the situation by suggesting a range of actions. Here Childers largely repeated what was existing Fianna Fáil policy. His proposals included the creation of industries to supply Ireland's requirements as far as possible. The home market was protected by a restriction on imports and he encouraged the use of native fuels such as turf. Changes in agriculture were also envisaged with the emphasis on the production of wheat, vegetables and all foods at the expense of cattle production. He called for the subsidisation of exports similar to that practised by other countries. His plan encouraged reforestation and the rehabilitation of inland fisheries. On the social side, Childers called for adequate pensions to be provided and unemployment

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<sup>69</sup> Taken from Childers memo., 9 Apr. 1934 (U.C.D.A., Fianna Fáil papers, MS P176/50).

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

assistance where necessary. Large ranches should be divided among the landless men and relief works instigated to improve roads and the value of land. Local government needed to be reorganised and the hospital and health services needed improvement. In 1937 Childers hoped to demonstrate, for example, the number of houses built compared to the number built in ten years under the Cosgrave government. Childers's plan also included a list of measures to be passed and these included a labour code, local government act, fisheries act and insurance act. Adult education needed to be addressed and the tourist industry required development. Hospitals and the health services needed developing and he put forward the concept of partnership in industry. Unfortunately he did not expand further on the concept of partnership as he saw it. Childers envisaged his four year plan as 'only a step in 25-year plan of work. Results will be sufficient to compel the whole nation to give vote of confidence to government'.<sup>71</sup> Testament to Childers's efforts can be obtained from various Fianna Fáil publications which sought to compare its record with that of Cumann na nGaedheal. Key economic and social indicators proposed by Childers in his memorandum of 9 April 1934 were among those used to show Fianna Fáil's record since coming to power in 1932.<sup>72</sup>

Upon his return from Paris in 1931 Childers quickly began an active political life in Ireland. Within the Fianna Fáil party he was the constituency delegate for Wicklow on the National Executive (hereafter cited as the NE) of 1934-5. Wicklow would be an obvious choice for his entry into politics. The first meeting of the Fianna Fáil NE elected by the eleventh Ard-Fheis was held on 9 November 1936 and included Seán Lemass, Seán MacEntee and Childers. During this meeting Childers was elected to the Publicity Sub-Committee (hereafter cited as the PSC). His energy and general administrative skills were also brought to bear on a special sub-committee set up to report on the dissolution of the P.H. Pearse Cumann in Waterford, and he was also appointed to report on the Fianna Fáil organisation in Scotland.<sup>73</sup>

Childers was again elected to the NE at the twelfth Ard-Fheis, in October 1937, and was re-appointed to the PSC. The importance of this committee and

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<sup>71</sup> Taken from Childers memo., 9 Apr. 1934 (U.C.D.A., Fianna Fáil papers, MS P176/50).

<sup>72</sup> Examples of Fianna Fáil publications include *Victory election bulletin*, Jun. 1938, *Fianna Fáil*, 1943, and *Fianna Fáil notes for speakers*, 1943-4. (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9959/24-42).

<sup>73</sup> NE meeting recorded in minute books, 9 Nov. 1936 (U.C.D.A., Fianna Fáil papers, MS P176/345).

Childers appointment to it can be judged by the appointment of other key personnel, such as Frank Aiken and Seán Lemass, as members. With prime responsibility for Fianna Fáil publicity, it supervised all material to be included in the monthly *Bulletin* before publication. The NE considered the publication of a weekly newspaper but the PSC recommended at its meeting of 3 January 1938 not to undertake such a venture. However, the meeting did appoint a sub-committee, which included Childers, to 'report on what steps should be taken by the Organisation to assist in increasing the circulation of the *Irish Press*'.<sup>74</sup> He was one of the fifteen members of the Standing Committee of the NE in 1937-8. Childers was exposed to key personnel within Fianna Fáil and showed his work ethic early on. However, he was soon to suffer a political set-back through no fault of his own.

The new Constitution of 1937 re-established the Seanad and Childers was one of de Valera's nominees. At a special meeting of the NE held on 28 February 1938 candidates were adopted to the various Panels for election to the Seánad. Childers was chosen to represent the Wicklow Comhairle Dáil Ceanntair on the Industry and Commerce Panel. However, in the process, it was discovered that Childers was not an Irish citizen and therefore was not eligible to stand. Childers had considered himself Irish based on his father's qualification through his Irish mother. However, because Childers's father was not living on 6 December 1922 he did not qualify for Irish citizenship through his Irish mother.<sup>75</sup> To overcome the problem an Order was made by the government to issue Childers with a Certificate of Naturalisation under the provisions of section five of the Irish Nationality and Citizenship Act, 1935. Childers was declared an Irish citizen on 2 March 1938. In a letter to de Valera on 7 April 1938, Childers informed him that the same problem of citizenship affected his mother, Mary Alden Childers, and his brother, Robert Alden Childers. A second order was made by the government on 14 April granting Certificates of Naturalisation to Mary and Robert Childers. The certificates were issued to Childers and his mother and brother because his father, Robert Erskine Childers, who 'in the opinion of the Government, rendered distinguished service to the Irish Nation'.<sup>76</sup> Whatever embarrassment this must have caused de Valera it was 'a very great honour for the

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<sup>74</sup> NE meeting recorded in minute books, 3 Jan. 1938 (U.C.D.A., Fianna Fáil papers, MS P176/345).

<sup>75</sup> NE meeting recorded in minute books, 28 Feb. 1938 (U.C.D.A., Fianna Fáil papers, MS P176/345).

<sup>76</sup> Certs. of naturalisation, 14 Apr. 1938 (N.A.I., Dept. of Taoiseach, MS S10564).

Childers clan. The Article has never been invoked before'.<sup>77</sup> Childers failed to secure a seat in the Seanad and his brother, Robert, believed that his chances of election to the Seanad were slim. In a letter to his mother, Robert also expressed his reservations concerning what he referred to as the 'Irish nationality business'.<sup>78</sup> Robert Childers did not like the way Erskine Hamilton Childers was suddenly made an Irish citizen. His point was that if the government had wanted to honour their father they could have done so when the nationality bill was passed. As it turned out, the granting of Irish citizenship to Childers was for 'purely party ends, which I don't like'.<sup>79</sup> Robert Childers recognised the fact that Fianna Fáil wanted to use the Childers legacy for their own electoral purposes. But it also has to be understood that Childers yearned for a political career and that Irish citizenship was absolutely essential to this end. Childers's father had considered himself Irish and his widow was anxious to secure recognition for him as an Irish citizen. Childers pressed for his mother's consent to the publication of their Irish citizenship but his mother urged the inclusion of his father in the official publication. De Valera was aware of the request and replied to Childers's mother as follows:

Have seen your cablegram to Erskine. Publication in his case urgent. Request your consent. Existing law does not permit of suggested steps regarding your husband but his position in history as a great Irishman is assured and could not be added to or taken from by any formal action now. Will write you later. Kindest regards.<sup>80</sup>

Childers's mother replied to de Valera accepting his advice and granted her permission for the official publication of Irish citizenship for the Childers family members. A draft text of the proposed Nationality Certificate was forwarded to the Childers family for consideration. It read as follows:

The Government of Ireland, cognisant of the Irish ancestry of the late Robert Erskine Childers and of his wish (unfulfilled for reasons of a purely technical and legal character) that he should be regarded as an Irish citizen; mindful also of the distinguished services rendered to the Irish people by the said Robert Erskine Childers, who finally gave his life in their cause, and by his wife, Mary Alden Childers, have directed that the status of natural-born citizens of Ireland be conferred on the said Mary

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<sup>77</sup> Letter from Childers to his mother, 1938 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9990/319).

<sup>78</sup> Letter from Childers brother to his mother, 31 Mar. 1938 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9990/320).

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Telegram from de Valera to Childers mother, 19 Apr. 1938 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9990/324).

Alden Childers, widow of the said Robert Erskine Childers, and also on Erskine Hamilton Childers and Robert Alden Childers, their sons.<sup>81</sup>

There is no evidence of resentment following the granting of citizenship to Childers and his family members. However, the issue of whether or not Childers was an Irish citizen would surface again later in his political career.

Childers's involvement in Fianna Fáil party politics eventually led him to a more creative public political role. At a meeting of the NE held on 28 May 1938 arrangements were undertaken for the forthcoming general election. Seán Lemass was appointed General Director of Elections and given the authority to appoint the personnel of the General Election Staff. This meeting also decided that a special meeting of the NE would consider the ratification of election candidates on 2 June 1938. At the 2 June 1938 NE meeting, candidates selected at the various Conventions were considered and ratified. The constituency of Athlone-Longford, a newly formed three-seat constituency, previously part of the Longford-Westmeath five-seat constituency had selected two Fianna Fáil candidates who were duly ratified. However, a third Fianna Fáil candidate was sought to support the two sitting Fianna Fáil deputies. A note under the ratification of the candidates stated that 'the question of a third candidate for this constituency was considered and it was decided to authorise the Director of Elections and the General Election Staff to examine this question further and to nominate a third candidate if such action was considered advisable'.<sup>82</sup>

In his report to the NE meeting held on 27 June 1938, Lemass stated that 'Mr. Erskine Childers was added to the list of Candidates selected by the Athlone-Longford Constituency'.<sup>83</sup> Nobody was more surprised than Childers when he was asked to stand for this large rural constituency. His sights had always been on Wicklow or possibly rural Dublin. However no opportunity could be missed and whatever the outcome he would gain valuable experience. His knowledge of the constituency was minimal and he had no local associations. It was a strange choice given his background. De Valera had his own agenda; this was the constituency of the arch Treaty rival Seán MacEoin. On a personal level, Childers's sincerity, courtesy

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<sup>81</sup> Text of nationality cert., 6 Jan. 1939 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9990/328).

<sup>82</sup> Note in NE minute books, 2 June 1938 (U.C.D.A., Fianna Fáil papers, MS P176/345).

<sup>83</sup> Lemass's report in NE minute books, 27 June 1938 (U.C.D.A., Fianna Fáil papers, MS P176/345).

and integrity compensated for his lack of local knowledge. Eamon de Valera achieved his goal nationally winning seventy-seven of the one hundred and thirty-eight seats.<sup>84</sup> The result was also significant because the 1938 general election was the only time during the career of de Valera that Fianna Fáil secured over 50% of the first preference vote; Fianna Fáil received 51.9% of the vote.<sup>85</sup> There was a surprise in Athlone-Longford. Childers was elected, securing the third and final seat, and had taken the first step in his political career.<sup>86</sup> He could now 'carry forward the work of a beloved father'.<sup>87</sup> Both Childers's parents had high ambitions for him in political life. The many messages of congratulations he received on his success in 1938 included one from his mother. In her letter she stated that his success 'is deserved-that means a great deal to me....last night I lay thinking of your future. I say "your future"-it seems to be fathers and mine and all our high expectations for you. God bless you in the coming days'.<sup>88</sup>

How did a man born and educated in England and with no contacts or knowledge of the constituency get elected in Athlone-Longford? Childers's success is explicable on several grounds. The first concerns the party he was standing on behalf of, Fianna Fáil, only six years in existence when it had its first general election victory in 1932. The Fianna Fáil success was not solely due to the magnetism of de Valera and key personnel such as Seán Lemass, Frank Aiken and Seán MacEntee. From the beginning the party set about organising itself locally and nationally. The basic unit of the organisation was the cumann, which in rural areas was the parish and in urban areas represented a group of streets. These cumainn elected delegates to a regional structure called a Comhairle Ceanntair and to an electoral structure called a Comhairle Dáil Ceanntair. Fianna Fáil had a more advanced system and structure than the other parties at that time and arguably Childers was a beneficiary of this. The organisation and administration of elections was carefully controlled from the top right down to the members who canvassed from door to door. The well-developed local and national structures really came into full effect at election time to the benefit of Childers.

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<sup>84</sup> Sean Donnelly, *Elections '97* (Dublin, 1998), p.6.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Brian M. Walker, (ed.), *Parliamentary election results in Ireland 1918-92* (Dublin, 1992), p.149.

<sup>87</sup> John N. Young, *Erskine H. Childers President of Ireland a biography* (Buckinghamshire, 1985), p.88.

<sup>88</sup> Letter from his mother to Childers, 20 June 1938 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9970/22).

The second reason for Childers's success was due to the man himself. His genuine nature and sense of kindness appealed to the constituents of Athlone-Longford. One of those constituents, Michael O'Neill, recalled his memories of Childers. On visits to Athlone Childers addressed the crowds after mass and met as many people as possible. These visits, usually once a month, generated much excitement and discussion during and long after his visits. He held his clinics in the local hotel and was not put out by the conditions of the streets at that time. He would often arrive by train and would cycle to his meeting place and to constituents' homes. Michael O'Neill pointed out that money was in short supply during the 1940s and 1950s so it is difficult to compare his material results with that of his successors.<sup>89</sup> Childers did his best to avoid controversy, good or bad, and was generally regarded, according to Michael O'Neill, as being a gentleman politician. He received many of his votes in Westmeath with the majority of votes in Longford going to Seán MacEoin, who was known as the blacksmith of Ballinalee. Childers represented the old style politics and with the backing of the Fianna Fáil party machine, he was sure of success. There was great local sadness when he was transferred from Longford-Westmeath to Monaghan in 1961 but as Michael O'Neill recalled, the local population could do little. The people were very down; they had lost a real gentleman.<sup>90</sup>

The third reason for his success was his name and the legacy left by his father, Robert Erskine Childers. His father's legacy and the subsequent expectations for Childers are demonstrated in a letter to Childers from the Royal Liver Friendly Society dated 20 June 1938. The letter offered Childers:

Hearty congratulations on being elected to the Dáil. You have energy, ability, and personality which are possessed by few men and which I trust will before long place you in the Cabinet of the State.

It was my good fortune to have known your highly esteemed and much respected father, and he has left in you a son worthy to carry on the traditions of his great name.

I can only say in conclusion that I hope you will be long spared to serve this little Nation which owes your late father so much.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Interview with Michael O'Neill of Portanure House, Apartment 12, Ard Rí, Dublin Road, Athlone, County Westmeath on 16 Feb. 2005. A constituent of Athlone-Longford and Longford-Westmeath during Childers term as TD. Born in Athlone in 1924, lifetime supporter of Fianna Fáil.

<sup>90</sup> Interview with Michael O'Neill of Portanure House, Apartment 12, Ard Rí, Dublin Road, Athlone, County Westmeath on 16 Feb. 2005.

<sup>91</sup> Letter from Royal Liver to Childers, 20 June 1938 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9970/23).



This letter encapsulates one view point of the Irish Civil War. Robert Erskine Childers was thoroughly disliked by the Free State government and was one of the first republicans to be executed during the civil war. Eoin O'Duffy's opinion of Robert Erskine Childers prominence within the anti-treaty leadership is refuted by Fearghal McGarry. O'Duffy's suggestion that Robert Erskine Childers was the Irregular commander-in-chief, revealed, according to McGarry, 'his lack of understanding of the balance of power within the anti-treaty leadership'.<sup>92</sup> Brian Hanley states that Robert Erskine Childers was considered sinister and 'openly referred to as a British agent intent on the destruction of Irish property in the interests of British business interests'.<sup>93</sup> Robert Erskine Childers attracted particular attention from the Free State government because he was English. Childers's early political career undoubtedly benefited from the impact that his father's execution had on de Valera. In relation to that execution, Barry Desmond, former TD and MEP, told the author that this was 'quite unwarranted in most opinion even now'.<sup>94</sup> In a similar view when interviewed by the author, Seán Sherwin, national organiser of Fianna Fáil, commented that 'without the War of Independence legacy of his late father, Childers would not have succeeded in entering the Irish political system'.<sup>95</sup> This is true, de Valera did promote Childers within the party and this did benefit Childers. On the other hand, Barry Desmond asserts that Fianna Fáil used the Childers name for political gain as 'Dev quite cynically parachuted this Cambridge don [Erskine Hamilton Childers], who had little experience of a rural constituency, in on top of his arch Treaty rival, Seán MacEoin'.<sup>96</sup> In short, it was a mutually beneficial relationship for both the Fianna Fáil party/ de Valera and Childers.

As a backbench TD Childers had the opportunity and energy to work with organisations outside of politics. In February 1939 Childers was appointed Secretary of the Federation of Irish Manufacturers, the body that subsequently developed into the Confederation of Irish Industry in March 1970. Childers's levels of energy and his

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<sup>92</sup> Fearghal McGarry, *Eoin O'Duffy, a self-made hero* (Oxford, 2005), p.111.

<sup>93</sup> Brian Hanley, 'The rhetoric of republican legitimacy' in Fearghal McGarry (ed.), *Republicanism in modern Ireland* (Dublin, 2003), p.168.

<sup>94</sup> Interview with Barry Desmond in Dáil Éireann on 22 November 2005. Former deputy leader of the Labour party, MEP and member of the Council of State.

<sup>95</sup> Interview with Seán Sherwin at 65/66 Lower Mount Street, Dublin 2 on 2 June 2005. Former TD and national organiser of Fianna Fáil at the time of interview.

<sup>96</sup> Interview with Barry Desmond, in Dáil Éireann on 22 Nov. 2005.

range of economic and social interests led to the preparation of a memorandum on his views of Ireland's economic position in 1940. Among other issues he set out Ireland's imports and exports, stating that the adverse trade balance was paid for through invisible exports such as tourist expenditure and remittances from emigrants. Childers promoted the use of modern methods of agriculture which would lower the cost of production. Childers argued that the question of an Irish Central Bank should be examined again in the light of conditions prevailing in 1940.<sup>97</sup> However, Childers views were not ground breaking. In 1934 Fianna Fáil set up 'an official inquiry into banking and credit.... [which] cautiously recommended a central bank'.<sup>98</sup> The establishment of a Central Bank was also one of the recommendations of the Banking Commission published in August 1938 and eventually set up in 1943.<sup>99</sup> The importance of this memorandum was not so much its content as its range of diversity and the fact that Childers was prepared to put forward his opinions, on such a diverse range of issues, for discussion. Throughout his long political career Childers was bold, sometimes to the point of being naïve, in expressing his views on issues outside the remit of his portfolio.

The 1940 memorandum also highlighted the remarkable change in Childers romantic view of Ireland which he held in 1923. By 1940 he had realised that the Irish people would have to be willing 'to work as never before in order to develop home industries...in order to develop exports at lower prices and export to countries other than England'.<sup>100</sup> Other countries had, according to Childers, established their exports through the brainpower of their people, 'the secret lies in their use of brains – more brains – and yet – more brains, in outwitting other countries'.<sup>101</sup> The English were selling produce to America every year despite the huge tariffs that existed. They could do this, argued Childers, because they had knowledge of the American market, good design capability and had established trade contacts through private initiatives. Quite a drastic change from his pure and simple in frugality concept of 1923.

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<sup>97</sup> Childers memo. entitled 'Some tentative thoughts on our present economic position', 9 July 1940 (N.A.I., Dept. of Foreign Affairs, MS DFA/P63).

<sup>98</sup> Cormac Ó Gráda, *A rocky road: the Irish economy since the 1920s* (Manchester, 1997), p.56.

<sup>99</sup> Diarmaid Ferriter, *The transformation of Ireland 1900-2000* (London, 2005), pp 365 and 371.

<sup>100</sup> Childers memo. entitled 'Some Tentative Thoughts On Our Present Economic Position', 9 July 1940 (N.A.I., Dept. of Foreign Affairs, MS DFA/P63).

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

In concluding his 1940 memorandum, Childers suggested that to compete successfully on foreign markets the complete production of Ireland would have to be organised on a semi-compulsory basis. This process would, according to Childers, be controlled by a government production council 'with wide dictatorial powers acting through local corporative Committees'.<sup>102</sup> Unfortunately, Childers did not elaborate any further on this point. He concluded: 'I venture to say, however, that a certain proportion of what I have forecast will come true in any event'.<sup>103</sup> Although he was not an economist, the important issue is the thought process around the issues that he felt were important for Ireland's survival.

Childers was aware of the need for planning to ensure the future of Ireland's economy. In July 1941 he emphasised that there was 'practically no examination of our future being made in this country'.<sup>104</sup> The Irish economy in the 1940s continued to decline. There were only two ways, according to Childers, to prevent a decline in standards of living. The first was industrial development, which had very limited scope, and the second was industrial exports. In the past various issues had prevented the development of industrial exports; very high wages, low production outputs, lack of knowledge of foreign markets, and 'a lack of desire to export because of the existence of high protection'.<sup>105</sup> The lack of market knowledge and the policy of protectionism were important issues that had to be tackled and overcome. Childers had pronounced the failure of Fianna Fáil's economic policies. The two key elements of Irish economic policy in the 1930s and 1940s, agriculture and industrial self-sufficiency, had according to Diarmaid Ferriter, 'failed to transform the economy'.<sup>106</sup> Childers advocated an end to protectionism and the formation of an export board as proposed by the Federation of Irish Manufacturers. The development of exports was fundamental according to Childers. The government was spending 8 million pounds a year on the army during war time so therefore after the war it should continue to spend this amount yearly 'on the improvement of agricultural production and the

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<sup>102</sup> Childers memo. 'Some tentative thoughts on our present economic position', 9 July 1940 (N.A.I., Dept. of Foreign Affairs, MS DFA/P63).

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Childers memo. entitled 'Post-War Planning', 14 July 1941 (N.A.I., Dept. of Foreign Affairs, MS DFA/P63).

<sup>105</sup> Childers memo. entitled 'Post-War Planning', 14 July 1941 (N.A.I., Dept. of Foreign Affairs, MS DFA/P63).

<sup>106</sup> Diarmaid Ferriter, *The transformation of Ireland 1900-2000* (London, 2005), p.371.

development of exports to other countries'.<sup>107</sup> Childers's views reflected the actual happenings of the period. By the late 1930s it seemed clear, according to Diarmaid Ferriter, that: 'Fianna Fáil's economic policies had reached the end of their shelf life'.<sup>108</sup>

Childers was still Secretary of the Federation of Irish Manufacturers in 1942. In this capacity, Childers decided to visit England and speak to as many officials as possible to ensure Ireland had sufficient levels of raw materials to enable the economic fabric of Ireland to continue and develop. Childers wrote to J. Dulanty, the High Commissioner for Éire, and outlined details of his scheduled visit to England in 1942. Childers held no government position but he used his position as Secretary of the Federation of Irish Manufacturers to assist the economy in whatever way he could. This was important for the war effort from the English point of view as the export of foodstuffs would continue.<sup>109</sup> Production plants should not be idle in Ireland if they could be used for the production of Irish and English consumables. Childers needed to meet those people who understood 'that they were achieving something if they can release 80,000 English workers by the employment of 80,000 Irish workers'.<sup>110</sup> In a letter to Joseph Walsh at the Department of External Affairs, Childers outlined his scheduled visit to England 'to discuss supply questions and to add one more voice to the many that are raised to enable this country to live through the difficult period ahead'.<sup>111</sup> In England the press coverage of the visit was positive. A condition of the supply of raw materials would be that two-thirds of the manufactured goods would be sent to England. In Ireland the unemployment problem would be eased while in England 'more British man power would be released for war activities'.<sup>112</sup> Childers had shown initiative and commitment during these difficult times for the country. However, Lemass would not have been impressed when Childers suggested that the Department of Industry be reorganised and more emphasis placed on planning in the following years. Throughout his political career Childers commented on issues

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<sup>107</sup> Childers letter to Joseph P. Walsh, Secretary, Dept. of External Affairs, Jan. 1942 (N.A.I., Dept. of Foreign Affairs, MS DFA/P63).

<sup>108</sup> Diarmaid Ferriter, *The transformation of Ireland 1900-2000* (London, 2005), p.372.

<sup>109</sup> Childers letter to J. Dulanty, 29 Jan. 1942 (N.A.I., Dept. of Foreign Affairs, MS DFA/P63).

<sup>110</sup> Childers letter to J. Dulanty, 29 Jan. 1942 (N.A.I., Dept. of Foreign Affairs, MS DFA/P63).

<sup>111</sup> Childers letter to Joseph Walsh, 30 Jan. 1942 (N.A.I., Dept. of Foreign Affairs, MS DFA/P63).

<sup>112</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 8 Feb. 1942. See also *News Chronicle*, 10 Feb. 1942 and the *Manchester Guardian*, 11 Feb. 1942.

outside of his own portfolio. Inevitably such commentary did not gain Childers favour from his fellow colleagues in Fianna Fáil.

While building his reputation, Childers, in common with all elected representatives, had to cater to the needs of his constituency. Childers never lived in the constituency he represented and this necessitated long journeys to meet his constituents. The majority of country deputies were local men who lived in their constituencies and travelled to Dublin for Dáil sittings. Not wanting to be known as the absentee deputy, he gave priority to monthly visits to his Athlone-Longford constituency. There were no problems while a car was available but the outbreak of World War II made travelling more difficult. Train journeys were slow and Childers took his bicycle with him on journeys to the Midlands. Deputy Mary O'Rourke, Fianna Fáil, recalled to the author her memories of Childers arriving by train to Athlone.<sup>113</sup> On arrival in Athlone, Childers would immediately go with her to her home. Deputy O'Rourke's father, Mr. Paddy Lenihan, would have all the local issues organised for Childers who then visited the various constituents to discuss their issues.<sup>114</sup> It was a similar situation when he visited other areas of the constituency. Arriving at Longford by train Childers would have lunch before cycling to his first appointment. He would spend the night in a supporter's home and leave next morning for his next meeting. His fitness and fondness of cycling was nothing new to Childers and through his many cycle rides on the lanes and roads of Longford and Westmeath he slowly became an accepted part of rural life in the constituency.<sup>115</sup>

Childers surmounted the difficulties of not living in the constituency he represented in Dáil Éireann. In a letter dated June 1943 de Valera offered Childers his 'congratulations on your election to An Dáil. Your success at the polls is an indication of the esteem in which you are held by the people, as well as proof of their adherence to the national and economic policy for which our organisation stands'.<sup>116</sup> The esteem in which he was held was rewarded with his successes in the 1943 and 1944 general elections. Childers's success at the polls and his contributions to Fianna Fáil's policies

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<sup>113</sup> Interview with Fianna Fáil deputy Mary O'Rourke at her home in Athlone on 5 February 2005. Former Leader of Seanad Éireann and Fianna Fáil minister. TD for Longford-Westmeath at time of researching this thesis.

<sup>114</sup> Interview with Fianna Fáil deputy Mary O'Rourke at her home in Athlone on 5 February 2005.

<sup>115</sup> John N. Young, *Erskine H. Childers President of Ireland a biography* (Buckinghamshire, 1985), pp 94-5.

<sup>116</sup> Letter from de Valera to Childers, 28 June 1943 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9970/29).

were finally rewarded with his appointment as Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Local Government and Public Health on 31 March 1944. This led to his resignation from the Federation of Irish Manufacturers.

Despite his work ethic and his organisational and administrative abilities, it had taken six years for Childers to gain his first appointment as Parliamentary Secretary in 1944. He received many letters of congratulations including one from the *Irish Times* which congratulated the government 'on its belated recognition of the services of an outstanding deputy, and – what from my point of view is even more important – an honest man'.<sup>117</sup> From the outset when he entered the Dáil in 1938 he was different to the other members of the Fianna Fáil party. Childers was educated outside the country and had gained experience working in the United States and France. In written communications during the course of research for this thesis, T.K. Whitaker suggested that:

Because of his English education, accent and mannerisms I feel that he was never quite accepted as 'one of us', though his patriotism would never have been in doubt.

There was also a certain dilettantism-a lightness of touch and charm of manner-which tended to distance him from apparently more serious and purposeful colleagues.<sup>118</sup>

He was also different in that he was determined to erase the bitter civil war memories that divided Dáil and country rather than to perpetuate them. This was a period when the Treaty and the Irish Civil War were extremely delicate issues and Childers did not publicly comment on either. Given what had happened to his father, he displayed enormous restraint. During our interview, Barry Desmond stated that Childers was neither 'pro nor anti-treaty per se. He was utterly determined to travel the road of reconciliation'.<sup>119</sup> Childers always did his utmost to fulfil the promises he made to his father.

There is, however, another issue which cannot be ignored when evaluating Childers's political career; the fact that he was a Protestant. When Fianna Fáil came to power in 1932 Seán MacEntee gloated in the fact that they had won the Catholic vote. However, with the overwhelming majority of the population Catholic they would not

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<sup>117</sup> Letter from the *Irish Times* to Childers, 4 Apr. 1944 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9935/10).

<sup>118</sup> Letter from T.K. Whitaker to the author, 13 Dec. 2005.

<sup>119</sup> Interview with Barry Desmond in Dáil Éireann on 22 Nov. 2005.

have been in government if they had not done so. De Valera and the *Irish Press* played the Catholic card to its ultimate and the Eucharistic Congress provided de Valera with the opportunity to equate republicanism and Catholicism.<sup>120</sup> During most of Childers's political career, religious affiliation was virtually synonymous with being a citizen of the Irish Republic. As stated by R.V. Comerford:

From the 1920s to the 1960s, a series of politicians from parties large and small publicly professed their fealty to the Church or the pope and affirmed that they were Catholics first and Irishmen or politicians second.<sup>121</sup>

The influence of the Catholic Church in the Irish Republic would lead an observer, as R.V. Comerford correctly states, to thinking 'that there was, indeed, an Established Church in the land'.<sup>122</sup> A two-page memorandum from Childers to MacEntee in 1945 outlined Childers's concerns regarding anti-Protestant activities since 1939. He stated that a large number of people had condemned the Hunt decision and it was viewed by many as a challenge to the government. Hunt, a Protestant, was received into the Catholic Church and married a Catholic woman despite a previous civil marriage in London to another Catholic woman. He was charged with bigamy, pleaded guilty and received a suspended sentence. The Church authorities were however aware of his first marriage when permission was given for Hunt's second marriage, despite its illegality under civil law.<sup>123</sup> The Catholic Church in Ireland was concerned during 1936-7 with the outcome of the Spanish Civil War and viewed the conflict as one of Communism versus Catholicism. Great Britain saw the conflict as a political issue and the Church of Ireland and many of the newspapers in Ireland did not endear themselves to the Catholic hierarchy in Ireland. Fearghal McGarry states that the Catholic Church 'demanded....unflinching and unequivocal support' of Franco.<sup>124</sup> This was not forthcoming from the Church of Ireland who did not form a firm position on the war. Protestant and Catholic relationships in Ireland were not aided by comments made by the Church of Ireland hierarchy in relation to events that befell the Spanish Catholic Church. While acknowledging the barbaric experiences faced by the Spanish Catholic

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<sup>120</sup> JJ. Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985; politics and society* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 177.

<sup>121</sup> R.V. Comerford, *Ireland* (London, 2003), p.115.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, p.116.

<sup>123</sup> Childers memo. to Seán MacEntee, 1945 (U.C.D.A., Seán MacEntee papers, MS P67/269).

<sup>124</sup> Fearghal McGarry, *Irish politics and the Spanish civil war* (Cork, 1999), p.159.

Church, the Church of Ireland stated that they were, states McGarry, 'not in a position to judge which of the opposing parties was the more cruel or the more savage'.<sup>125</sup>

Childers felt that even though the activities of Dr McQuaid, Archbishop of Dublin, had diminished and that there were more Catholics than ever in Trinity College, Dublin this made little real difference. Childers was concerned with the suppression of the Mercier Society, the attempt to exclude Protestants from the Youth Unemployment Commission and the suppression of two mixed charitable societies, whose supervisors were practising Catholics. The Mercier Society was a mixed group of Catholics and Protestants set up to debate religious matters and to promote better understanding among both religions. Archbishop McQuaid suspended the society in April 1944. The Youth Unemployment Commission was set up to consider the problem of unemployment which affected the whole community. Archbishop McQuaid was chairman and he refused to accept answers from Protestants to a questionnaire concerning religious and spiritual welfare. He suggested that answers from Protestants be sent to Seán Lemass for consideration, as he would not deal with them as archbishop of Dublin.<sup>126</sup> Childers pointed to the suppression of Church of Ireland books on sex and censorship in general. He suggested that, in the view of many Protestants, when it came to employment opportunities and the Local Appointments Commission, there was no point in applying. He did however state that he had no specific foundation for this view but that it was widespread. Childers concluded, 'I do not propose to recommend to you what should be done officially'.<sup>127</sup>

Although Childers did highlight his concerns regarding anti-Protestant activities, he also recognised that it was not all negative and he defended the position of Protestants in the twenty-six counties when their well being was challenged. In 1946, Mr Edmund Warnock, then Minister for Home Affairs at Stormont, stated that Protestants in the twenty-six counties were unhappy and did not prosper. Childers challenged Warnock to tour the twenty-six counties and then repeat his statement. Protestants, argued Childers, living in the twenty-six counties enjoyed religious tolerance and their share of the industrial and commercial activity was in greater

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<sup>125</sup> Fearghal McGarry, *Irish politics and the Spanish civil war* (Cork, 1999), p.158.

<sup>126</sup> These explanations were taken from *John Charles McQuaid: ruler of Catholic Ireland* by John Cooney, pp 169-92.

<sup>127</sup> Childers memo. to Seán MacEntee, 1945 (U.C.D.A., Seán MacEntee papers, MS P67/269).



proportion to their actual numbers. This was not a contradiction by Childers. He had highlighted specific problems and issues, but in general terms, Protestants enjoyed religious tolerance and were well represented in the industrial and commercial sectors. Childers had to challenge Warnock in public and bring some balance to the issue. Childers was not only defending the position of Protestants in the south but also defending Fianna Fáil against allegations of discrimination. However, he had to be careful as he would undoubtedly have been aware of de Valera's sentiment that 'if there is anything more contemptible than another, more disgusting than another, it is for people in any political party in this country to try to drag in religion to help them'.<sup>128</sup> De Valera has been described as primarily a Catholic head of government, but not Catholic enough at times for Archbishop John Charles McQuaid.<sup>129</sup> The church did not get its way in relation to the 1937 Constitution but had considerable success in drafting sections of the 1953 Health Act.<sup>130</sup> Dev Valera tried to be non-confrontational but his support in 1930 of the campaign to insist on a Catholic librarian in Mayo over the appointment of a Protestant, Letitia Dunbar-Harrison, was an unusual reaction from the normally cautious de Valera. However, in relation to the Fethard-on-Sea boycott in 1957, de Valera dismissed it completely.<sup>131</sup> The balance of power between church and state was complex, and Childers strove for that balance.

In his new position as Parliamentary Secretary, Childers soon made a name for his administrative abilities and his attention to detail. A highly skilled speaker yet shy and reserved, Childers had an intense interest in whatever work was assigned to him. Whatever the task, he studied every aspect and analysed problems and situations in a cool and rational manner, though his decisions were not always appreciated by the electorate. He possessed qualities of compassion and integrity mixed with certain grandeur or aloofness derived perhaps from his background. If Childers appeared distant from people his enthusiasm for his work left its impression everywhere. Although dedicated to serving Ireland he was proud of his English family and

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<sup>128</sup> Extract from de Valera's speech in Dáil Éireann, 1 March 1934 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9959/24).

<sup>129</sup> Diarmaid Ferriter, *Judging Dev* (Dublin, 2007), p.218.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, chapter IX.

<sup>131</sup> Diarmaid Ferriter, *Judging Dev* (Dublin, 2007), p.307.

education. He was a non-Irish speaker and refused to learn Irish, as he did not want to appear to be something he was not.<sup>132</sup>

Seán MacEntee was Minister for Local Government and Public Health during Childers's term as Parliamentary Secretary. MacEntee previously held the portfolios of Finance, and Industry and Commerce. During this period the Irish economy remained depressed but the demand for Irish emigrant labour was strong in Britain. Between 1940 and 1945 136,000 passports or travel permits were issued to men and 62,000 to women.<sup>133</sup> After the war the industrial sector recovered and by 1946 both employment and output were higher than they had been in 1938. However, industry continued to rely on the home market under the protection it was given in the 1930s and 'apart from drink and confectionery Irish industry exported very little'.<sup>134</sup> It was against this background that Childers commenced his public career in government.

A memorandum from MacEntee to Childers outlined his duties and responsibilities as Parliamentary Secretary. Childers would act as MacEntee's personal representative and would take responsibility for defined areas within the department and only involve MacEntee in these areas if he considered it necessary. Childers's main areas of responsibility included widows and orphans pensions, the audit section, the roads section, purchasing section and the old age pensions appeal section.<sup>135</sup> MacEntee particularly emphasised the audit section of the department stating that audits of many institutions and local authorities' accounts were badly in arrears. Another priority highlighted was the planning of new road works. The government attached particular attention to this work as a measure of economic reconstruction but also as a source of much needed employment. Childers was to ensure that 'nothing is left undone which would expedite the completion of the planning for these works and their ultimate realisation'.<sup>136</sup> With little money or materials Childers set about his duties as Parliamentary Secretary. He succeeded in overseeing the drawing up of plans for a national road network that included regulations as to road width, elevation and curvature, and provided standards for non-

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<sup>132</sup> John N. Young, *Erskine H. Childers President of Ireland a biography* (Buckinghamshire, 1985), p.93.

<sup>133</sup> Cormac Ó Gráda, *A rocky road: the Irish economy since the 1920s* (Manchester, 1997), p.18.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, p.23.

<sup>135</sup> Memo. from MacEntee to Childers, 1 May 1944 (U.C.D.A., Seán MacEntee papers, MS P67/255).

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

skid road surfaces. His other main contributions included an overhaul of the local authority audit system, a reorganisation of the county engineering service and the introduction of amenity schemes to improve urban areas.<sup>137</sup>

In November 1946 MacEntee outlined in Dáil Éireann his proposals for the establishment of separate Departments of Health and Social Welfare. This was a far reaching decision at that time but one which had according to MacEntee public opinion behind it.<sup>138</sup> As far back as February 1944 MacEntee had announced that in order to improve and develop health services a separate Department of Health would be necessary. However many changes were required including the administration and re-organisation of local authorities who at that point were responsible for part financing of health services. This restructuring was aided due to their supervision under the combined Ministry of Local Government and Public Health.<sup>139</sup> This would undoubtedly impact on Childers's career and narrow his field of operations. As a result of the division within the Department of Local Government and Public Health Childers wrote to MacEntee and outlined his position as he saw it. Always cordial and wishing to avoid conflict, Childers commenced by thanking MacEntee for giving him the opportunity to gain valuable experience in administration, and to express his appreciation of the working relationship that existed between them. However, Childers also conveyed his position in the aftermath of the division of the functions within the department. According to Childers, much of the pioneering work assigned to him by MacEntee was now completed and with the department divided Childers stated that his 'usefulness is gradually diminishing'.<sup>140</sup>

Childers outlined his new functions as Parliamentary Secretary to MacEntee and hoped that he would realise that change was needed. Many of his previous functions were transferred and those that remained needed less attention or creative ability. Childers remained in the Local Government section and areas such as pensions and the appeals process were transferred to Health. Policies were in place in relation to local engineering services and this area also required less time and activity.

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<sup>137</sup> Taken from the notes compiled during Childers presidential campaign, 1974 (U.C.D.A., Fianna Fáil papers, MS P176/923).

<sup>138</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol. 103, 14 Nov. 1946.

<sup>139</sup> Seán MacEntee's proposals to establish separate Depts. of Health and Social Welfare, Nov. 1946 (U.C.D.A., Seán MacEntee papers, MS P67/577).

<sup>140</sup> Letter from Childers to Seán MacEntee, 11 Nov. 1947 (U.C.D.A., Seán MacEntee papers, MS P67/292).

Work was also nearing completion on the national road plan; however, road traffic safety still needed attention.<sup>141</sup>

Childers viewed his position as extremely serious. He was now well established in the constituency of Athlone-Longford having served there since 1938. However, his current functions and responsibilities led him to believe ‘that I will probably lose my seat and in view of the way I have slaved for the Party since 1943 I find the prospect very heart breaking’.<sup>142</sup> He had expected a promotion in the recent reorganisation and was fearful that the people whose allegiance shifts at election time had decided that he was not a success. Since his election in 1938 he had told the people, at the cost of great unpopularity, the adjustments that were required in policies as a result of the war. From 1943 he had provided more publicity for the Fianna Fáil party than any other deputy and most ministers, but he never ‘received even a word of commendation from “the Chief” save indirectly once by Frank Gallagher’.<sup>143</sup> Childers stated that if he was thinking of his future career ‘I should have resigned’.<sup>144</sup> He had less to do than in the beginning and this was noted in his own constituency.

Childers’s observations did not reflect on MacEntee, he was aware that MacEntee was a consistent advocate. He lamented his lack of promotion and while ‘being passed over and deprived of functions may not be fatal but I feel very pessimistic...I shall go on defending the government policy although in many ways it is far from adequate’.<sup>145</sup> Childers needed to be challenged in his work and needed a new set of responsibilities to restore himself to the status he held in 1945. Should Fianna Fáil win the next election change would be needed if his creative and organisational capacity were to be most effectively utilised. Childers had no difficulty working with MacEntee and would do anything for the country but ‘waste my years of youth doing nothing special’.<sup>146</sup> He was not satisfied in securing his first government position unless he was challenged and contributing to Fianna Fáil’s

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<sup>141</sup> Letter from Childers to Seán MacEntee, 11 Nov. 1947 (U.C.D.A., Seán MacEntee papers, MS P67/292).

<sup>142</sup> Ibid. Quotation from page one of the letter.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid. Quotation from page two of the letter.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid. Quotation from page three of letter.

<sup>146</sup> Letter from Childers to Seán MacEntee, 11 Feb. 1948 (U.C.D.A., Seán MacEntee papers, MS P67/298).

progress. Throughout his political career Childers spoke out on issues when he considered it necessary, though not always to his own advantage.

In his February 1948 letter to MacEntee, Childers again outlined his workload and lack of promotion. His letter marked 'Confidential' told of the wonderful welcome that he had received when last touring his constituency and that this was no doubt due to the amount of time he had spent there defending government policy since 1944. He emphasised the feelings of his supporters who could not understand why he was overlooked up to this point but his promotion would 'surely be this time'.<sup>147</sup> Childers was embarrassed by the observations among his constituents and felt that it was also bad for the party. Childers reminded MacEntee that his current workload attracted no public attention and the work that required his abilities had come to an end.

In trying to establish why or what was preventing him from getting the rewards that he felt he deserved Childers stated:

Since I saw you last, Robert Barton (not to be quoted please to anyone) hinted to me that a Protestant was unlikely to be appointed to the Ministries of Justice, Health, External Affairs, Education and probably Social Welfare.

If this is the case, Education excepted, I wish to resign immediately because there remains only three Ministries where special organising powers are needed. I cannot believe it but others in Fianna Fáil have hinted at this and I should be glad to know the truth.<sup>148</sup>

After serving for ten years in Dáil Éireann had Childers arrived at the core reason for his perceived lack of progression within the political system? Was it a party decision to curtail Childers movement up the ranks, and if so was this in keeping with popular opinion and sentiment at that time? If based on popular sentiments how was Childers's success at the various general elections explained? George Irvine provided further insight on religious attitudes during this period in his correspondence with de Valera in 1949. Irvine was a regular visitor to de Valera's home and a devout Protestant. He had taken part in the 1916 rising and had been imprisoned as a result. Terry de Valera, youngest son of Eamon de Valera, recalled that 'when Father was drafting the Constitution, he had an argument with him as to the use of the word

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<sup>147</sup> Letter from Childers to Seán MacEntee, 11 Feb.1948 (U.C.D.A., Seán MacEntee papers, MS P67/298).

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

'Catholic'. Irvine contended that he too was a Catholic, although not in the Roman tradition'.<sup>149</sup> Irvine's initial letter to de Valera concerned a recent remark made by MacEntee in Dáil Éireann, who referred to members of the Gaelic training college of the Church of Ireland 'as non-Catholic'.<sup>150</sup> Irvine also stated that 'this insult was allowed to pass without comment from the Chair' and infringed paragraph four the Declaration of Independence that cherished all people of the Republic equally.<sup>151</sup>

Irvine was a member of the Church of Ireland and in his own words a Republican. The insult to the Church of Ireland by MacEntee could be dismissed as an example of ignorance. The issue arose because 'it was offered in Dáil Éireann itself, constitutes a breach of the Declaration of Independence, of which Declaration our Representatives are the guardians'.<sup>152</sup> In his reply to Irvine, de Valera stated that MacEntee intended no offence and that it was merely a slip in 'phraseology which is very common'.<sup>153</sup> De Valera suggested that he would also have used the term non-Catholic instead of Protestant had Irvine not warned him against it many years previously. However, Irvine provided other examples of anti-Protestant behaviour during the period concerned. Letters in the newspapers 'suggesting that Protestants were not of much account, that T.C.D. should not get a grant because it was a Protestant foundation'.<sup>154</sup> Other issues outlined by Irvine included reviews of books written by Roman Catholic priests linking Protestantism with Communism and suggesting that both be exterminated. Some print opinion suggested that the constitution be changed and that the Irish Government swear allegiance to the pope; this change was also demanded by the Roman Catholic bishop of Down in a Lenten Pastoral.<sup>155</sup> However, despite the episodes referred to above and the controlling influence of the Catholic Church on Irish political and social life up to the late 1960s, Garret Fitzgerald is not convinced that Childers's political career was curtailed

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<sup>149</sup> Terry de Valera, *A memoir*, (Dublin, 2004), p.17.

<sup>150</sup> Letters from/to Irvine to/from de Valera, 18 July 1949 to 22 Sept. 1949 (U.C.D.A., Eamon de Valera papers, MS P150/2983, vol. 3).

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

because he was a Protestant. During an interview with the author, Garret Fitzgerald asserted that de Valera would not ‘have tolerated such a situation’.<sup>156</sup>

Back in his own constituency of Longford-Westmeath Childers alleged that a Fine Gael speaker had made inappropriate comments about him. However, the Fine Gael election agent for Longford wrote to Childers and stated:

I am directed by the Fine Gael Candidates for Longford-Westmeath to inform you that the allegation that a Fine Gael Speaker in Longford referred to you as an “Orange Weed” is untrue and unfounded.

I am to request you to state in writing to me before twelve noon on Thursday 13<sup>th</sup> instant the name of the person whom you allege to have made the statement.<sup>157</sup>

Childers clearly suspected that he was the target of religious discrimination in terms of his career advancement. His immediate family also believed this to be the case. According to his daughter, Nessa Childers, from his entry into politics to the early 1960s ‘certain portfolios would not be open to him. These included the Ministries of Education, Health and the position of Taoiseach’.<sup>158</sup> It may be more than coincidence that Childers was made Minister for Health in 1969, some four years after the Second Vatican Council, which ended in 1965. The enormous influence that was still exercised by the Catholic hierarchy in the period under discussion is clearly demonstrated in a letter dated 21 March 1951 from John A. Costello, Taoiseach, to Dr Noel Browne, Minister for Health in the first Inter-Party government. Browne wrote a letter intended for the Irish Medical Association but this was brought to Costello’s attention. In his letter Browne had stated that the introduction of the Mother and Child Scheme was fundamental to government policy. However, Costello informed Browne in unambiguous terms that:

your scheme in the form outlined by you was not acceptable to the Government unless and until the express reservations made by the Hierarchy....and by the Archbishop of Dublin....are satisfactorily disposed of. Accordingly you are not entitled to describe your Scheme as Government policy and you must not so describe it hereafter unless and

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<sup>156</sup> Author’s interview with Garret Fitzgerald, 20 Dec. 2007. Economist, academic and journalist. Former Fine Gael leader and Taoiseach. Chancellor of the National University of Ireland at the time of researching this thesis.

<sup>157</sup> Letter from P.J. Shaw, Fine Gael, to Childers, 11 May 1954 (U.C.D.A., Sean MacEoin Papers, MS P151/883, II political career).

<sup>158</sup> Interview with Nessa Childers at 14 Gledswood Avenue, Clonskeagh, Dublin 14 on 2 Sept. 2005. Daughter of Erskine Hamilton Childers.

until you have satisfied the Hierarchy that in respect of the matters relating to faith and morals your Scheme is unobjectionable.<sup>159</sup>

The unsavoury issue of religious discrimination is one that periodically raised its head throughout Childers's career.

In his constituency Childers was confronted with the real and existing difficulties of the post-war years. It was particularly difficult for rural TDs with little or no industrial development. At a meeting of his North Longford constituency party, probably during 1947, Childers was confronted by members who were angry at the government's response to a range of local government and other issues. Following the four-hour meeting Childers communicated the points raised at the meeting in a letter to MacEntee. The party, in the view of members, needed new blood in its membership and the administration also needed to be refreshed. Old age pensions needed to be increased considerably and cheap clothing provided for children, this 'to be promoted by subsidies'.<sup>160</sup> It appears unusual that Childers would recommend subsidies to MacEntee as a method of allaying constituency hostilities given MacEntee's previous rejection of state intervention and allowances.<sup>161</sup> This apparent slip on Childers behalf may not have had any negative effect on MacEntee's opinion of Childers. The cost of fuel for transportation was also causing concern and Childers suggested to MacEntee that 'transport costs might be reduced by direct removal of turf to merchants yards from the great bogs'.<sup>162</sup> To help lessen hardship Childers also suggested to MacEntee that bog drainage and land improvements grants be increased.

Childers was worried by the level of hostility he encountered in Longford during 1947, although this was not directed at him personally. He suggested to MacEntee that 'there might be an emergency temporary cut in all salaries above a certain limit of 5% to 10% as a contribution to austerity. This however to include us and the President. Also Dublin TDs'.<sup>163</sup> Childers also stated that something needed to be done to increase agricultural output and the number of new houses. Childers's experiences were shared by TDs right across the country. He reported local party and

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<sup>159</sup> Letter from John A. Costello to Noel Browne, 21 Mar. 1951 (U.C.D.A., Sean MacEoin Papers, MS P151/495, II political career).

<sup>160</sup> Letter from Childers to Seán MacEntee, 1947 (U.C.D.A., Seán MacEntee papers, MS P67/293).

<sup>161</sup> JJ. Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985; politics and society* (Cambridge, 1989), pp 283-4.

<sup>162</sup> Letter from Childers to Seán MacEntee, 1947 (U.C.D.A., Seán MacEntee papers, MS P67/293).

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.* Emphasis in original document.



constituents grievances to MacEntee but he also warned of the danger to Fianna Fáil nationally. During 1947 Childers's view was that Fianna Fáil required a major shake-up and 'unless we take risks in appointing new young or immensely popular candidates we shall founder'.<sup>164</sup> He further warned MacEntee that 'we maybe too late. It is possible that we should have founded a new Party at the end of the emergency embracing National Labour, F.G. and ourselves'.<sup>165</sup> Childers clearly feared the loss of his own seat in Longford-Westmeath and a possible defeat for Fianna Fáil in the next general election.

A general election was held on 4 February 1948 and Fianna Fáil won sixty-eight of the 147 Dáil seats. They were still much the largest party but had lost eight seats compared with the 1944 result. Clann na Poblachta's ten seats deprived Fianna Fáil of its majority but it could not be displeased with the outcome. 1947 was a bad year for the economy and Fianna Fáil 'went into the election burdened with blame for the condition of the country....the cabinet had, admittedly, little idea how to respond to the situation'.<sup>166</sup> De Valera expected to form a government but the first Inter-Party Government took up office. Childers had sensed the defeat for Fianna Fáil but he retained his own seat in the reconstituted Longford-Westmeath constituency. Longford-Westmeath was a five seat constituency and Childers secured the fourth seat.<sup>167</sup> Fianna Fáil had been in power for sixteen years and Childers was an opposition deputy for the first time. At a meeting of the Fianna Fáil party in Leinster House de Valera was elected Chairman of the Party and its leader in Dáil Éireann. In opposition Fianna Fáil would pursue its objectives as if it was in office and be 'ready as the great national reserve when the country needs it'.<sup>168</sup>

There were many reasons why Fianna Fáil lost its overall majority in 1948 and Childers had his own views on the causes. In a confidential letter to MacEntee he stated that vested interests, general post-war disgruntlement and a feeling among the public 'that we have ceased to be the poor mans government', all contributed to the

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<sup>164</sup> Letter from Childers to Seán MacEntee, 1947 (U.C.D.A., Seán MacEntee papers, MS P67/293).  
Emphasis in original document.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> JJ. Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985; politics and society* (Cambridge, 1989), pp 296-8.

<sup>167</sup> Brian M. Walker, ed., *Parliamentary election results in Ireland 1918-92* (Dublin, 1992), p.173. The quota was 6,942, Childers received 5,325 first preference votes.

<sup>168</sup> Statement from de Valera, 26 Feb. 1948 (U.C.D.A., Eamon de Valera Papers, MS P150/2944, vol. 3).

election result.<sup>169</sup> Childers had previously predicted the Fianna Fáil defeat in the 1948 general election. The post-war period of continued scarcities would have presented Childers and his colleagues with a difficult enough situation even under favourable conditions. But things got worse. The summer of 1946 was one of the wettest on record and led to additional bread rationing. The awful summer of 1946 was followed by one of the hardest winters of the century. Fuel supplies sank to critical levels in the early months of 1947, transport and industry were almost at a standstill and ‘the miseries of the long-suffering population were intense’.<sup>170</sup> Childers had alerted MacEntee in 1947 that the public were getting bored with Fianna Fáil and that new blood was needed in the party. As F.S.L. Lyons stated, the ‘signs appeared in the constituencies of a kind of cumulative boredom with the old party machines, the old party slogans, even the old party leaders’.<sup>171</sup> Childers added a postscript to his letter to MacEntee: ‘I have omitted our failure to get all the farmers on our side. I have written about this before. We need a Lemass for agriculture with drive and imagination’.<sup>172</sup> Childers wanted the agricultural portfolio; perhaps this was the meaning of the postscript. Certainly he possessed drive and imagination and would have been in line for a ministerial position when Fianna Fáil returned to power.

Childers also wrote to Tom Mullins, General Secretary of Fianna Fáil giving his post-mortem on the 1948 election. In this letter Childers addressed the administrative shortcomings of the Fianna Fáil party machine as he saw them. He was critical of their TDs both in respect to attendance at Comhairle Ceanntair meetings and more particularly ‘in respect of their duties as educators of their electors’.<sup>173</sup> Unless TDs met their constituents outside churches or at Cumann meetings a government in office as long as Fianna Fáil were could not hold its position. In future, Childers suggested, where Comhairle Ceanntair fail to meet frequently they should be investigated by a special committee of the NE. Every constituency should keep a record of all meetings held and Fianna Fáil headquarters notified of such meetings.<sup>174</sup> TDs whose attendance record was poor should be warned that they would be asked to

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<sup>169</sup> Letter from Childers to Seán MacEntee, Feb. 1948 (U.C.D.A., Seán MacEntee papers MS P67/299).

<sup>170</sup> F.S.L. Lyons, *Ireland since the famine* (London, 1973), p.559.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, p.560.

<sup>172</sup> Letter from Childers to Seán MacEntee, Feb. 1948 (U.C.D.A., Seán MacEntee papers MS P67/299).

<sup>173</sup> Letter from Childers to Tom Mullins, 10 Feb. 1948 (U.C.D.A., Seán MacEntee papers MS P67/299).

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*

resign from the party should their attendance remain unsatisfactory. Where it was difficult to meet the public directly, as in Dublin, because church gate meetings could only take place during election time, meetings should be arranged in halls at regular intervals. At these meetings TDs would explain current legislation, point out Acts that had been passed that benefited the local community, and answer all criticisms. Childers argued that the electorate could not be updated through speeches in the Dáil and announcements by ministers, personal contact was required.<sup>175</sup> Childers had set out one of the key components that was to dominate his entire political career; community involvement and local self-help. Fianna Fáil's success would be secured at local level, in government, Childers encouraged local involvement and participation in local projects. To get back into government Childers also advised Mullins that Fianna Fáil needed fresh blood:

There is no question the people are tired of some of the old faces and we may as well make up our minds that something will have to be done, regretfully perhaps, about members of the Party who have given great service in the past but who have become inarticulate between elections and whose personal prestige has been constantly declining....It would appear that younger relations of existing T.Ds, who are able to speak well and who have some political sense, are a very valuable asset to any party'.<sup>176</sup>

Childers had stated his reasons to MacEntee and Mullins for the Fianna Fáil defeat in the 1948 general election and what was required to reinvigorate the party. Also included in his letter to MacEntee was an attachment providing 'a summary of the intelligent waverer's view of education'.<sup>177</sup> Childers marked the attachment on education 'absolutely confidential'. But why? He was communicating the feelings of the electorate and it was no secret that the education system lacked progress. Diarmaid Ferriter has stated that 'there was a certain pessimism in the post-war period in relation to lack of progress in education, the Irish language and the universities'.<sup>178</sup> School buildings were bad, teachers underpaid and the first national teachers strike took place in 1946. The education minister at that time was Tomás Derrig, and

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<sup>175</sup> Letter from Childers to Tom Mullins, 10 Feb. 1948 (U.C.D.A., Seán MacEntee papers MS P67/299).

<sup>176</sup> Ibid. Childers was referring to the O'Higgins family success; the combination of youth and tradition of the family got the attention of the electorate.

<sup>177</sup> Childers views on education to Seán MacEntee, Feb. 1948 (U.C.D.A., Seán MacEntee papers MS P67/299).

<sup>178</sup> Diarmaid Ferriter, *The transformation of Ireland 1900-2000* (London, 2005), p.531.

according to Diarmaid Ferriter, Derrig ‘seemed to reflect the arrogance of 15 years of uninterrupted power in rejecting calls for Ireland to follow the educational reforms being put in place in post-war Europe’.<sup>179</sup> Derrig argued that during the war Ireland was free ‘from any hindrance to our educational schemes’.<sup>180</sup> Education in general was unsatisfactory and Childers expressed the views of the Fianna Fáil mothers; children leaving school could not write English or Irish and their mathematics was no better. He concluded that changes were necessary in the light of his experience.<sup>181</sup> Throughout his political career Childers commented on issues of general public interest even when such issues were outside his own portfolio. On this occasion it is clear that Childers and his colleague in education were not in agreement on education issues.

With Fianna Fáil in opposition Childers was appointed to the publicity department within the party and submitted reports to de Valera on the work completed over a period of time. This was an opportunity for Childers to engage with colleagues outside the pressures of government and use his abilities to promote and develop the Fianna Fáil party. His early memoranda demonstrated his organisational and administrative abilities, and his desire to get as much relevant information to TDs as possible. In one of his reports to de Valera he highlighted the trouble it took ‘to get people to sign letters prepared in the office’.<sup>182</sup> Trying to get the best use from the office Childers suggested that ‘a long discussion of ways and means of using the office is needed by the Party’.<sup>183</sup> His attention to detail and the desire to maximise the resources of the publicity office gives credence to Childers as an effective administrator. But here he had an opportunity to introduce change to office routines and monitor the results; a chance to manage and lead. But Childers was conservative, not a risk taker, and it would be many years before Childers would show his real potential as a politician and leader. Out of government Childers sought employment in the business sector. In a letter dated 19 October 1948, Blackwood Hodge confirmed that ‘we should like you to act in a full time capacity as Manager of Blackwood

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<sup>179</sup> Diarmaid Ferriter, *The transformation of Ireland 1900-2000* (London, 2005), p.532.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>181</sup> Childers views on education to Seán MacEntee, Feb. 1948 (U.C.D.A., Seán MacEntee papers MS P67/299).

<sup>182</sup> Childers memo. to de Valera, 13 Jan. 1949 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9959/12).

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*

Hodge (Ireland) Ltd., at a salary of £700 per annum, payable monthly'.<sup>184</sup> His work at Blackwood Hodge was impressive enough to have been offered a yearly retainer of £300 on return to government in 1951.

In March 1950 Childers's wife Ruth died leaving him a widower at the age of forty-four. They had met at difficult times in both their lives and Ruth supported Childers as he made his way back to Ireland and into politics. Childers could well feel, stated Young, that life had dealt harshly with him. But he would soon be back on the campaign trail in Longford-Westmeath.

On the political front another idealist, Dr Noel Browne, caused controversy with his Mother and Child Scheme. It came under attack from both the medical profession and the Catholic Church. However, relations between Browne and colleagues within his own party, Clann na Poblachta, led to Browne's resignation from government. Other resignations followed, some due to the government's failure to solve its economic problems, and Taoiseach John A. Costello decided to go to the country. However, according to J.J. Lee, it was not Browne's resignation that led directly to the 1951 general election but rather 'the price of milk – cows', not mothers'.<sup>185</sup> After the fall of the Inter-Party government Childers was once again on the campaign trail in Longford-Westmeath in the spring of 1951. His time in local government had provided him with practical experience of political life and gave him a base on which to progress his political career. The coalition government provided Fianna Fáil with the opportunity of an early return to government.

There is no doubt that from a young age it was Childers's intention to return to Ireland and embark on a political career. As a fact he returned to Ireland in 1931 and commenced his public political career in 1938. Whether it was 1931 or 1941 is not important. What is important is that it was his decision and desire. He did not have to, he wanted to. Arguably, this position was strengthened following the death of his father. He gained considerable exposure within Fianna Fáil prior to his election in 1938 where he demonstrated his considerable administrative abilities. Focused and hard working, he got his reward when made parliamentary secretary in 1944. His political progress and his concerns at his lack of promotion on religious grounds must

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<sup>184</sup> Letter from Blackwood Hodge to Childers, 19 Oct. 1948 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 10045/1).

<sup>185</sup> J.J. Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985; politics and society* (Cambridge, 1989), p.319.

be viewed against the calibre of his political colleagues. Never one to shy away from opinion, in the period up to 1948, Childers commented on colleagues, on the Fianna Fáil organisation and on government departments. He may have been correct in many instances but displayed a political naivety in being so forthright. He solved problems by comprehensive analysis and discussion of alternatives. This was Childers's style and he avoided risk and exposure when he was in a position to be innovative and lead. As his career developed and Childers matured as a politician he grasped the opportunity to demonstrate his leadership potential. For now, if he and Fianna Fáil were successful in the 1951 general election and with de Valera Taoiseach, it seemed likely that he would be given a ministerial portfolio in the new government.

## Chapter 2

### First ministerial challenge, Department of Posts and Telegraphs, 1951-4

Following the 30 May 1951 general election Fianna Fáil ended up with sixty-nine seats, one seat more than the 1948 general election result.<sup>1</sup> Clann na Poblachta lost eight of its ten seats and the balance of power lay with the fourteen independents. De Valera formed a government with the assistance of the independent deputies. Although it lasted for three years it was dogged from the beginning to the end by inflation and an adverse balance of payments. Childers continued his success and was re-elected in Longford-Westmeath taking the fifth and final seat. After serving thirteen years in Dáil Éireann, Childers secured his first ministerial portfolio when he was appointed Minister for Posts and Telegraphs in June 1951.

Childers and his fellow colleagues faced a period of economic challenge on return to government. The economic growth achieved in the late 1940s did not last and did perhaps conceal 'the futility of the protectionist strategy adopted in 1932'.<sup>2</sup> The 1950s, 'a miserable decade for the Irish economy' commenced with a balance of payments crisis.<sup>3</sup> A massive deterioration in trade due to the sterling devaluation of 1948 and the escalation of the Korean War in 1950 was mainly responsible for the balance of payments crisis. Emigration continued and in 1951 the total number of persons at work was only 12,000 more than in 1926.<sup>4</sup> The same familiar weaknesses were evident in the economy. Lack of capital investment, conservative agricultural practices, the poverty of the home market and a lack of exports were among the issues that faced the government. In general, the increasing cost of living coupled with the absence of social services, comparable with those in Northern Ireland, was causing real hardship. The contentious Mother and Child controversy required delicate handling by de Valera and was a significant achievement for the government.

Now in government Childers had the profile to develop his career and apply his abilities to his new portfolio. However, the cabinet of 1951-4 has been described by some as having 'strong claims to be considered the worst de Valera government'.<sup>5</sup> Seán MacEntee's 1952 budget was deflationary and contributed to the atmosphere of

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<sup>1</sup> Seán Donnelly, *Elections '97* (Dublin, 1998), p.6.

<sup>2</sup> Cormac Ó Gráda, *A rocky road: the Irish economy since the 1920s* (Manchester, 1997), p.25.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> F.S.L. Lyons, *Ireland since the famine* (London, 1973), p.573.

<sup>5</sup> J.J. Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985, politics and society* (Cambridge, 2001), p.321.

depression. Introduced due to the balance of payments situation, it seriously damaged domestic industry due to lack of investment and development of exports. Childers tried to deflect attention away from the budget and suggested that people started talking about yields per acre and stock density. The opposition blamed the budget for the trade depression but Childers argued that there was a trade slump of varying degrees all over the world. He suggested that government operations be compared with a gardener working in a fruit orchard, 'there must be pruning and there will be some grafting, while waiting for the growth of many urgently needed young plants'.<sup>6</sup>

It was easy to blame the Costello government for the situation faced by Fianna Fáil and Childers did his part in explaining the position to the public. He and Fianna Fáil now had the task of revealing to the people the true state of the finances of the country. Childers spoke at many locations across the country and informed the people of the economic condition of the country and what needed to be done to remedy the situation. The outgoing Minister for Industry and Commerce had, according to Childers, a stack of price increases on his desk prior to the election.

To maintain the standard of living agricultural output, according to Childers, needed to be increased. Imports in general would have to be reduced and it was vital to stop the flood of imports that could be produced in Ireland.<sup>7</sup> The tourist industry was hampered by the lack of theatres and Childers viewed the promotion of entertainment as much a national concern as the standardisation of hotels and restaurants.<sup>8</sup> The Irish economy had functioned, stated Childers, under the previous government as follows; Ireland was buying goods from the United States but not selling anything to them to pay for the imports. National development, argued Childers, rested in long term planning and not in short term expedients. He urged all local authorities to support the Tourist Association and showed its significance by comparing the revenues from tourism with those from the export of live cattle. In 1951 the export of live animals generated revenue of thirty million pounds while the earnings from tourism amounted to twenty-five million pounds.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Childers speech at switch-on of electrification scheme, Longford, Nov. 1952 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9965/336).

<sup>7</sup> *Irish Press*, 11 Feb. 1952.

<sup>8</sup> *Irish Press*, 7 Feb. 1952.

<sup>9</sup> *Irish Press*, 24 Oct. 1952.



Childers argued that the previous government did not carry out their election promises and he attacked their performance:

It was curious that after three years of claiming to do the largest amount of work in the shortest possible time...102,000 people emigrated. 28,000 more persons had gone off the land, the national debt had been doubled....farm production was in 1950 slightly below the 1938 figure....actual quantity of all goods exported was virtually the same as in 1938.<sup>10</sup>

What the country needed 'was twenty years of resolute government with plans made carefully and wisely by ministers collaborating and not rivalling each other'.<sup>11</sup> Childers admitted that agricultural production had not increased during their sixteen years in government. This was not only due to the economic war and the world war but also due to the absence of modern methods of farming. Capital spending was required on fertilizers, drainage, farm buildings and modern machinery.

Representing a rural constituency and with his love for the countryside, it is not surprising that Childers had an interest in the condition of the agricultural sector and he harboured aspirations of one day becoming Minister for Agriculture. Once again Childers ventured outside his brief and this was a feature during his political career. In a draft memorandum to de Valera on Fianna Fáil party agricultural policy dated 9 May, 1952 Childers set out his observations on the general condition of agriculture. There had been no increase in crop yields since 1911 and livestock production showed no significant change. On the social front, Childers was concerned at the reduction in the numbers working in agriculture and the age profile of farm owners. Childers was correct in his observations but what he was really saying was that Fianna Fáil economic policy had failed. Fianna Fáil was in government from 1932 to 1948 and it was their economic policies that Childers was in fact criticising. Childers's vision for Ireland and agriculture in particular, had changed from that which he held in the early 1920s. He and de Valera were no longer singing from the same hymn sheet and de Valera accused Childers of thinking too much of the economics of farming when he had responsibility for lands.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Draft of Childers speech at Tubberclair, Co. Westmeath, before 3 Sept. 1951 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9965/167).

<sup>11</sup> Childers speech to West Limerick Fianna Fáil, 9 Dec. 1951 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9965/172).

<sup>12</sup> Memo. from Childers to de Valera, 29 May 1958 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9954/1).

In criticising the Land Commission, he argued for ‘limiting the work of the Land Commission to very narrow objectives’.<sup>13</sup> He queried the policy of land division and its minimal effect on emigration. As a future Minister for Lands he would experience the difficulties of land allocations and realise that there was not sufficient land available to satisfy the demands. Childers would realise that it was easy to identify problems in the workings of the Land Commission; it was a different matter to find solutions giving the prevailing circumstances. There was under-investment by farmers in buildings and land maintenance, and new methods were required to increase yields and capital investment. Childers proposed the establishment of an agricultural board similar to the then existing Tourist Board but ‘divorced from Civil Service procedure’.<sup>14</sup> He concluded the memorandum as follows:

I feel that the conditions are now suitable for a reorientation of agricultural policy. The facts are indisputable and the farming community is a little more on the defensive than ever before. I would ask you [de Valera]...to consider this proposal and not to mention my letter at a meeting of the government unless you are certain it would not cause resentment. I would equally on your advice write the Minister for Agriculture direct on this matter.<sup>15</sup>

Childers displayed his frustration in a memorandum to de Valera dated 25 June 1953. Surely it was time to make ‘some decisions on unemployment, agriculture and credit’.<sup>16</sup> He wanted urgent planning to deal with unskilled and semi-skilled labourers, and ‘some dramatic plan for stimulating agricultural production such as Seán Moylan and I prepared in separate memos’.<sup>17</sup> Childers reflected ‘the sense of strangulation by Fianna Fáil’ on the lives of his constituents. Unemployment was a major concern and with a reduction in employment on local authority works, ‘this is doing terrific damage to us’.<sup>18</sup> Again, Childers asked for confidentiality as he did not want to cause resentment. His language demonstrated genuine concerns and a real sense of passion and frustration. Reflecting the situation as he saw it, Childers was doing no more than stating the obvious realities of the time, the sense of doom that prevailed. Emigration

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<sup>13</sup> Childers memo. to de Valera, 9 May 1952 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9954/4).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Childers memo. to de Valera, 25 June 1953 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9954/6).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

was the answer for many Irish men and women and de Valera ‘no more than any other Irish politician of his era, had no answers’.<sup>19</sup>

Childers could not understand why the problems of agriculture were not attacked ‘in the same dramatic way we did other problems’.<sup>20</sup> In the thirty years of self-government agricultural stagnation was evident but little was done to reverse this trend. One of the problems suggested by Childers was that many in Fianna Fáil were adverse to risk taking and ‘if the farmer is happy, why change him?’<sup>21</sup> The agricultural community should have been dominant socially, culturally and technically but the inverse was true according to Childers. In a general attack on agricultural policy and the Minister for Agriculture, deputy Thomas Walsh, he stated that ‘no Minister of Agriculture has conceived of modern propaganda. The leaflets are dull, the Agricultural Committees are dull, the method of teaching is dull, the instructors are dull’.<sup>22</sup> From his previous commercial experience Childers knew the importance of directing advertising to the key concerns of the audience. The Irish farmer was thought of as something unique, but Childers believed the farming community ‘to be just as receptive as other sections of the community to propaganda but it must be brilliant and not condescending and, above all, it must talk of money’.<sup>23</sup> Childers was aware of de Valera’s vision for rural Ireland, he held such views himself back in 1923, but now Childers wanted change.

Childers also shared his views on the position of Irish agriculture with the Minister for Industry and Commerce, Seán Lemass. Lemass was one of de Valera’s ablest ministers and arguably Childers recognised a future leader in Lemass. Eager to impress, Childers wrote to Lemass on 24 January 1952 with his results of ‘many hours studying statistics in regard to our agricultural production’.<sup>24</sup> Yields from all farming produce made dismal reading and the room for enormous expansion never took place. In his view ‘the most urgent matter affecting the whole country’s life is that of making farmers feel that the future of their families and of their country depends on the acquisition of scientific knowledge and its application to farm

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<sup>19</sup> Diarmaid Ferriter, *Judging Dev: a reassessment of the life and legacy of Eamon de Valera* (Dublin, 2007), p. 285.

<sup>20</sup> Childers observations on agricultural policy, 1952 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9954/23).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Childers observations on agricultural policy, 1952 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9954/23).

<sup>23</sup> Childers observations on agricultural policy, 1952 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9954/23).

<sup>24</sup> Letter from Childers to Lemass, 24 Jan. 1952 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9954/66).

production'.<sup>25</sup> Childers stressed the need for farmers to invest in their farms and increase production. The success of agriculture also depended on the widespread use of machinery due to the reduction in the labour force. He refused to believe that 'there is no system by which machinery can be used co-operatively by small farmers'.<sup>26</sup> He advocated the use of creameries to make financial incentives for high production quotas.

Farm instructors should not only have the knowledge and capability of passing on information but also 'the gift of propaganda'.<sup>27</sup> Childers once again proposed the need for an Agricultural Board and suggested 'that the present Minister for Agriculture has too much to do to devote three-quarters of his time to propaganda which is in fact what he should be doing'.<sup>28</sup> To emphasise the position of agricultural production he used a fictitious contrast with the industrial sector:

If you were informed by the Secretary of the Department of Industry and Commerce that in the year 1951 the whole of industry suffered a deficiency of 10,000,000 units of spare-part replacements and that having made up that deficiency a million and a half units should be purchased each year whereas, in fact, the present position was that only 300,000 units were being purchased, you would go through the roof.<sup>29</sup>

Childers recognised that there were difficulties, for example, the high cost of machinery and of fertilisers. On the positive side, there existed additional electric power and a plentiful supply of good seed. He wanted everyone to realise that there was a crisis in regard to agricultural production. However, he was not convinced that his colleagues realised that for the first time 'we are actually able to inaugurate a new agricultural policy without either an economic war or a world war obliterating all chances of ultimate success'.<sup>30</sup>

In 1953 Childers wrote to Thomas Walsh, Minister for Agriculture outlining his political fears. The mystique of Fianna Fáil was declining steadily with the possible result of defeat and a coalition government. This decline was, according to Childers, contributed to by the fulfilment of many of Fianna Fáil aims and the 'almost complete conversion of Fine Gael to our policy at least so far as official policy is

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<sup>25</sup> Letter from Childers to Lemass, 24 Jan. 1952 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9954/66).

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Letter from Childers to Lemass, 24 Jan. 1952 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9954/66).

concerned'.<sup>31</sup> He also suggested a frustration due to their failure to end partition and a disillusionment common to all countries as a result of the Second World War. There was now, according to Childers, a general agreement that agricultural production was the number one problem confronting Ireland.

The Fianna Fáil 'dream of making a new Ireland is unlikely to become reality unless we dramatise the most important problem - agricultural production. The result may be a failure, the risk is no greater than the danger to the future of Fianna Fáil if we do nothing'.<sup>32</sup> Childers had warned Fianna Fáil of its impending demise in 1948; here once more in 1953, he warned the party that change was necessary if Fianna Fáil were to remain in government. But de Valera, Lemass and Childers colleagues were aware of the economic position during this period. In January 1952 Sean MacEntee described the finances of the country as 'difficult, almost to the verge of desperation'.<sup>33</sup> T.K. Whitaker's suggestion that Childers's proposals were regarded by his colleagues as too idealistic and therefore ignored is substantiated by Bruce Arnold. Childers forwarded letters and magazine cuttings, on educational issues, to Jack Lynch while he was Minister for Education. Similar material was also 'sent in other directions as well. Lynch never read them! An immense pile grew up in the corner of the office, and was ignored'.<sup>34</sup>

Against this bleak economic background, Childers settled into his first government portfolio in the Department of Posts and Telegraphs. This department could be divided into two distinct sections; that of the postal and telephone services. However, crucially for Childers, responsibility for the national broadcasting service, Radio Éireann, hereafter cited as RE, was also vested in the Department of Posts and Telegraphs and it is in this area that Childers left a lasting impression. Within the Department of Posts and Telegraphs Childers was called 'the Minister for Broadcasting' because of his keen interest in broadcasting.<sup>35</sup> As a consequence, the focus of this chapter is primarily on his contribution to the development of the broadcasting service.

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<sup>31</sup> Letter from Childers to T. Walsh, 23 Jan. 1953 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9954/24).

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> J.J. Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985 politics and society* (Cambridge, 1989), p.323.

<sup>34</sup> Bruce Arnold, *Jack Lynch: hero in Crisis* (Dublin, 2001), pp 42-3.

<sup>35</sup> *Times Pictorial-Radio Supplement*, 17-24 Sept. 1952 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9979/41).

At this time, the *Irish Press* newspaper was undergoing fairly dramatic changes. Childers held the view that the broadcasting service was another method of communications and no doubt was influenced by developments in the *Irish Press*. The novelist Benedict Kiely was appointed literary editor in 1951 and the newspaper became a haven, particularly for younger Irish writers, and the paper's politics 'were also undergoing a discreet change'.<sup>36</sup> Although Eamon de Valera remained in control of the newspaper until his retirement from politics in 1959 Sean Lemass's term as managing director from 1948-51 had left its mark. The *Irish Press* took sides in the internal argument within Fianna Fáil on the issue of tariffs and protection. Lemass realised early in the 1950s the inadequacy of Fianna Fáil's policy in relation to home industries and the *Irish Press* endorsed his arguments while 'sidelining or minimising contrasting party views'.<sup>37</sup>

The Fianna Fáil government inherited a very difficult situation on its return to power in 1951, but what lay ahead of Childers in the Department of Posts and Telegraphs? Specifically, what did he confront within the broadcasting service in 1951? A considerable increase in revenue from licence fees and vitally important technical improvements in the late 1940s and early 1950s were significant contributors to changes in radio broadcasting. Restrictions on advertising 'were considerably relaxed after 1949....and content was changing'.<sup>38</sup> In 1951 RE was still primarily a public service organization strictly controlled and used 'for ideological ends which were primarily politically driven'.<sup>39</sup> A major constraint on the development of radio was, according to John Horgan, financial.<sup>40</sup> The Department of Finance 'always apprehensive of expenditure in the area of broadcasting, would....put up stout resistance against further extravagance on this modern luxury [radio]'.<sup>41</sup>

It had been accepted that up to 1948 'Radio Éireann was effectively a government mouthpiece, at least insofar as news and current affairs were concerned'.<sup>42</sup> There were no live political debates and while opposition spokesmen were allowed on the radio at certain times it was in the context of a concession rather

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<sup>36</sup> John Horgan, *Irish media, a critical history since 1922* (London, 2001), p.68.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> John Horgan, *Irish media, a critical history since 1922* (London, 2001), pp 68-9.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p.69.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p.70.

than a right. The period 1948-51, did result in financial and technological advances but was 'not notable for much in the way of innovation in broadcasting'.<sup>43</sup> All efforts to remove broadcasting from direct government control were resolutely ignored.

Childers had inherited a government controlled, under-funded organisation that ranked lowly in the eyes of the Department of Finance, and with little or no interaction with its audience. It is worth noting that the secretary of the Department of Posts and Telegraphs was León Ó Broin, cited hereafter as Ó Broin, who joined the civil service in the early 1920s. Childers and Ó Broin were of similar age and both knew nothing of the postal and telephone services when they joined the department. However Childers 'was manifestly desperately keen to learn'.<sup>44</sup> Ministerial responsibility would necessitate that a minister provide direction and control through periodic meetings with the broadcasting management. Not so with Childers. The success of his working career to date was based on attention to detail and he brought this with him to his new portfolio. Childers showed a level of passion in the area of broadcasting that he did not exhibit again until later on in his career as Minister for Health.

An analysis of the *Radio Review*, the only radio programme journal available, provides a picture of the broadcasting service in Ireland on Childers's arrival, and a means of measuring his contribution to it. The *Radio Review* was published weekly and included a daily listing of radio programmes not only of RE but also for the BBC, Radio Luxembourg and other stations. During the years 1949 to 1951 transmissions at RE commenced at 13.00 and usually closed at 23.00. Programme composition included news, music, religion, literature/drama, live song performance, sport, farming information, sponsored programmes, listeners' letters, Irish and children's programmes.<sup>45</sup> From 1949 to 1951 RE did not offer any programming to compete with the political discussion and live audience programmes broadcast by its competitors. However, on occasion broadcasts did commence at 9.30am, for example the broadcast of Mass from an outside location, and close down could be as late as 00.45.

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<sup>43</sup> John Horgan, *Irish media, a critical history since 1922* (London, 2001), p.70.

<sup>44</sup> León Ó Broin, *Just like yesterday, an autobiography* (Dublin, 1985), p. 178.

<sup>45</sup> *Radio Review*, Jan.-Dec.1949 (N.L.I., *Radio Review*, MS newspaper catalogue, hard copy).

Childers faced a tough task as he set about reforming and developing the broadcasting service. He saw the broadcasting service as another method of communications and set about extending its programme variety, transmission times and opening up the service to the public. Childers inherited a situation where political broadcasting was almost nonexistent, confined to news reports on Dáil Éireann and Seanad Éireann proceedings. His liberal attitude led him to convince the government to widen this coverage and include speeches by the Taoiseach and government members. However, it was not until April 1954 that Seán MacEntee as Minister for Finance, inaugurated the first series of political broadcasts from RE. He furthered the political coverage on radio with special commentaries on the Dáil and Seanad proceedings and provided for political broadcasts during general elections. The political broadcasts were based on 'numerical strength in Dáil Éireann on the date of the dissolution, subject to appropriate arrangements being made in respect of independent Deputies'.<sup>46</sup>

Not all TDs were of the same opinion as Childers on the use of radio for political purposes. Childers opposed those who suggested that a state sponsored radio station should not allow, for example, political discussion. This conflict of opinion was clearly evident when, in July 1951 Sean MacEoin, Fine Gael TD in Childers's constituency, wrote a letter to RE complaining about references in a broadcast speech by Childers. In the course of the radio broadcast Childers had suggested that MacEoin had lowered 'the standard of political controversy in Longford-Westmeath'.<sup>47</sup> MacEoin regarded the use of RE for such purposes as an abuse of the station whereas Childers viewed it as another medium of general communication.

The only limitations on RE were those forbidding indecency, blasphemy, treason, personal insults and vicious attacks against friendly nations. Childers proposed to the government that RE broadcast 'interesting political matter in the same manner as the newspapers, with the proviso that balance between the political groups be maintained as far as possible'.<sup>48</sup> He gave details of much wider political

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<sup>46</sup> Memo. from Childers to RE, 16 Aug. 1951 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9943/36).

<sup>47</sup> Letter from Sean MacEoin to RE, 14 Jly. 1951 (U.C.D.A., Sean MacEoin Papers, MS P151/401, II political career).

<sup>48</sup> Childers memo. to government, 31 Jly. 1951 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9939/1).



broadcasting in many countries in Europe and he emphasised the need for balance in allocation of time and State security. He also proposed that:

between the date of the announcement of a General Election and polling day, a number of special party political broadcasts will be arranged and will be allocated to the political parties and Independents in accordance with their numerical strength in the Dáil at the time of the dissolution.<sup>49</sup>

Childers continued his political programme expansion with the broadcast in March 1952 of a programme on the week's events in Dáil Éireann. Transmission commenced on a Saturday night initially scheduled for 21.30 and the programme was usually of fifteen minutes duration. This represented the first of such programmes and the result of Childers's initiatives.<sup>50</sup> Government ministers also used the broadcasting service to explain new pieces of legislation.

Childers viewed broadcasting as an example of working democracy and Ireland was sadly lacking in this area. On 17 August 1951 Childers informed RE that 'for a trial period of six months....discussion-groups should be allowed to debate freely questions in which political view-points are involved'.<sup>51</sup> Where scripts of the proposed discussions were not provided to RE the discussion was to be recorded in advance. This was to ensure reasonable balance and compliance with, for example, the issue of comment on religious organisations, which was not allowed. Childers viewed broadcasting as encompassing society in general but he was aware that radio broadcasting was not developed in Ireland among professional and other bodies.

However, the development of new programmes in itself was not sufficient. Childers was committed to increasing standards across all areas of broadcasting. Transmission of programmes to the listener in a clear and professional manner was paramount to Childers. To this end, Childers listened to many programmes over a weekend and remarked on the technical problems as he perceived them. Quoting one example, the broadcasting of mass from the Holy Ghost Missionary College in Kimmage, Childers wrote to the Director of Broadcasting in January 1952 and stated that:

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<sup>49</sup> Childers memo. to government, 31 Jly. 1951 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9939/1)..

<sup>50</sup> Radio programme, *The week in Leinster House*, 1952 (N.L.I., *Radio review*, MS newspaper catalogue, hard copy).

<sup>51</sup> Memo. from Childers to RE, 17 Aug. 1951 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9943/38).

When Miss Peg Monahan began to read....her voice became muffled and as I can presume she was not speaking too close to the microphone it is obvious that some technical expert should have been there to correct the broadcasting effect. I understand that there are balance and control officers for practically all features in the BBC I should like confirmation that we are getting a second balance and control officer.<sup>52</sup>

This attention to detail was representative of Childers throughout his political career. It was however a characteristic which suggested that Childers would not evolve from a very efficient administrator to a more general role of leader. Childers was a moderniser and according to John Horgan, 'much given to direct interference in broadcasting'.<sup>53</sup> His interference was a symptom of his genuine interest and he exhibited such symptoms throughout his political career, straying into whatever briefs he felt passionate about.

Paramount in Childers's vision for the broadcasting service was the end user, the listener. Childers's cultural and social aspirations for radio included the recording and transmission of singing in community halls throughout the country. Not only was the transmission of song important but Childers wanted to create an atmosphere at the live venue which would make 'the people sitting by the fireside....feel they were taking part in the performance'.<sup>54</sup> Involvement and interaction with the people of Ireland was paramount to Childers in the evolution of radio programming. He suggested programmes that encouraged the public to request information and answers on a range of issues.

In keeping with his theme of customer satisfaction, Childers sought to bring some sort of regularity to programme timing. Due to technical and personnel reasons programme transmission was unplanned and very irregular. Due to pressure from the public he suggested greater regularity of particularly popular programmes. Always conscious of the listening public he was annoyed at the lack of professionalism and listener awareness in RE. This was the era of light hearted sponsored programmes and he was not impressed when these programmes were immediately followed by:

gloomy, distressing, tortured music. I always ask for the co-operation of the Directors in matters of this kind and I do not want to have to give an order that never, never, on any possible occasion should the programme be

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<sup>52</sup> Letter from Childers to Director of broadcasting, Jan. 1952 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9943/79).

<sup>53</sup> John Horgan, *Irish media, a critical history since 1922* (London, 2001), p.71.

<sup>54</sup> Childers memo. to RE, 8 Jan. 1952 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9943/85).

so drastically altered in character that persons who have been listening to Sponsored Programmes will wish to turn-off the radio at whatever time these end.<sup>55</sup>

It is understandable that Childers would have taken a keen interest in sponsored programming and advertising in general. Having worked as advertising manager of the *Irish Press* and also acted as secretary of the Federation of Irish Manufacturers, he had a long-standing acquaintance with many commercial concerns. Additional advertising revenue was available to RE from March 1952. From this date Irish companies importing goods for sale in Ireland were allowed to advertise for the first time, as long as their products were not in competition with Irish made goods.<sup>56</sup>

Like P.J. Little, former Minister for Posts and Telegraphs 1939-48, Childers was a music enthusiast and demonstrated this in his continuing support and development of Radio Éireann's orchestral output. Childers had a particularly keen interest in the Radio Éireann Symphony Orchestra and the Radio Éireann Singers. Childers maintained tight control over their programmes by way of memoranda to the secretary of his department and the Director of Music at Radio Éireann. When a performance did not match Childers's expectations he let this be known. His control of the orchestra went as far as providing the Director of Music with a list of suggested music for the coming year and thereby made it 'easier to choose soloists and give variety'.<sup>57</sup>

An analysis of programmes led to the formation of the Radio Éireann Singers and the expansion of the Radio Éireann Symphony Orchestra. Childers wanted to increase the number of performances of the orchestra and suggested a series of popular concerts on Sunday nights in the Gaiety Theatre. However, Ó Broin informed Childers on 16 May 1952 that there were no free Sunday nights in the Gaiety until January 1953. Ó Broin suggested to Childers that 'we are trying to handle so much with concerts this year that it would probably be better to defer further consideration of the Sunday Gaiety Concerts until next year'.<sup>58</sup> A series of concerts arranged throughout the country led to increased clerical and general administrative pressure on the music department at RE and Ó Broin did not want to add to their workload. The *Irish Times*

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<sup>55</sup> Childers memo. to RE, 27 Feb. 1952 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9943/98).

<sup>56</sup> John Horgan, *Irish media, a critical history since 1922* (London, 2001), p.72.

<sup>57</sup> Childers memo. to RE, 8 Feb. 1952 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9944/4).

<sup>58</sup> Letter from Ó Broin to Childers, 16 May 1952 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9944/14).

commented on 28 October 1952 that Childers seemed to be establishing himself as the cultural leader of the government.<sup>59</sup>

Childers's contribution to the radio orchestra and singers was acknowledged and appreciated many years following his term as Minister for Posts and Telegraphs. In 1965 the Radio Éireann Singers toured Europe and recorded a disc of their tour. A letter from Dr Hans Waldemar Rosen, then Radio Éireann vocal adviser and conductor, to Childers stated: 'may I, in grateful remembrance of your initiative in forming this group, ask you to accept a proof copy of this record'.<sup>60</sup>

Childers demonstrated his awareness of radio as a national archive. On 1 February 1952 he asked the broadcasting service if they considered approaching people who had experiences of 1916 and whether they would come together to discuss and reminisce. He was conscious of what would be lost to the Irish people and posed the question 'how many are left'.<sup>61</sup> Social and cultural topics were also discussed and programmes ranged in variety from a discussion on the future of the small farms in Ireland to the role of Shannon airport. However, in a later portfolio Childers did not show the same concern and sense of urgency and potential loss to the Irish people when questioned in the Dáil in relation to the preservation of documentation held by the Land Commission.<sup>62</sup>

News bulletins were not very exciting when Childers became minister. Recorded interviews were far too few in the news broadcast and he proposed 'ordering immediately at least two portable tape recording machines to be carried on the backs of staff whose duty it is to interview prominent persons and carry out recording where the recording van is not available or where there is no reason for using it'.<sup>63</sup> This may appear comical today but in August 1951 a live interview could only be recorded when a special recording van was available. News interviews were but one example of how Childers viewed the changing face of radio in Ireland. He suggested that this same process be used to capture interviews of disasters, sporting events and to record political speeches.

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<sup>59</sup>John N. Young, *Erskine H. Childers President of Ireland a biography* (Buckinghamshire, 1985), pp 114-5.

<sup>60</sup> Letter from Dr Rosen to Childers, 25 Mar. 1966 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9944/41).

<sup>61</sup> Memo. from Childers to RE, 1 Feb. 1952 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9943/90).

<sup>62</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.169, 3 July 1958.

<sup>63</sup> Memo. from Childers to RE, 9 Aug. 1951 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9943/25).

Childers's development of the broadcasting service in particular, the political content and the news programmes led to him answering questions in the Dáil on the issue of government favouritism. Deputy Sweetman, Fine Gael, enquired as to the number of news bulletins over a four day period in July 1952 and the number of such bulletins which contained reports of Childers's speeches or other activities. Over the period in question, there were twenty news bulletin broadcasts of which eleven contained reports of speeches by Childers.<sup>64</sup> However, over this particular four day period, Childers had several non-political appointments of a nature always reported by RE. Opposition deputies were not going to let radio be a voice solely for the government. Further questions by deputy Sweetman in relation to by-election candidates required Childers to state why only Fianna Fail candidates were announced in news bulletins.<sup>65</sup> Childers assured deputies that there was 'no question whatever of Party discrimination'.<sup>66</sup> Despite newspapers naming opposition deputies taking part in the by-election, RE could not announce their names until official notification was received.

During 1952 Radio Éireann was only broadcasting for five hours per day if the sponsored programmes are excluded. Childers planned to increase the hours with the installation of new transmitters and was also considering, 'whether broadcasting will require proper studio buildings in the foreseeable future'.<sup>67</sup> Childers's influence within broadcasting and the commitment to change and development began to reap rewards. A letter from the Director dated 27 January 1953 to Childers advised him of more regularity in programme scheduling, the recruitment of additional control officers and enhancement of the news service. The popularity of radio among the public can be gauged from the increase in radio licence purchases. In 1950, the number of radio licences in the country was 298,129 and this had increased to 427,660 by 1954.<sup>68</sup>

The issue of non-nationals working within the broadcasting service was raised during question time in Dáil Éireann in 1952. Opposition deputies were anxious to know the number of non-nationals holding positions in the Radio Éireann orchestra. Reservations were expressed concerning the replacement of Irish members by non-

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<sup>64</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol. 133, 23 Jly .1952.

<sup>65</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol. 134, 30 Oct. 1952.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Taken from Childers estimate statement 1952-3, undated (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9943/250).

<sup>68</sup> *Radio Éireann Handbook*, 1955 p.90.

nationals and the hardship this caused. Out of a total of sixty-one members of the radio orchestra, sixteen were non-nationals as at 30 June 1951 and this had risen to seventeen of the same total by 30 June 1952.<sup>69</sup> According to Childers this was ‘not abnormal when compared with leading foreign symphony orchestras in countries with a longer history of concert development’.<sup>70</sup>

He also defended, during questions in the Dáil, their inclusion by reference to the contribution they made to the improved standard of performance and to the fact that ‘improvement has also taken place in the standard of teaching as a number of the orchestra members are engaged in the teaching establishments and give instruction of high calibre not fully available here before’.<sup>71</sup> Childers suggested that ‘it maybe possible in time to secure more nationals of adequate professional standard to fill vacancies in our orchestra as they occur. This of course, depends on what can be done by the teaching organisations’.<sup>72</sup> This was a situation where a standard of competence would have been accepted by some in order to secure Irish musicians positions within the orchestra. However, Childers’s aim was to raise standards and the only way to achieve this was to employ musicians based on ability. There was stated Childers ‘no prejudice whatever in that matter’.<sup>73</sup>

Broadcasting as a function of the Department of Posts and Telegraphs meant that it was controlled by the civil service and constrained particularly by the Department of Finance. Aware of the constraints on the development of the broadcasting service, Childers wrote confidentially to León Ó Broin, secretary of the department, requesting evidence of constraints on RE due to civil service control:

If it will serve your purpose better they can be written unofficially but I insist on having them. Examples are...permits required to secure funds for entertaining debaters, all of which I regard as utterly ludicrous and fantastic and fully justifying the change....unreasonable restraint by Finance on matters which are purely artistic or literary.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol. 142, 4 Nov. 1953. For further on this issue see also vol. 134, 30 Oct. 1952 and vol.135, 11 Dec. 1952.

<sup>70</sup> Taken from prepared answer to Dáil question by deputy James Everett, 27 Mar. 1952 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9944/8).

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9944/9).

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol. 135, 11 Dec. 1952.

<sup>74</sup> Letter from Childers to Ó Broin, 25 Mar. 1952 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9943/111).

He could see the limitations imposed on RE by the civil service and initiated the process by which the broadcasting service would gain its autonomy.

After a settling period Childers initiated a major reorganisation of the broadcasting service revenue streams. The finance system operated by the civil service was not flexible enough to 'enable broadcasting to run smoothly'.<sup>75</sup> The government recognised that financial flexibility was required to enable RE deliver the service expected from it. Childers told the Dáil that 'Radio Éireann must function with the speed and the vigour of a newspaper'.<sup>76</sup> His earlier career experience would be brought to bear in the development of RE. Traditionally the amount provided for the provision of the service was arrived at following discussions between the Department of Finance and the Post Office. Following negotiations with the government Childers announced to the Dáil that 'an annual grant will be made for broadcasting equal to the total of the receipts from licence fees and sponsored programme fees'.<sup>77</sup>

Capital expenditure was paid by way of subsidy following discussions between the Minister for Posts and Telegraphs and Minister for Finance. This was a real breakthrough in the development of the service and the alterations to existing practices gave 'much greater freedom and flexibility than it has now both in providing programme staff and in the many innovations where speed of decision is essential and it will be possible to plan development much farther ahead'.<sup>78</sup>

By March 1952 Childers had introduced a system of committees and an advisory committee. The individual committees were responsible for different items of broadcasting, such as drama, light music and the Irish language. The advisory committee met periodically to hear and review progress. It was Childers's intention that the different features of broadcasting be reviewed and discussed at least every six months. However, as part of the reorganization process, Childers negotiated with his government colleagues a fundamental change in the broadcasting service. The government had agreed to the appointment of a five member council to advise and assist the minister 'in the conduct of broadcasting and....responsible under him for the

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<sup>75</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol. 134, 5 Nov. 1952.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> Taken from Childers estimate statement 1952-3, undated (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9943/249).

general control and supervision of the service'.<sup>79</sup> The membership of this council was chosen by Childers and submitted to the Dáil for approval. Members gave part-time services to broadcasting at a rate of £500 per annum for the chairman and £300 per annum for each of the other four members.<sup>80</sup> The first council included Seán Ó Suilleabháin and Theodore William Moody.

The council broadly speaking took the place of the department in the management of RE. This was a significant achievement for Childers in the process of complete autonomy for the broadcasting service. It was a step in the right direction, an improvement, but Childers and the government's control was not altogether lost as he chose the membership of the council. The council directed daily policy and gave advice to the Director of Broadcasting. In choosing the first council, Childers used his intuition 'more than anything else in believing these men to have the administrative gift of providing good management and of co-operating with the director'.<sup>81</sup> The new council began its work in January 1953 and among its notable successes was the introduction of a series of lectures that became known as the Thomas Davis lectures.

From a political point of view the new structure meant that Childers could redirect questions from opposition deputies on routine broadcasting issues to the Director of Broadcasting. Childers remained responsible to Dáil Éireann for the broadcasting service but if he commented on daily issues he would have removed the freedom granted to the broadcasting authorities. The political convenience of the new structure was commented upon in Dáil debates. In a critical tone deputy Sweetman, Fine Gael, remarked that it was clear 'that if there is anything good he will take the praise, and if there is anything bad he will not stand the blame himself, but shelter behind the council'.<sup>82</sup> Childers refused to answer questions in the Dáil relating to daily issues within the broadcasting service and his reasons were logical. He adopted a similar position in differing portfolios throughout his political career. When responsible for lands, Childers would not interfere in the workings of the land commissioners. Similarly when he was responsible for transport and power, Childers refused to intervene in the closing of uneconomic railways. Childers had appointed a

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<sup>79</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol. 134, 5 Nov. 1952.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> *Irish Times*, Dáil report, 17 Dec. 1953 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9979/115).



council and did not want to undermine their position. However, his own behaviour in relation to the broadcasting service points to a blatant contradiction when compared to his approach to questions in the Dáil.

Wanting to keep listeners tuned to RE, Childers's new council moved the broadcasting service into the scientific age with the inauguration of listener research. The things RE needed to know when planning radio programmes were 'when listeners listen, what they listen to, and what they think of the programmes they hear'.<sup>83</sup> Surveys were carried out in 1953, 1954 and 1955. The first survey revealed that 85% of the potential audience listened to RE, compared with 53% for Radio Luxembourg and 49% for the BBC.<sup>84</sup> The survey showed, according to Horgan, 'an unexpectedly large audience for Irish dance music programmes. This was an oddity-Irish dancing on radio seems an unusual attraction at best'.<sup>85</sup> However, the audience figures indicated that RE did not have the luxury of operating in a vacuum.

The survey results included information on the time periods during the day when radio sets were on and the various radio channels people listened to. Programme appeal was measured and Childers could see at a glance what the public thought of established and new programmes. Childers was aware of broadcasting trends in other European countries and would no doubt have noticed a very sizeable percentage tuning in to the BBC and Radio Luxembourg. A high degree of selectivity was demonstrated by those interviewed. Radio sets were not merely switched to RE but people tuned to specific programmes despite the irregularity of programme schedules. The findings of the research were forwarded to Childers by the director of Radio Éireann, for his views before making 'a selective statement to the Press'.<sup>86</sup>

While the results showed the number of listeners that tuned to the most popular programmes, the survey also indicated the numbers tuning into the more specialised tastes and interests. The important thing was, according to Maurice Gorham, 'to see that everybody gets what he wants some of the time....a radio station has a duty towards all sections of its listeners'.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> *Radio Éireann Handbook*, 1955 p.5.

<sup>84</sup> John Horgan, *Irish media, a critical history since 1922* (London, 2001), p.72.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> Letter from Gorham to Childers, 21 Jly. 1953 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9945/32). For a complete view of the research findings please see 9945/4-31.

<sup>87</sup> *Radio Éireann Handbook*, 1955 p.6.

Childers's strategy to remove the broadcasting service from under the control of the civil service and proceed with its development was considerably enhanced with the appointment of Maurice Gorham, cited hereafter as Gorham, as Director of Radio Éireann in 1953. Gorham had joined the BBC in 1926 and had considerable experience in both radio and television. This appointment was significant in that Gorham was the first Director to be appointed from outside the civil service.

However, the appointment of Gorham had its complications because; in Ó Broin's words Childers 'never really learned that there were some things he should leave to others'.<sup>88</sup> The re-organised structure of the broadcasting service should have allowed Childers to remove himself from the daily issues and to concentrate on wider policy issues. However, Childers's interest in the broadcasting service made it difficult for him to distance himself from routine matters.

This was typified when Childers intervened in Gorham's salary negotiations and agreed a salary directly with him. However, MacEntee as Minister for Finance would not agree to the salary which undoubtedly caused embarrassment to Childers. It was left to Ó Broin to retrieve the situation and secure Gorham's services. In January 1953 Gorham was appointed Director of Broadcasting and spoke of Childers in the following terms:

When Erskine Childers came in as Minister for Posts and Telegraphs, Radio Éireann had for the first time a Minister who had a genuine enthusiasm for broadcasting in all its aspects....took a lively interest in everything broadcast-news, talks, discussions, Irish music, sponsored programmes. His constant enquiries....passion for information....were sometimes embarrassing to those who were doing the job, but the staff appreciated that here was a Minister who really wanted to do something for the broadcasting service as a whole.<sup>89</sup>

Ó Broin had been influential in obtaining the semi-independent structure of RE and 'refrained nobly from interfering in any way in Radio Éireann's affairs....though always ready to help the Director when required'.<sup>90</sup> However, Childers:

Found this self-denying role harder to sustain. His interest in every detail of organisation and programmes overflowed in constant telephone calls and copious minutes-they might run to 22 numbered paragraphs, many of them expecting a reply. It was sometimes tempting to ask him why he had

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<sup>88</sup> León Ó Broin, *Just like yesterday, an autobiography* (Dublin, 1985), p.181.

<sup>89</sup> Maurice Gorham, *Forty years of Irish broadcasting* (Dublin, 1967), p.201.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.* p.222.

taken the trouble to install a new regime and a new director if he wished to run the service himself.<sup>91</sup>

Evidence supporting the contradiction of his non-interference in daily issues when questioned on RE matters in the Dáil and his obvious, although well intentioned interference, on a personal level.

In his private life Childers was preparing for his second marriage during 1952. Childers was engaged to Rita Dudley, a Catholic, who had worked at the British Embassy in Dublin as Assistant Press Attaché, and later at the Irish Desk in the Empire Division of the Ministry of information in London. During his reign Archbishop John Charles McQuaid discouraged mixed marriages. When permission was granted, no mass was permitted and the ceremony had to take place in the sacristy of the church. Childers wrote to Archbishop McQuaid on 9 July 1952, requesting permission to marry in a Catholic church in Ireland, and that they be allowed marry before the altar rather than in the sacristy of the church. In an extract from his letter Childers outlined his case as follows:

My fiancée wishes to attend Mass immediately before or after the ceremony as in France and she feels most intensely that for us there is no need to hide our actions from the public at large. With all respect I suggest to Your Grace that no serious precedent will be created if you should in your wisdom make an exception of this kind for me.<sup>92</sup>

The reply from the archbishop's house dated 12 July 1952 was short and to the point. Childers's views had been frequently expressed but the policy on mixed marriages had been maintained:

I regret that I cannot see my way to make an exception in favour of a Minister of State which I could not fairly refuse to grant to other and humbler applicants.

It is open to the parties to a mixed marriage to have the ceremony performed in another diocese and country. If the ecclesiastical authorities in the Diocese chosen consent to the publication of the marriage, I shall not make any objection.<sup>93</sup>

Childers pondered his position and during a visit to Rome he visited Cardinal Montini, later Pope Paul VI, for talks. Despite all-night discussions, the Cardinal was unable to

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<sup>91</sup> Maurice Gorham, *Forty years of Irish broadcasting* (Dublin, 1967), p.222.

<sup>92</sup> Letter from Childers to Archbishop McQuaid, 9 Jly. 1952 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9989/16).

<sup>93</sup> Letter from Archbishop McQuaid to Childers, 12 Jly. 1952 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9989/20).

dispel Childers's reservations and the idea of a conversion was dropped.<sup>94</sup> After consulting with Rita they decided to marry outside Ireland and the ceremony was carried out in St. Joseph's Church, Paris on 16 September 1952. Childers contacted the Irish Embassy in Paris and was supplied with the documentation required for the ceremony. He was also informed 'that the marriage could actually take place within the church and not only in the sacristy. The ceremony would, of course, precede and not be a part of the Mass'.<sup>95</sup> Childers had got his wish to be married before the altar of a church. This episode demonstrated the powerful position of the Catholic Church in Ireland and is testimony to the hard line adopted by Archbishop McQuaid. During his political career Childers expressed reservations concerning promotion prospects because he was a Protestant. He had now experienced the control of the Catholic Church in Ireland in relation to his private life.

Back in Ireland Childers was confronted with the arrival of television. Although the broadcasting of television in Ireland was many years ahead, Childers replied to a letter from the Council of Europe seeking advice on the drafting of a European Convention to regulate the television service and copyright issues. In his reply Childers stated that when television was established in Ireland it would not be operated under the control of the civil service. His department had proposed sending officers abroad to investigate television and gather some expert information. However, the conditions attached to the proposal by the finance department were such that Childers department could not accept them. As a result, Childers department was not in a position to give any official advice on television matters.<sup>96</sup>

At the end of 1951 there were approximately 500 television sets along the east coast area of Ireland receiving British television. The setting up of a television transmitter in Belfast meant that a wider area of the Republic received foreign television channels. Childers stated as early as 11 November 1952 that it was bound to come to Ireland and if we did not provide it ourselves foreign networks would cover the country.<sup>97</sup> By 1953 the prospect of a national television service was looming. A

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<sup>94</sup> John N. Young, *Erskine H. Childers President of Ireland a biography* (Buckinghamshire, 1985), p.113.

<sup>95</sup> Letter from embassy to Childers, 18 Jly. 1952 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9989/34).

<sup>96</sup> Letter from Childers to the Council of Europe, 19 Jun. 1951 (N.A.I., Dept. of Foreign Affairs, MS 362/37).

<sup>97</sup> *Irish Press*, 11 Nov. 1952.

proposal from the Federated Trust to Childers regarding the formation of a company to run a commercial television station in Ireland prompted deputy Sean MacEoin, Fine Gael, to suggest that his involvement in the project would influence Childers's decision on the proposal. The proposal included a weekly television guide of programming and stated that the Federated Trust had the necessary capital for the project. No state grants or loans would be required. A licence fee of two pounds was proposed for the first three years of the project and the fee thereafter to be agreed with the government. Childers's reply to MacEoin expressed surprise at the suggestion and stated that should the government accept the proposal but find insufficient detail or objectionable areas an opportunity would be given to the Federated Trust to consider these issues before any final decision was made.<sup>98</sup>

In the autumn of 1953 Childers visited London, Paris and Brussels to examine the television services. Childers realised the benefits socially and culturally and that the capital cost, spread over eight years, was not prohibitive. However, there is the feeling that Childers was not totally committed and supportive of this new innovation. When questioned in the Dáil on the progress made towards establishing a television station he replied:

No decision has so far been taken to proceed with the actual establishment of a television service. I am, however, keeping in the closest touch with television developments elsewhere with a view to enabling the government to decide whether and when a television service should be provided here.<sup>99</sup>

Childers viewed television as competition to radio and its listeners. He would also have been aware of the possible erosion of cultural values with the introduction of television. However, Ó Broin and Childers had begun the planning process that led to the launch of Irish television in December 1961. Childers was not responsible for the broadcasting service when television was introduced by the Irish government. However, Ó Broin played an enormous part in deciding the ownership and structures of the new television service.<sup>100</sup>

Despite Childers's passion to expand and improve the broadcasting service and, his interest in the cultural and social aspects of it, it was nevertheless just a

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<sup>98</sup> Letter from Childers to Sean MacEoin, 4 Sept. 1953 (U.C.D.A., Sean MacEoin Papers, MS P151/1993, V, Social and Personal).

<sup>99</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol. 145, 24 Mar. 1954.

<sup>100</sup> Robert J. Savage, *Irish television, the political and social origins* (Cork, 1996).

section of his overall responsibility in posts and telegraphs. While there is no doubting his immense interest and influence in the area of broadcasting, this does not mean that he neglected or ignored the postal and telephone sections of his portfolio. This was a period of expansion and development in postal and telephone services. New post offices and telephone exchanges were planned throughout the country. At the opening of a new automated telephone exchange in Waterford in October 1952 Childers announced plans for a new telephone exchange in Athlone, County Westmeath. This exchange, in his own constituency, was opened in September 1953 and further exchanges were planned for Limerick, Galway, Sligo, Drogheda and Mullingar. His participation in the announcement and opening of telephone exchanges was what would have been expected from the responsible minister. He had travelled to see the latest developments in telephone technology but Childers did not, indeed could not have the same influence in this area due to its technical and other specialised considerations.

Childers was unhappy with the difficulty experienced by the farming community in securing the telephone service. The balance Childers had to consider was that between social good and financial loss. This was also the dilemma that faced Childers later in his career in relation to uneconomic railway closures. It is difficult to envisage the structure and challenge that faced Childers in these key areas of communication in the 1950s. An example of the telephone structure and service in rural areas may be had from a report in the *Longford Telegraph* dated 1 September 1951. The article reported on a meeting of Longford County Council at which it was noted that it took between two and five hours to get a call through to a local number.<sup>101</sup> The telephone service showed improvement during 1951 with 6,639 new subscribers and seventeen new or updated telephone exchanges.<sup>102</sup> There was a record 7,234 telephone installations in 1952.<sup>103</sup>

During question time in the Dáil Childers regularly answered questions from deputies on the provision of telephone kiosks in villages and towns throughout Ireland. This was a particular concern for deputies during 1951 and Childers responded with the number of telephone kiosks in a particular location and a promise

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<sup>101</sup> *Longford Telegraph*, 1 Sept. 1951.

<sup>102</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.133, 3 Jly. 1952.

<sup>103</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.138, 30 Apr. 1953.

to have additional requests examined. This may seem trivial by current standards but the task that confronted Childers in 1951 can best be understood by his answer to a query on the installation of a public telephone in a County Monaghan sub-post office.

Childers replied:

It is the intention of the Department to install a telephone in every post office. As there are still about 700 offices to be dealt with – most of them in remote areas – the work will have to be spread over a number of years. So that the best progress may be made, the order in which call offices are installed is determined mainly on engineering considerations.<sup>104</sup>

Waiting times for telephone installations was considerable and in reply to Dáil questions on installation backlogs in the Cork city district Childers replied in July of 1951 that ‘service for persons who applied last year will commence shortly’.<sup>105</sup> Other issues of interest to deputies ranged from the delays in delivering telegrams, the number of postmen in the service, the cost of delivering post to the provision of new post offices.<sup>106</sup>

It is very clear from Childers’s speeches in the Dáil where his enthusiasm and real interests lay. When speaking on matters concerning posts and telegraphs he listed the notable achievements for the year without displaying any sense of personal involvement or enthusiasm. Backlogs and arrears were explained away with reference to similar problems in other telephone administrations. In 1952, the policy of clearing telephone applications was continued; priority was given to those areas with outstanding applications going back to 1949 or earlier.<sup>107</sup> Childers read the script, answered deputies’ questions in his usual thorough way, but it lacked Childers’s personal enthusiasm and drive. However, when speaking on broadcasting issues Childers’s tone and approach was very different. He took joint ownership of initiatives, appointments, and developments. There is a sense of someone who had a real interest, not only in the longer term strategic objectives of the broadcasting service, but in the daily routines of broadcasting. From planning new programmes and highlighting current progress, to the appointment of a young Irish assistant conductor, this was Childers’s department.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.126, 5 Jly. 1951.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> For examples see *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol. 126, 27 Jun., 5, 12, 17 Jly. 1951.

<sup>107</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.126, 20 Jun. 1951 and vol.133, 3 Jly. 1952.

<sup>108</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.142, 10 Nov. 1953.

However, not having the same enthusiasm for the telephone and postal sections of his brief does not mean that he was not interested in the workings and improvement of the telephone system. Barry Desmond recalled that:

He was inclined to get embroiled in the minutiae of his portfolio, for example, as Minister for Posts and Telegraphs he used to walk around Dартry. I well remember people accused him of testing out the phone boxes, the public phone boxes, and writing a little report on them to the Secretary the following morning.<sup>109</sup>

Childers encountered negative views and opinions in the appointment of non-nationals to the radio orchestras and he also encountered this issue in relation to the telephone and postal services. Questioned on why a non-national was appointed to the position of sub-postmistress instead of an Irish applicant he replied that candidature for sub-postmasterships 'is not restricted to Irish nationals'.<sup>110</sup> Employment and emigration were a major concern during this period but the memories of not too distant times were also evident. During Dáil discussions on postal appointments deputy Everett, Labour, commented in regard to one appointment that the lady 'had a Black and Tan brother'.<sup>111</sup>

Within government, Seán MacEntee's handling of finance contributed to independent deputies withdrawing their support for Fianna Fáil which resulted in the 1954 election. He received most of the blame for the 1954 result and ruined his chances of succession. Fianna Fáil had sixty-five deputies following the 1954 general election, a loss of four seats from its 1951 result.<sup>112</sup> Childers was once more successful in Longford-Westmeath taking the fourth seat in this five seat constituency. After the election, Fine Gael and Labour dominated the situation and constructed another coalition government under John A. Costello. Childers was frustrated; in total control of his department it was all taken away from him overnight. His successor, Michael Keyes, paid tribute to Childers for his energy and considerable success within the Department of Posts and Telegraphs. Childers would have responsibility again for the Department of Posts and Telegraphs later in his political career. Childers's interest in

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<sup>109</sup> *Uachtaráin*, TG4 documentary series, Wed. 9 May 2007.

<sup>110</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.126, 27 Jun. 1951.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> Sean Donnelly, *Elections '97* (Dublin, 1998), p.6.



broadcasting continued and he was involved in a proposal to develop Ireland's V.H.F. radio programming during the early 1960s.

In opposition Childers reminded the government of the healthy position they inherited from Fianna Fáil. Public demand increased imports but exports also increased to new levels, one-third higher than in 1950. Private incomes reached an all time high with workers earnings rising higher than increases in living costs. Sales of farm produce reached record levels and livestock numbers reached post-war records in 1953. People had saved sufficient amounts during 1952-3 to enable them to invest in the National Loan. The loan would not have been successful if the view taken by the inter-party speakers on the economic state of the nation was true.<sup>113</sup>

Childers's portrayal of a healthy economic position was just not true. Following the Second World War Ireland had the prospect of a constant demand for her exports. However, unemployment continued at a high level and wage claims soon created an inflationary situation. The unpleasant fact was, according to F.S.L. Lyons, 'that the economy had not fundamentally changed since the war and that its inherent weaknesses had not been eradicated'.<sup>114</sup> The growth outlined by Childers owed 'an unhealthy large proportion to heavy state spending....what was happening in the decade after the war was that the government was making frantic attempts not merely to provide work....to reduce emigration, but also to provide amenities and services....normal elsewhere.'<sup>115</sup> Government expenditure on agriculture increased from just over four million pounds in 1939 to over thirteen million pounds in 1952.<sup>116</sup> Despite this spending, the return 'was hardly impressive, indeed distinctly unimpressive by comparison with those Western European standards by which Ireland was beginning to measure herself'.<sup>117</sup> The increases outlined by Childers were not sustainable, it would not be until the late 1950s that 'something changed, and Ireland entered a period of sustained economic growth'.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Taken from the *Irish Press*, 26 Oct. 1954 and the *Irish Times*, 10 Nov. 1954. A comprehensive view of Childers opinions on the Inter-Party Government, 1954-7, is available under Government Information Service, reference number GIS 1/58.

<sup>114</sup> F.S.L.Lyons, *Ireland since the famine* (London, 1973), p.624.

<sup>115</sup> F.S.L.Lyons, *Ireland since the famine* (London, 1973), p.625.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 625-6.

<sup>118</sup> Cormac Ó Gráda, *A rocky road: the Irish economy since the 1920s* (Manchester, 1997), p.29.

The inter-party government encountered a particularly difficult period in Ireland. It faced industrial and agricultural slow-downs, rising unemployment, emigration and a balance of payments deficit. The then Minister for Finance, Gerard Sweetman realised that economic expansion was the solution to the county's problems and appointed T.K. Whitaker as Secretary to his Department. Sweetman believed Whitaker to be the person most capable of planning Ireland's economic future and few could have envisaged the long-term effect of his appointment in May 1956.

An outbreak of Republican activity in December 1956 commenced with a series of bombings in border areas. Speaking at Granard, county Longford, Childers made no secret of his views on such bombings. He stated that:

Blowing up transformers and buses in the Six Counties was like bringing back horses to replace tractors or flying tricolours from every house to prove that the residents were Irish. During the war the same group had imperilled neutrality by conspiring with one of the warring countries whilst after the war the same group had achieved a 26-county Republic by agitation in the Dáil.<sup>119</sup>

There was no place or excuse for violence in Childers's politics. He preached reconciliation throughout his political career and was to the forefront in calming very difficult times for government and country in 1970.

John A. Costello's inter-party government was no more successful with inflation and general economic matters than was Fianna Fáil. Costello was also confronted by the ominous revival of IRA activities. The government had no option but to use the existing law against those who were bringing the gun back into politics. Seán MacBride withdrew Clann na Poblachta's support for the government thus forcing the 1957 general election. He withdrew support for the government because of Sweetman's financial policies and also because of Costello's hostility to the IRA. The 1957 general election saw Fianna Fáil return to government with seventy-eight seats.<sup>120</sup> It was de Valera's greatest electoral triumph and also saw the virtual obliteration of Clann na Poblachta as an electoral force. Fianna Fáil secured 51.9% of the first preference vote in 1938 compared with 48.3% in 1957.<sup>121</sup> However, Fianna Fáil won one seat more than it did in 1938, and more importantly, it stretched its

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<sup>119</sup> *Longford Leader*, 13 Apr. 1957.

<sup>120</sup> Sean Donnelly, *Elections '97* (Dublin, 1998), p.6.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

advantage over Fine Gael from fifteen seats in the 1954 election to thirty-eight seats in 1957.<sup>122</sup> Childers had another successful campaign in Longford-Westmeath, again taking the fourth seat; it was to be his last campaign in this constituency.

Childers's first ministerial portfolio coincided with a very difficult period for Fianna Fáil in government. However, despite this the Department of Posts and Telegraphs provided Childers with the opportunity to indulge his creative imagination and boundless energies. The period of the inter-party government of 1948-51 had not been innovative in relation to the broadcasting service. However Childers's appointment:

gave a completely new tone and impetus to the direction, content and control of Irish broadcasting. Childers was a moderniser...among the few Irish politicians of his era who saw broadcasting as an opportunity rather than a threat.<sup>123</sup>

Childers inherited a broadcasting organization that was starved of financial resources and the necessary drive to develop its potential. The introduction of political discussion and unscripted debate led the way to the opening up of radio to the wider community. That wider community was of special interest to Childers. Listener research was among Childers's priorities and this process commenced in 1953. The improvement in programme quality, variety and scope can be traced to Childers's imaginative policy of convincing the government to grant RE almost autonomy.

Childers was fortunate that Ó Broin was also interested in change and not typical of civil servants during that period. Gorham's appointment, crucial in the development of the broadcasting service, was the first non civil servant in the organisation. The appointment of the five member council to advise and assist Childers lasted until the broadcasting authority took over in June 1960. Childers restructured the revenues of RE thereby facilitating expenditure and development plans. During his term Childers showed innovation and a determination to make the changes necessary for the development of the broadcasting service.

However, having put a management structure in place he found it difficult to break away from the day to day detail. This may well have signalled to his party colleagues his undoubted administrative skills but that he would never be able to

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<sup>122</sup> Sean Donnelly, *Elections '97* (Dublin, 1998), p.6.

<sup>123</sup> John Horgan, *Irish media: a critical history since 1922* (London, 2001), pp 70-1.

make the transition from the specific to the general. While recognising the drive and imagination of Childers, it was the combination of Childers, Ó Broin and Gorham that laid the foundations for the developments that occurred within the broadcasting service. The new structures introduced by Childers as minister and maintained by subsequent ministers paved the way for the eventual separation of broadcasting from direct government control and the creation of an autonomous body to control both radio and television.

Whether or not the 1951-4 cabinet was the worst de Valera government, there can be no denying the positive contribution made by Childers to the development of the broadcasting service during this period. Childers well deserved the accolade of 'Minister for Broadcasting' within the Department of Posts and Telegraphs. While developments in the telephone service were not as significant some progress was made. Later in his political career Childers had responsibility once more for the department of posts and telegraphs. His efforts led to the modernisation of the telephone service in Ireland. For now, Fianna Fáil was back in government and Childers could look forward to renewing his ministerial career.

### Chapter 3

#### Minister for Lands, Forestry and Fisheries, 1957-9

The withdrawal by Seán MacBride of Clann na Poblachta's support led to the fall of the inter-party government and the return of Fianna Fáil to government in 1957. De Valera gained his greatest electoral triumph with Fianna Fáil winning seventy-eight seats in Dáil Éireann. Childers was again successful in Longford-Westmeath and was appointed Minister for Lands, Forestry and Fisheries in March 1957. The three components of this portfolio provided Childers with the challenge of managing vital national resources. His appointment as Minister for Lands was seen by some as disappointing but the *Westmeath Independent* contended that 'no matter what anybody says to the contrary, his office is a very important one, dealing as it does with the activities of the Land Commission and of the Forestry Sections'.<sup>1</sup> In his new portfolio he faced an enormous range of issues. The ongoing problems of uneconomic farm holdings needed to be progressed, forestry schemes that needed to be pushed ahead not to mention the fisheries section of the Department of Agriculture that had been transferred to the care of the Minister for Lands. He wanted the agriculture portfolio but if successful in lands his case for agriculture would only be strengthened.

The 1950s was a miserable decade for the Irish economy and things had not changed when Childers took up his new office. Emigration and unemployment were still rampant but a change was on the horizon brought about by a combination of events. Amongst these events was the publication in 1958 of *Economic Development* and the ensuing *Programme for Economic Expansion* which even today 'can be seen as a watershed in the modern economic history of the country'.<sup>2</sup> Ireland appeared at last to be moving towards participation in the world of that time. New emphases on attracting foreign investment, the modernisation of agriculture and the development of a wider range of exports all contributed to moving Ireland from its old position of protection and inward looking to a new position of initiative and aspirations towards the Common Market. The substantial investment in social projects also contributed to the recovery process along with the considerable growth of Ireland's trading partners. The hopelessness, stated F.S.L. Lyons, had begun to give way 'to a drive and

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<sup>1</sup> *Westmeath Independent*, 6 April 1957.

<sup>2</sup> Cormac Ó Gráda, *A rocky road, the Irish economy since the 1920s* (Manchester, 1997), p.29.

optimism previously unknown'.<sup>3</sup> However, political will and leadership was required to drive this new momentum and the retirement of de Valera from active politics led to the appointment of Seán Lemass as Taoiseach in 1959. While credit must go to de Valera for the initial favourable government reaction to Whitaker's report in 1958, as he was still Taoiseach, the responsibility for its implementation rested upon Seán Lemass.

Back in government Childers travelled the country widely addressing major issues affecting the country and criticising the economic planning of the opposition. Emigration was one such issue and he explained that it was not solely an Irish problem. Emigration from rural areas to centres of industrial wealth was universal. It would not be stopped by panic measures such as spending money on employment for employment sake. What was required, in Childers's view, was a steady build up of scientific agricultural production and getting the cost structure correct. He asserted that Ireland's recovery required the belief 'that a greater amount of produce sold at a competitive price, using adequate capital and modern methods, brought real prosperity'.<sup>4</sup> Increased production would automatically lead to employment according to Childers. He suggested a complete reorganisation of the Department of Agriculture and for ministers to show leadership and not, according to Childers, to 'start the old round of correspondence, using exactly the same phraseology....how much is a T.D. an advocate of production-how much a carpet-bagger'.<sup>5</sup> The crisis in the Irish economy in the 1950s was according to Brian Girvin 'not so much within industry as within agriculture'.<sup>6</sup> One of the major difficulties that faced Lemass when he became Taoiseach was that the agrarian sector could not increase exports nor could it provide additional employment.<sup>7</sup>

Foreign investment was needed in 1957 but Childers warned that conditions must be favourable if foreign capital was to be invested in Ireland.<sup>8</sup> He advised that economic stability for a period of ten years was required 'so that investors would feel

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<sup>3</sup> F.S.L. Lyons, *Ireland since the famine* (London, 1973), p.583.

<sup>4</sup> *Westmeath Independent*, 31 August 1957.

<sup>5</sup> Childers untitled memo., 1957 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9965/566).

<sup>6</sup> Brian Girvin and Gary Murphy (eds), *The Lemass era: politics and society in the Ireland of Seán Lemass*, (Dublin, 2005), p.29.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.28.

<sup>8</sup> Childers speech to the Insurance Institute of Ireland, 28 Oct. 1957 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers' Speeches 1957-60, MS GIS 1/59)

certain of their position'.<sup>9</sup> Childers's ten years of stability was exaggerated, in fact by early 1958 Lemass had decided that the time was right to encourage foreign investment in Irish industry. The government started a publicity campaign in the United States to attract investment into Ireland. Speaking at the annual dinner of the Wexford Chamber of Commerce, Lemass stated that capital generated within the country was not sufficient to produce the industrial expansion that was required. Foreign capital and technical aid were crucial in the effort to secure additional foreign markets. Industrial growth was the key to reducing unemployment and emigration. It was planned to expand the campaign to other countries but this would depend on results and the availability of funds for such promotional activities.<sup>10</sup>

Childers was utterly frank on the issue of emigration. He argued that Ireland could only afford wage levels in proportion to levels of production. Childers concluded that if people did not want to live on Irish income levels then they would emigrate and the government could do little to prevent them emigrating.<sup>11</sup> There are two issues here in relation to Childers's argument on emigration. Accelerating emigration was a feature of the 1950s and Irish wages rates, which had historically 'remained quite close to those prevailing in Britain, fell far behind in this period. By 1960, the average British worker earned at least forty per cent more than his Irish counterpart'.<sup>12</sup> This gap in wages served as a strong incentive for workers to emigrate even when not faced with unemployment. But Childers failed to conclude that Fianna Fáil's policy of protectionism since coming to power in 1932 failed to provide sufficient employment opportunities for those leaving agriculture and for those entering the labour market for the first time. Ireland required better marketing, improved quality and design while always reducing costs by incorporating new productivity techniques. Childers stressed the need for savings in order that the government could provide capital for productive purposes. The 'government was pledged to facilitate productive capital....excessive restriction of capital outlay for

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<sup>9</sup> Childers speech to the Federation of Irish Manufacturers, 22 Nov. 1957 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers' Speeches 1957-60, GIS 1/59).

<sup>10</sup> *Irish Times*, 29 January 1958.

<sup>11</sup> Childers speech to Fianna Fáil convention in Tullamore, 30 Mar. 1958 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers' Speeches 1957-60, MS GIS 1/59).

<sup>12</sup> Gary Murphy, 'From economic nationalism to European Union' in Brian Girvin and Gary Murphy (eds), *The Lemass era* (Dublin, 2005), p.29.

reducing costs or expanding output was intolerable'.<sup>13</sup> Evidence of Childers's changing position on industrialised Ireland from the view he held in the early 1920s. He was no longer in tandem with de Valera on the economic future of Ireland. De Valera was, according to Niamh Puirseil, 'stubbornly refusing to let go of the reins of office....seemed out of touch with the lives of most people for some time'.<sup>14</sup> Childers was not only in touch with the real situation facing the economy, he also knew that Lemass was 'growing increasingly irritated by what he saw as de Valera's passive leadership'.<sup>15</sup>

Childers took every opportunity to criticise the economic plans and results of the opposition. It would 'take five, if not ten years to uproot the political weeds sown by the Coalition mentality since 1947'.<sup>16</sup> Fianna Fáil, he argued, was responsible for every important project in the rebuilding of the country. The coalition governments of 1948 and 1954 promised lower prices, decrease in taxation and generally a better time for all. Fianna Fáil had to combat the negative legacy of coalition governments whose policies 'of increasing wages without increasing production and of using up all the savings beyond the absolute minimum had left no reserves'.<sup>17</sup> But it was not only the coalition governments that left a negative legacy. Brian Girvin quite rightly also attaches blame to de Valera and stated that 'evidence from the 1950s suggests that de Valera was paralysed politically, without any clear understanding of what was happening to his society'.<sup>18</sup> Ireland was in crisis at the time of the 1957 general election and it was not until 1959 that decisive actions occurred. The first action was when Lemass became Taoiseach in 1959 and had full power for the first time. He promoted an 'active expansion of the economy....accepts Whitaker's position that

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<sup>13</sup> Childers speech to the Federation of Irish Manufacturers, 22 Nov. 1957 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers' Speeches 1957-60, MS GIS 1/59).

<sup>14</sup> Niamh Puirseil, 'Political and party competition in post-war Ireland' in Brian Girvin and Gary Murphy (eds), *The Lemass era* (Dublin, 2005), p.24.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Westmeath independent*, 31 August 1957.

<sup>17</sup> Childers speech to the Fianna Fáil convention in Tullamore, 30 Mar. 1958 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers' Speeches 1957-60, MS GIS 1/59).

<sup>18</sup> Brian Girvin and Gary Murphy (eds), *The Lemass era: politics and society in the Ireland of Seán Lemass*, (Dublin, 2005), p.6.



state investment should be for expansionist purposes'.<sup>19</sup> The second action was Britain's decision in 1961 to apply for membership of the European Community.<sup>20</sup>

This was an important period in Childers's political career. If successful in Lands his ambition of securing the agricultural portfolio would be strengthened and advanced. Even more important for Childers was the fact that de Valera was nearing the end of his political career. Childers had a very short period of time to demonstrate his abilities to Lemass and his suitability as a future Minister for Agriculture. Land had been a dominating factor in Irish life. This dominance continued into Childers's term as he arrived in the Department of Lands in March 1957 and indeed long after he departed this portfolio. Representing a rural constituency with responsibility for land challenged Childers understanding of land issues, and the deeply held convictions of his rural constituents and rural Ireland as a whole. He immediately began to query all aspects of the Land Commission procedures (hereafter cited as the LC) and this led to unprecedented flows of additional work. In his memoirs, after spending forty-four years working in the service of the LC, Patrick J. Sammon recalled that Childers 'gave the firm impression that he was going to do a root and branch examination into the Land Commission and all his queries merited and got priority treatment'.<sup>21</sup> Along with all the queries that followed, Childers also called for a full review of land policy. Existing policy gave land to previous employees, smallholders, migrants and so forth but the number of landless men who got land was very small. The term landless man referred to an applicant for land with knowledge and practice of farming routines but who did not possess any land. As a result of Childers's call for a review of land policy in 1957, a conference was held within the LC. The majority of the participants, stated Sammon, recommended no change in land policy. However, Sammon prepared a minority report which proposed a model farm structure for landless men. The proposal envisaged one such model farm structure for each county. Each standard holding was to comprise thirty-three acres of good land, fully equipped with dwelling house and farm buildings. Those selected were to be fully trained in agriculture and

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<sup>19</sup> Brian Girvin and Gary Murphy (eds), *The Lemass era: politics and society in the Ireland of Seán Lemass*, (Dublin, 2005), pp 6-7.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p.7.

<sup>21</sup> Patrick J. Sammon, *In the Land Commission, a memoir 1933-1978* (Dublin, 1997), p.48. Sammon joined the Land Commission as a clerical officer in 1933. Successful in the 1934 examinations for Executive Officers, he was one of sixteen appointed to the Land Commission in 1934. He retired from his post as Principal Officer in May 1978.

their performance monitored. Nothing more was heard of this proposed change and no change in land policy took place.<sup>22</sup>

In his efforts to update and reform the working of the LC Childers was blocked by procedures and the internal workings of the LC. The annual estimate and Dáil speech by the minister was a highlight in the LC calendar. Sammon was one of those who had a significant input into the minister's draft speech and in preparing Childers's draft speech for 1958 he incorporated many new ideas, including the model farm experiment for landless men. However, Sammon's draft speech probably never reached Childers as it was, according to Sammon, fairly certain that it 'was removed altogether from the file before the minister saw it'.<sup>23</sup> Sammon was informed by his superior that Childers would not accept the new ideas. Sammon argued 'how could the Secretary say, in advance of discussing our draft with Erskine, whether he would embrace this new material or not?'.<sup>24</sup> Sammon concluded that this was 'surely a clear case of the top administrators feeding the minister a standard type of estimate speech without any embellishments or alterations in policy or other proposals'.<sup>25</sup> The meeting that followed between Childers and LC officials to discuss his speech was scheduled for the night before Childers's speech in the Dáil. If Childers was to use the estimate speech to announce new policy decisions he was leaving himself very little time to reflect on such changes.

From the beginning of his term as minister Childers identified issues and procedures that needed changing within the LC. Presenting his first estimate for Lands on 24 April 1957, Childers informed the Dáil that he had commenced 'a thorough examination into the policy and working of the Land Commission, but it is too early yet to have taken decisions on such major changes as maybe needed'.<sup>26</sup> He would be in a better position for the next presentation of estimates. However he did make some comments on LC activities and the need for the best use of Ireland's land resource. Childers acknowledged the criticism levelled at the standard of houses provided by the LC and undertook to implement new house designs. He also posed the question as to how the LC could contribute to the interrelated problems of low agricultural

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<sup>22</sup> Patrick J. Sammon, *In the Land Commission, a memoir 1933-1978* (Dublin, 1997), pp 48-50.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p.54.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp54-5.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p.55.

<sup>26</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol. 161, 24 Apr. 1957.

production and emigration. Childers proposed that the LC focus more attention on the quality of farmers receiving land allocations. He made it clear that in future: ‘the Land Commission will adopt a firm attitude towards the inefficient working of allotments’.<sup>27</sup> Those who received land were not to consider it a gift from the State, it must be worked to maximum capacity and contribute to overall economy. Land availability was the limiting factor for Childers and all those who held the portfolio. In any one year only fourteen out of every one thousand uneconomic farmers got land and of every one thousand farms investigated; only one hundred and fifty were suitable for acquisition.<sup>28</sup> An uneconomic holding was one not sufficient in size and quality of land to enable the owner to derive a livelihood from working it. During Childers’s term as minister thirty to thirty-five acres of good land was recognised as an economic holding. Childers recognised that the primary need was increased agricultural production. Throughout his term he constantly urged the use of better methods of work to increase agricultural output. Government expenditure of ‘£500 as an investment on making a farm economic, surely can expect a notable increase in output from the producer’.<sup>29</sup> The LC had spent many millions of pounds but with little improvement in agricultural output. The economic improvement of a relatively small number of families did not justify the Department of Lands. There was no general improvement in the county’s economic position and ‘social welfare, in Mayo or elsewhere, like patriotism, is not enough’.<sup>30</sup>

The current objective of the LC was to settle as many families on the land as was practicable. He wanted this modified to ensure ‘that the policy will result in the growth of high grade commercial farming’.<sup>31</sup> He questioned the logic of the LC spending capital on land division while the country lost revenue on cattle exports because of ‘out-of-date practices’.<sup>32</sup> Childers was aware of the problems with the LC and stated that ‘the problem for us then is how to spend the portion of the Estimate

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<sup>27</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol. 161, 24 Apr. 1957.

<sup>28</sup> Childers speech to a farm apprenticeship scheme, 15 Dec. 1957 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers’ Speeches 1957-60, MS GIS 1/59).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* Childers was quoting from a speech by Seán Moylan in 1956.

<sup>31</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol. 161, 24 Apr. 1957.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

devoted to land division in the most effective way....at this stage, I can only say this: the system must change'.<sup>33</sup>

While much of what Childers said was generally accepted by opposition deputies he did attract criticism on some issues. As usual with Childers he tried to give a complete understanding of a problem that confronted him. He quite clearly saw the bigger picture in relation to the difficulties of land allocation and the best use of this asset. Childers constantly urged the use of better methods of production in order to increase output and commented on the negatives within agriculture as they appeared to him. The LC could only ensure a change of ownership in land, how the land was used was the responsibility of the Minister for Agriculture. In the Dáil his comments on agriculture led to the suggestion from deputy Dillon of Fine Gael that if he wanted 'to be Minister for Agriculture, he should persuade the Taoiseach to make him Minister for Agriculture'.<sup>34</sup> Childers had not received competent advice because; in the opinion of deputy Dillon 'there is nobody in the Land Commission competent to advise him on agricultural matters'.<sup>35</sup> Childers's comments on agriculture were valid and even though lands and agriculture were two separate departments he commented on the facts as he encountered them. This sensible and logical approach to issues was adapted consistently by Childers during his political career, though not always to his advantage. His interest and arguments should have led Childers to propose the amalgamation of lands and agriculture, but he did not. Childers did suggest that the Department of Agriculture use the valuable experience gained by many of the LC Inspectors. A high proportion of inspectors had agricultural science degrees and had become skilled in public relations with farmers. Future policy should encourage greater co-ordination between the Departments of Lands and Agriculture. Childers cited areas such as marketing projects, technical instruction and general assistance to farmers to progress.<sup>36</sup> It was of course possible for the departments of lands and agriculture to exist independently; they had done so and would for many years after Childers term as minister.

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<sup>33</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol. 161, 24 Apr. 1957.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

Childers's statements on agriculture in relation to production can be justified. However, he was walking on very thin ice when he spoke of firm attitudes by the LC towards inefficient farmers who received land allocations. The issue of fixity of tenure entered the debate and Childers was warned that he was treading on dangerous ground. During his term as minister Childers demonstrated a lack of feeling and understanding of land and the mentality of the Irish farmer. Childers's upbringing could not be further from the life experience of small farmers in rural Ireland. In this respect Childers was an outsider. On most issues that Childers encountered during his political career being somewhat removed from particular circumstances would be an advantage. This allowed him to look objectively at a particular issue and propose a solution based on the information he had to hand. However, the Irish farmer and his land was not an issue that could be dealt with from the point of view of output; it was not just another industry. Childers's study of history, in particular Irish history, made him aware of the land struggle down through the centuries. However, being aware of circumstances and having an understanding of the feelings of a people are two very different issues.

On the question of land utilisation deputy Dillon, Fine Gael, asked Childers 'who is going to say what working it right is....the right user of land in this country is that user which will procure for the man who owns it under God and nobody else the best living for himself, his wife and his family'.<sup>37</sup> He was warned by deputy Dillon that 'our people will not stand for disruption of fixture of tenure....there is too much trying to undermine fixity of tenure in this country and in this House....there was a lot of blood spilt in this country in order to get the three F.s'.<sup>38</sup> Doubts around land security would have impacted on land improvements and investments which ironically Childers repeatedly called for. In the Dáil debate he was reminded by deputy Dillon that 'the best bank a farmer could have ought to be his land...if you once raise a doubt in his mind...not one penny of the savings will go into the land'.<sup>39</sup> Here again Childers crossed the line which divided the departments of land and agriculture. It was not likely that officials of the LC would wish to supervise the activities on lands which they allotted. It would have been the responsibility of

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<sup>37</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol. 161, 24 Apr. 1957.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

officials from the department of agriculture to assist those farmers in need of help. Childers never had the intention of introducing an element of insecurity into farming. The only thing he was interested in was the 'high output farm....higher output per acre, for more development on the land, for better profits for the people concerned'.<sup>40</sup> For Childers the future lay in large well run farms and according to Terence Dooley 'there was greater cabinet consensus than at any time before'.<sup>41</sup>

Childers had promised change to the LC systems and procedures and no doubt deputies expected announcements during his next estimate speech. In the meantime he continued his activities into the workings of the LC. He argued for young energetic farmers to be given an opportunity to get into farming and make a success of the LC efforts. The future of Ireland depended on the development of young, first-class scientifically minded farmers. This was not an unrealistic position for Childers to take. From the annual reports of the Minister for Agriculture it is clear that there was an education and training structure in place prior to and during Childers term as Minister for Lands. Under the section of the report dealing with agricultural education, a list of institutions is provided along with the courses offered and the total number of students registered. These institutions covered a wide geographical area and were either under the control of the Department of Agriculture or in the case of the university Colleges of Dublin and Cork, were in receipt of annual grants. Grants for agricultural education were also paid to private agricultural colleges and secondary schools. Agricultural training was continually developed with short term courses offered when and where necessary. All aspects of agriculture were covered from general courses in farming to very detailed and specific topics.

Whether Childers's many speeches and general encouragement had any direct impact on agricultural education and training is not easy to determine. However, statistics do show an increased participation by students in agricultural education and an increase in the number of agricultural schools both under the control of the Department of Agriculture and those in receipt of grants from the department during his term as minister. For example, in the year 1954-5, there were 186 agricultural schools under the department's control and 253 agricultural schools in receipt of

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<sup>40</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol. 161, 24 Apr. 1957.

<sup>41</sup> Terence Dooley, *'The land for the people': the land question in independent Ireland* (Dublin, 2004), p. 172.

grants from the department.<sup>42</sup> By the year 1959-60 these figures had increased to 220 and 397 respectively.<sup>43</sup>

Approximately 20,000 farmers and farm relatives were registered as unemployed in April 1957. Unemployment assistance played 'a considerable part in rural economy'.<sup>44</sup> The LC recognised that change was required and were in favour 'of establishing on the land an elite corps of young energetic married men with growing families so as to increase production and rejuvenate agriculture'.<sup>45</sup> Their definition of this elite corps included men not exceeding thirty years of age with at least two children, son of a farmer or farm labourer, with practical knowledge of farming and with some capital. The overriding problem of land settlement was according to Childers 'the absolute determination of the Irish people to seek quickly as near an English standard of living as possible'.<sup>46</sup> The LC had acquired over 1 million acres of land since 1923 with no great sign of universal agricultural resurgence since the war. A comparison with Danish agriculture showed that Irish farm income was about half that of their Danish counterpart per acre.<sup>47</sup>

Childers made observations on the current workings of the LC in relation to land allocation. Each year some 17,000 acres consisting mainly of badly used land was acquired but it was taking on average five and a half years to acquire an estate and to pay the owner. Of this great delay, the landowner was responsible for twenty-six months. In July 1957 the LC had 45,000 acres of land of which 22,000 acres were on its hands for more than two years. Such delays in allocations were an annoyance to small landowners, as they could not make decisions as to their economic future. Childers did not lay the blame for this problem with the LC, and said that 'the fault lies in the pressure exercised by successive Ministers to multiply the number of tasks carried out by Inspectors in a given period'.<sup>48</sup> Those who were allocated land were not contributing enough to economic expansion. Childers highlighted the issue of migrants and the fact that they were selected to ease re-arrangement difficulties rather

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<sup>42</sup> 24<sup>th</sup> Annual report of the Minister for Agriculture 1954-5, reference A20 0005 0002 G – 17991, p38.

<sup>43</sup> 29<sup>th</sup> Annual report of the Minister for Agriculture 1959-60, reference A20 0005 0002 G – 17986, p31.

<sup>44</sup> Childers report on the activities of the LC, 1 Jly. 1957 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9937/2).

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. see page 7 of the report.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

than for their farming competence. While admitting the excellent work done in re-arranging rundale holdings, he argued that the final result 'is not stemming emigration to the slightest degree'.<sup>49</sup> He quoted an example of how £25,000 was spent on a particular re-arrangement in County Mayo. The resultant holdings were still utterly uneconomic with some owners having let their units and emigrated to England. He suggested that the £25,000 could be more usefully spent to maintain families on the land, to educate, to improve farms or provide fertiliser subsidies. Childers highlighted social features in relation to land ownership that he considered required attention. Out of a sample of 5,000 holdings investigated permanent absentee tenants on farms of under £20 valuation represented, on average, 8.9% of the holdings.<sup>50</sup> An examination of seventy-three enlargements totalling 762 acres revealed that one allotment had been sold and nine others were let. These transactions totalled one hundred acres or 14% of the total area examined. Given these results it may appear somewhat unfair when Childers suggested that:

it is obviously right not to consider landless men on the present basis as experience has shown that the taking of continuous conacre is not by itself proof of good farm management and within its limitations the Land Commission selects tenants on the whole with care.<sup>51</sup>

The LC policy of setting up smallholdings was failing with the number of holdings between one and thirty acres falling by 17,426 between 1938 and 1955.<sup>52</sup> The National Farmers' Association (hereafter cited as the NFA) was against a policy of smallholdings that would not support the people at a standard that they had come to expect. Holdings of approximately fifty acres of good land or its equivalent of less good land would allow farmers to educate their children adequately so they could be efficient and progressive farmers.

Childers's thorough examination of the LC and the identification of necessary changes in the system led to little change within the LC process. Sammon stated in his

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<sup>49</sup> Childers report on the activities of the LC, 1 Jly. 1957 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9937/2).

Rundale is an ancient form of land division which allows access to the best land, water and provides common grazing for all. It allows subdivision of holdings to accommodate family. Plots or strips of land are scattered over a wide area and unfenced. Rearrangement was a function of the Land Commission whereby rundale holdings were amalgamated into one or two lots. Common in the north and west of Ireland, largely disappearing after the 1840s.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., taken from a memo. compiled by the National Farmers' Association dated 23 May 1957. This memo. is attached to page 14 of Childers report on the LC.



memoirs that ‘no great decisions of any real worth were taken by the minister’.<sup>53</sup> Childers was won over by civil servants to maintain the status quo. Childers failed to do what he promised in his first year in lands. Full of energy and enthusiasm he examined the land question in great detail and identified the shortfalls and injustices of the system as he perceived them. However it is one thing to identify an injustice; to correct it, if it can be corrected, is quite something else. Simply put, Childers failed to recognise early on that the limiting factor in solving many of the social problems associated with agriculture was the finite amount of land available for distribution. On the political front, Childers ideas for land allocation were negative and contrary to the traditional Fianna Fáil/ de Valera view of family farm holdings. Terence Dooley correctly states that up to the 1960s those individuals in Fianna Fáil, who favoured commercial farming, were not allowed to abandon the traditional form of land division.<sup>54</sup> It would have proved negative politically, something Childers did not quite grasp. Childers presented his second lands estimate for the year ended 31 March 1959 to Dáil Éireann in July 1958. He provided the customary statistics across the various activities of the LC for the past year and informed the Dáil that the new LC house design had been prepared. There was improvement in the time taken to allocate land but continued effort was required ‘to dispose of lands on hands’.<sup>55</sup>

However, Childers disappointed opposition deputies and those qualified farmers with no land who expected to hear announcements of policy changes within the LC. Childers’s speeches and statements made during the year would have led people to expect a new approach in the provision of land for landless men. This category included farmers’ sons who had worked the land but could not secure the necessary capital to purchase land. However LC policy was not changed with Childers telling deputies ‘that to include landless men, sons of farmers and cottiers among those qualifying for land....would simply add to our difficulties’.<sup>56</sup> Having gained agricultural experience, he was sympathetic towards these men but offered them no hope of securing land from the LC. Deputy Griffin, Fianna Fáil, reminded Childers that ‘a considerable number of these young men have no alternative but to

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<sup>53</sup> Patrick J. Sammon, *In the Land Commission, a memoir 1933-1978* (Dublin, 1997), p.55.

<sup>54</sup> Terence Dooley, *‘The land for the people’: the land question in independent Ireland* (Dublin, 2004), p. 202.

<sup>55</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.169, 3 July 1958.

<sup>56</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.170, 8 July 1958.

leave the country'. Deputy Tierney, Cumann na nGaedheal, stated that 'the present system of land division is completely wrong' and deputy Crotty, Fine Gael, severely criticised Childers stating that 'when he went in first, we heard a lot about his being young and energetic....there would be a big change. Instead of that, as far as we down the country see, he has done nothing'.<sup>57</sup> While the criticisms of Childers by opposition deputies could be explained as politics he nevertheless failed in his estimate speech to announce any significant changes to LC policy. The criticism of Childers in this regard is valid and he was forced to ignore his earlier statement that the system must change. Childers could do little for those farmers' sons who deserved land. He was criticised for not performing a miracle but his error was in promising land that was not there for distribution. What he did do was improve administrative routines and procedures but the fundamental policies of the LC remained unchanged. His ideas of transforming the LC failed to materialise despite his energetic and imaginative mind.<sup>58</sup>

Childers had virtually ruled out future allotment of lands to landless men not that they had received, stated Terence Dooley 'very much since the Emergency'.<sup>59</sup> Although Childers was premature in announcing radical change within the LC his eventual conclusion was one that did stand the test of time. The publication of T.K. Whitaker's *Economic Development* led to the Department of Agriculture emphasising increased cattle production which led to less land for division. From 1959 to 1973 no more than four landless people received land per year and only 1,376 acres was allotted to landless men during this period.<sup>60</sup> This confirms the reality that there was insufficient land for distribution.

During the 1958 estimate debate an issue not directly associated with the daily workings of the LC but of some significance to historians was raised in the Dáil. This was the issue of LC records and their preservation. While making his observations on the problems faced by the LC in acquiring abandoned farms deputy Dillon had one final comment to make:

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<sup>57</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.169, 3 July 1958.

<sup>58</sup> Patrick J. Sammon, *In the Land Commission, a memoir 1933-1978* (Dublin, 1997), p.57.

<sup>59</sup> Terence Dooley, *'The land for the people': the land question in independent Ireland* (Dublin, 2004), p. 172.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

The last thing I want to say to the Minister concerns a very important matter, but nobody gives a damn about it...the Land Commission has become one of the greatest treasure houses of social history outside the British Registry of Deaths...is there no means of collaboration with the National Library to get that treasure house of documents preserved or at least microphotographed?...the Minister would serve the country well if he could get the National Library to collaborate with him and microphotograph this material for posterity.<sup>61</sup>

In response, Childers assured the deputy that 'these documents are in good hands. Occasionally, they are consulted by research students...these historic documents are well cared for'.<sup>62</sup> Childers indicated that he would request the LC to approach the National Library for their view on deputy Dillon's proposal. It appears that Childers did not attach the level of importance to the LC archive as did deputy Dillon. This was not only extremely unfortunate but also very surprising. While Minister for Posts and Telegraphs Childers showed a deep concern for the preservation of Ireland's culture and heritage. He encouraged the recording of Irish songs and stories for future generations and was very aware of what could be lost forever.

Childers delivered his final lands estimate to Dáil Éireann for the year ended 31 March 1960 on 9 June 1959. He reported on the LC achievements and addressed issues that caused concern for his department. He reminded deputies that the LC would not be coerced by agitation whether it was peaceful or otherwise. On the issue of land purchased by non-nationals he assured the Dáil that such purchases were not significant. His speech was structured as in previous years with deputy Jones, Fine Gael, remarking that he had 'looked at the Minister's statement and the main facts in it are similar to what we found in previous years'.<sup>63</sup>

Childers failed to introduce any significant changes to LC policies but did work to improve the circumstances of those people aided by the LC. His plans for an improved type of house for migrants lead to the building of prototypes. However, the cost of the new house designs was considerably more than houses built to existing LC plans and were therefore rejected. In his own constituency of Longford-Westmeath Childers did have some positive moments as he announced government relief for farmers whose holdings were flooded due to their proximity to the river Shannon.

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<sup>61</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.169, 3 July 1958.

<sup>62</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.170, 8 July 1958.

<sup>63</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.175, 9 June 1959.

Childers proposed the migration of twelve people and the construction of new dwelling houses and farm buildings. Once more Childers was not prepared to play politics with the situation and entrusted the completion of the work entirely to the LC as part of its land settlement programme. He would not interfere in any way with the process of selection other than to ensure that it was carried out in an efficient manner. Inspectors called to the families involved and the LC decision was final.<sup>64</sup> Childers was adamant that he had no part to play in the decision process as to who should receive land or assistance from the LC. Having secured some relief for local constituents he removed himself from the situation which was not in keeping with the usual political process. This recurring theme of distancing himself from the electorate followed Childers throughout most of his political career but did not hamper his popularity on polling days. This contradiction can be explained with reference to Childers himself. He was perceived as honest and sincere. The electorate did not always agree with his actions but these were overlooked in favour of his diligence.

Childers's attempts to change LC policies had not been successful but he would, in the main, be judged by the electorate on how he handled issues they brought to his attention. Due to the numbers of people calling to see Childers to present their claims for land he found it necessary to explain the procedure used by the LC in the acquisition and allocation of land. Speaking at a Fianna Fáil convention in Moate, County Westmeath he stated that lands were allocated first to deserving tenants on the estate and where possible some land could be made available to former employees who were considered deserving of land. The selection process centred on uneconomic landholders within one and a quarter miles of the estate with competence in farming being one of the important conditions. Land was also made available to western migrants but landless men were not given land. Childers explained that landless men could only be given land following the results of an examination as the total number seeking land in the country 'was so great as to make ordinary selection impossible'.<sup>65</sup>

He also pointed out that he had no power to allot land and that the Land Commissioners were independent. Neither he nor any Dáil deputy had any influence

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<sup>64</sup> Childers speech to a meeting of Athlone Comhairle Ceanntair, 2 Dec. 1957 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers' Speeches 1957-60, MS GIS 1/59). There had been severe flooding in the area of the river Shannon for some years and Childers was referring to farmers in Offaly, Westmeath, Galway and Roscommon.

<sup>65</sup> *Westmeath Independent*, 25 January 1958. Report of speech by Childers to Fianna Fáil Convention in Moate, Co. Westmeath.

as they all received far too many representations from applicants. Childers explained that if he had the power to allot land he would not be able to distinguish between one application and another unless he himself became an inspector. He was not going to get involved in land distribution and supported the Dáil decision 'to take allotment of land out of the political arena'.<sup>66</sup> Childers was clearly stating his position as minister, as he did in his previous portfolio; he would not make representations to the LC on behalf of the electorate. He was criticised by deputy Flanagan, Fine Gael, in the way he 'deals with representations directed to him. It was the custom of all Ministers for Lands....to receive deputies, deputations from local committees and to hear the merits or demerits of the case which they had to put forward'.<sup>67</sup> Childers made it known that to receive deputations on issues of land acquisition and allocation would serve no useful purpose. He was not going to interfere with the workings of the LC, he could have met the deputations, but generally he did not.

Childers took a very tough line on land agitation, much to the anger of those demanding the acquisition and division of estates. This was a national and local problem for Childers. Speaking in Moate, County Westmeath, Childers made it very clear that land agitation 'would serve no purpose whatsoever'.<sup>68</sup> The pool of badly worked land was diminishing and Childers stated that the LC was not interested in well-worked land. Farmers, big and small, who were exercising good land practice, were assured that their property rights would be respected. This particular viewpoint was very contentious in the Midlands, as locals demanded that estates be taken over by the LC and divided out among them. Childers had to balance the rights of the landowners, big or small, with the demands of the small landholder and avoid the uncertainty that 'would hang over hundreds of estates, a most objectionable feature which could not be tolerated'.<sup>69</sup> This message no doubt registered with some as a sense of the ascendancy class looking after their own. Childers was not promoting the case of the large estate owner. Terence Dooley recounted an alleged incident in which

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<sup>66</sup> *Westmeath Independent*, 25 Jan. 1958. Report of speech by Childers to Fianna Fáil Convention in Moate, Co. Westmeath.

<sup>67</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.175, 9 Jun. 1959.

<sup>68</sup> Childers speech to a Fianna Fáil meeting in Moate, Co. Westmeath, 20 Jan. 1958 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers' Speeches 1957-60, MS GIS 1/59). There was considerable land agitation in the county during this period.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

a deputation was told ‘that the minister did not care who owned the lands as long as they were well worked’.<sup>70</sup>

The issue of the Boyd-Rochfort estate at Castletown in County Westmeath demonstrated the feelings of local people in the Midlands and Childers’s response to their agitation. A well-attended meeting in the area was held in July 1958 to impress upon the authorities the ‘advisability of dividing the Boyd-Rochfort Estate’.<sup>71</sup> The meeting was organised by the local land league and their intention was to have the estate acquired peacefully. A letter from Childers to the meeting made it clear that the acquisition and division of land was the sole responsibility of the LC and that he could not interfere. It had been his practice not to meet deputations from land leagues or attend their meetings. The LC had no grounds for the acquisition of the arable portion of the estate but the question of turbary was being dealt with. Childers’s views were completely opposite to those held locally and aired at the meeting. As reported in the *Westmeath Independent*, there was no reason why the estate should not be divided. Evictions had taken place in the past and ‘it was only right that the descendants of those who had been evicted, and uneconomic land holders in the area, should get land on this estate’.<sup>72</sup> There were 113 holdings under £15 valuation within one-mile radius of the estate. Emigration was a major concern locally and the proposed division of the estate was seen as a means of keeping many people in the area. The importance of strong agitation to have the estate acquired was stressed, but they would keep within the law. Responding to Childers’s views, Senator L’Estrange, Fine Gael, stated that it was the duty of the government to formulate policy and that there were valid grounds upon which to acquire and divide the estate.<sup>73</sup>

Childers warned that agitation would only result in delaying the LC’s decision and even result in them withdrawing completely from the acquisition. The LC did not ‘initiate proceedings against an owner who is and has been working his lands well’.<sup>74</sup> He also emphasised that the Constitution guaranteed equal treatment to all and that the State could not target certain individuals in a way that would leave doubt as to their

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<sup>70</sup> Terence Dooley, *The land for the people’: the land question in independent Ireland* (Dublin, 2004), p. 185.

<sup>71</sup> *Westmeath Independent*, 12 Jly. 1958.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> Childers speech to a Comhairle Dáil Cheanntair meeting in Mullingar, Co. Westmeath, 13 Jly. 1958 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers’ Speeches 1957-60, MS GIS 1/59).

security. Since the foundation of the State, it had been made clear ‘that all residents of the State must be treated with complete impartiality, particularly in matters concerning property’.<sup>75</sup> Much of the land agitation in the Midlands was blamed on the ‘lackadaisical policy of the Land Commission’.<sup>76</sup> While Childers could point to statistics that showed the amount of land acquired and distributed by the LC, the agrarian agitation was blamed on a department ‘which through unwillingness or inertia, refuses to budge, or move in the direction pointed out by the plain people’.<sup>77</sup>

Childers backed the policies of the LC and was justified in doing so. Commenting on the plight of the small land owner deputy Blowick, Clann na Talmhúain and former Minister for Lands, stated that ‘the small uneconomic landholder is not responsible for the fact that he has a small holding. He is not responsible for the fact that most of the land was given to 10,000 landlords during Cromwell’s time....subdivision of land took place that we are trying to remedy today’.<sup>78</sup> This sense of a sympathetic hearing for the small landholder was not entertained by Childers as minister. He made his decisions based on the policies of the LC. In doing so he could not be faulted in any way other than his ignoring the historical background. This is where Childers lacked sensitivity and a genuine feeling and understanding of the motives behind the land agitation. This lack of understanding would be paramount in defining his term as Minister for Lands.

Childers had demonstrated that he was standing behind the policies of the LC in relation to land acquisition and allotment. In early 1958 he decided to tackle the problem of representations to the LC in relation to land allocations. This was Childers’s biggest political blunder as it called into question his understanding of the Irish political process. At best it further questioned his understanding of land issues in Ireland and banished his prospects of ever securing the agricultural portfolio. In fact following his term in Lands, Childers was to spend some ten years in the Department of Transport and Power which did nothing to advance his political career. As Lemass watched on, Childers initiated a career ending proposal. He proposed to end the

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<sup>75</sup> Childers speech to a Comhairle Dáil Cheanntair meeting in Mullingar, Co. Westmeath, 13 Jly. 1958 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers’ Speeches 1957-60, MS GIS 1/59).

<sup>76</sup> *Westmeath Independent*, 30 May 1959. For a detailed account of land agitation in the Midlands see *Westmeath independent*, 9,16,23,30 May 1959; 6,13,20,27 June 1959; 25 July 1959.

<sup>77</sup> *Westmeath Independent*, 9 May 1959.

<sup>78</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.175, 9 June 1959.

practice whereby TDs made representations to the LC on behalf of constituents. According to Sammon, in early 1958, and not yet one year in Lands, Childers circulated a letter to all TDs making representations directly to the LC.<sup>79</sup> He stated that the selection of candidates for land allocation was the reserved function of the LC. Fianna Fáil TDs were, stated Sammon, up in arms with this situation, and following a party meeting Childers was forced to abandon his approach and revert to previous practice.<sup>80</sup> Childers believed that people had come to rely far too much on government assistance and in a belief that public representatives could provide solutions to all their problems. He used the LC issue as an example and although he could show from statistics that a very large proportion of those who received land had made no representations to the LC, he was forced to back down on this issue. It was true that deputies often recommended so many people for the proceeds of particular land divisions as to make the recommendations of no value. However, to suggest an end to the process of elected public representatives acting on behalf of constituents, no matter how futile the intervention, demonstrated political and social naivety on Childers part. It was one thing for Childers as minister to distance himself from the decisions of the commissioners but what he proposed contravened a key ingredient of the Irish political process, patronage politics. Lemass could not have been impressed.

Childers's position on the LC policy of not acquiring well run estates did not endear him to those farmers who believed that they were entitled to land allocations from local estates. This however was not the only difficulty that Childers had to confront in relation to potential land acquisitions by the LC. The relief of rural congestion was an ongoing process during the period Childers was Minister for Lands. However, not all land offered for sale was purchased by the LC or Irish citizens. Given Ireland's background and land history it seemed, stated Canon McCarthy, 'particularly unfair and anti-social that many of our bigger and best farms should be allowed to pass intact, by public and private sale, into the hands of new and oftentimes alien landlords and combines'.<sup>81</sup> Non-nationals, also described at that time as aliens, were buying land and property in Ireland and this was one of the land issues

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<sup>79</sup> Patrick J. Sammon, *In the Land Commission, a memoir 1933-1978* (Dublin, 1997), p. 126.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> *Westmeath Independent*, 12 Apr. 1958. Very Rev. J. Canon McCarthy, St. Peter's, Athlone. He was speaking at the Christus Rex Congress in Ballina.



which featured prominently in newspapers and Dáil debates. In the Dáil, questions to the Taoiseach on 21 November 1957 included one asking him to clarify government policy on this issue. His response was that under the Aliens Act of 1935, an alien, non-national, could acquire property in the same way as acquired by an Irish citizen.<sup>82</sup> Many of the properties acquired by non-nationals were expensive residential properties for which there was little Irish demand. This was also a period when the government was trying to attract foreign investment into Ireland and to adopt a restrictive policy on the acquisition of property by non-nationals would have been counter productive. The Taoiseach did state, however, that circumstances might arise when restrictions on such purchases, as distinct from the abolition of the right to purchase land, may be necessary.<sup>83</sup> Childers encountered similar questions in his previous portfolio and resolutely backed the non-national members of the radio orchestra. He would adopt the same position in relation to land purchases.

In February 1959, Roscommon County Council questioned the policy of the government in allowing the 2,000 acre Rockingham Estate, outside Boyle, to go on the market. They called on Childers to have the estate acquired by the LC to relieve congestion in the area and to ‘prevent it being purchased by aliens’.<sup>84</sup> The council suggested that the land be given back to the people who had a rightful claim to it. Farms close to the estate were in the Shannon Valley and subject to flooding, and this was also put forward as a reason to distribute the estate among local farmers. During question time in the Dáil Childers told deputies that the LC was unsuccessful in their attempt to purchase the estate.<sup>85</sup> The property was not suitable for compulsory acquisition and under the Land Acts non-nationals had to be treated on the same basis as all other landowners. If the new owners were not using the land in the best interest of the nation then the LC could acquire the land and use it for land settlement purposes. No matter who owned land it could be ‘taken by the Land Commission if it wants it for the relief of congestion’.<sup>86</sup>

This explanation did not satisfy local opinion and they questioned why the LC did not acquire the estate for relief of congestion. The Rockingham Estate comprised

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<sup>82</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.164, 21 Nov.1957.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *Westmeath Independent*, 21 Feb. 1959.

<sup>85</sup> *Westmeath Independent*, 7 Mar. 1959.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, Response by de Valera, Taoiseach.

some 2,400 acres with 950 acres of forestry and fully equipped sawmills. It also included a stud farm, Lough Key and its islands along with sporting rights over 40,000 acres of adjoining lands. The potential of this property for the tourist industry alone must have impressed Childers. The negotiations between the LC and the estate owners were on a voluntary basis and as such Childers would not disclose details of the LC offer for the estate. He went on to say that it was not the practice to publish any information in connection with unsuccessful negotiations 'where there is a question of compulsory sale to the Land Commission'.<sup>87</sup> The sale of the estate by public auction was scheduled to take place in Dublin on 5 May 1959. A special stamp duty of 25% was payable by non-nationals on the purchase of agricultural land but this held very little weight among the many thousands of small landholders.

As of February 1959 Childers was not concerned over the amounts of land purchased by non-nationals, the situation did not 'warrant any investigation'.<sup>88</sup> He assured the Dáil that further steps would be taken to discourage non-nationals from buying land required for the relief of congestion if circumstances required such action. During the period 1940 to 1950 non-nationals purchased an average of 5,000 acres per year.<sup>89</sup> From April 1957 to July 1959, purchases of agricultural land by non-nationals averaged roughly 2,100 acres per year.<sup>90</sup> The records showed that land purchased by non-nationals from 1961 to October 1963 was approximately 6,500 acres each year, about one-fifth of the total land purchased by the LC for relief of congestion.<sup>91</sup>

The controversial land issues that confronted Childers remained long after his term as minister. The findings of a joint committee of Macra na Feirme and the National Farmers' Association were sent to Lemass in 1963. The committee found that there was insufficient land in Ireland to meet the requirements of Irish citizens. Even so, large tracts of land were sold to non-nationals and they recommended that legislation be enacted to preserve the land of Ireland for the people of Ireland. The rate of transfer of farmers from uneconomic holdings to viable farm sizes could not solve the problem in the foreseeable future. They called for the LC programme on land transfer and structural improvements to be greatly accelerated. They also

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<sup>87</sup> *Westmeath Independent*, 28 Mar. 1959. Report on Dáil question time.

<sup>88</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.173, 25 Feb.1959.

<sup>89</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.205, 23 Oct.1963.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

concluded that increased production was necessary in farming so that income could be raised to a socially acceptable level as quickly as possible.<sup>92</sup>

Childers's interest in agriculture was expressed in the many speeches he delivered on the subject. He constantly spoke on the economics of agriculture and the need to increase production while keeping costs under control. At a cabinet meeting in 1958 de Valera suggested that Childers 'thought too much of the economics of farming and too little of the small farmer'.<sup>93</sup> This comment annoyed Childers and he reminded de Valera of previous memoranda on the position of the small farmer and that he had made an intensive study of the human problem in Longford. Childers's view of agriculture had changed from the position he adopted in the 1920s. Childers suggested that the West of Ireland could produce and export to Britain 'tens of millions of Pounds worth of early potatoes, vegetables and fruit products'.<sup>94</sup> What was needed, according to Childers was 'more scientific method and organisation'.<sup>95</sup> He wanted modernisation of farm methods and an increased use of fertilisers. Childers asked the question 'can we save the West and the small farm areas?'.<sup>96</sup> Childers reminded de Valera that everything he wrote about the need for an agricultural policy applied most urgently to the small farming areas. But therein lay the problem as de Valera saw it. Childers no longer dreamed of Ireland as a 'people who were satisfied with frugal comfort'.<sup>97</sup> Aware of the views of those who never considered him as Irish he stated that 'I am not speaking with a foreign outlook'.<sup>98</sup> He was an Irish citizen, but his understanding of Irish politics and in particular his sense of judgement in relation to land issues can be questioned.

Childers did not enhance his career prospects in Lands. His ambitions for land reform were flawed because he did not recognise early on in his term that there was not enough land available to meet the demands for land. He certainly did not demonstrate to Lemass that he was a potential Minister for Agriculture. His proposal to abolish representations from TDs to the LC on behalf of constituents showed

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<sup>92</sup> Joint committee report to Lemass, 21 Oct. 1963 (N.A.I., Department of the Taoiseach, MS 98/6/677).

<sup>93</sup> Memo. from Childers to de Valera, 29 May 1958 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9954/1).

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> J.J. Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985, politics and society* (Cambridge, 1989), p.334. Extract from de Valera's speech on St Patrick's day 1943.

<sup>98</sup> Memo. from Childers to de Valera, 29 May 1958 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9954/1).

political naivety and a lack of understanding of the political process. Childers was an administrator and man of principle. As he matured as a politician he learned to manage and manipulate situations to produce the desired outcome.

The land section of Childers's portfolio proved challenging with very little positive impact for Childers. Forestry presented Childers with a different challenge and he set about expanding the acreage under state forestry and in particular the development of private forestry. He saw the industry as providing a source of employment nationally, an investment for farmers and an indicator that Ireland invested its money wisely. Ireland had the lowest number of privately owned forests in Europe and Childers was determined to rectify this situation. Ireland's climate was favourable to tree growing and the possibility of associated industrial activity and the export of timber all seemed viable. Childers produced a detailed memorandum on afforestation as a national economic objective.<sup>99</sup> An adequate intake of plantable land was the most essential prerequisite to increasing the annual planting programme. The total area acquired in 1956-7 was 18,725 acres and Childers anticipated acquisitions totalling 25,000 acres in 1957-8.<sup>100</sup> Childers did not make the same mistake in dealing with forestry as he had done in his predictions in relation to lands. In relation to future acquisitions he told deputies 'whether it will be possible to maintain the acquisition rate at that level in future years is, of course, more open to question'.<sup>101</sup>

Childers was confident of maintaining the target level of 25,000 acres provided there was a market for the produce. The markets were available with Britain only able to provide 35% of its requirements. Europe and the United States were importers of wood products and in Ireland timber products to the value of ten million pounds per year were imported. Climate and yields were favourable for Irish timber production and much of the imported timber products could be produced in Ireland.<sup>102</sup> He advocated that timber production be organised on a sound economic basis with the government absorbing the short-term costs. The issue of finance in relation to Ireland's afforestation project would be crucial. Under normal economic standards, a project 'should be able to operate on borrowed capital and clear the capital and

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<sup>99</sup> Childers memo. on forestry, Feb. 1958 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9936/3).

<sup>100</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.161, 24 Apr.1957.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> Childers speech to Muintir na Tíre, Roscrea, Co. Tipperary, 14 Aug. 1958 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers' Speeches 1957-60, MS GIS 1/59).

interest charges thereon from the sale of the crops'.<sup>103</sup> However, with a long production cycle and high interest rates this model was not the most suitable, but Childers decided that 'there are good grounds for making the attempt'.<sup>104</sup> Presenting his first estimate on forestry to Dáil Éireann in April 1957 he emphasised the financial reality for the industry. Given Ireland's economic position he questioned 'whether this small country, with limited capital resources....can really justify a steadily increasing annual capital investment in afforestation'.<sup>105</sup> Forestry would have to compete for funding with for example agriculture, and Childers needed to be able to say that 'this is an investment that will employ more people eventually at an economic cost'.<sup>106</sup> There was no more easy money available and the forestry programme 'must be carried out at maximum output as a commercial undertaking'.<sup>107</sup> Childers undertook a complete examination of every phase of the forestry operation. People, he stated:

will not invest money in this country until they see widespread evidence that costs are being cut, scientific methods are being used....if the forestry work is carried out on commercial company lines they will say that this is a sound country to invest money because money is wisely invested and spent.<sup>108</sup>

He did not doubt the potential success of forestry but he had to consider the almost immediate returns if the capital invested in forestry was spent in other areas of national development. In 1957 the annual investment in forestry was close to two million pounds. His planting target would provide excess timber to domestic requirements and this would lead to additional exports. Childers concluded that 'there is a definite possibility that State Forestry will ultimately prove a sound national investment'.<sup>109</sup> Should there be a loss it would be small enough to justify the continued development of the forestry industry. Another possibility was 'revenue of substantial proportions (free of Capital Debt) could be anticipated in thirty-five to fifty years'.<sup>110</sup> Childers highlighted the potential gain in employment from forestry.

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<sup>103</sup> Childers memo. on forestry, Feb. 1958 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9936/3).

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.161, 24 Apr. 1957.

<sup>106</sup> Childers speech to Southwest Longford Comhairle Ceanntair, 1957 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers' Speeches 1957-60, MS GIS 1/59).

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Childers memo. on forestry, Feb. 1958 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9936/3). Underlined by Childers.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

Employment on forestry work had declined over the two previous years but based on planting 25,000 acres per year from 1959-60 onwards, Childers's employment calculations appeared attractive. His calculations indicated employment levels of 9,700 in 1958-9 increasing to 24,300 by 1998-9.<sup>111</sup>

State afforestation was progressing nicely but private tree planting showed little progress. For the year ended 31 March 1957 only 625 acres were planted privately. Childers was 'determined that there must be a really active campaign to secure more private planting....the House may rest assured that one of my main objectives....will be to secure a big increase in private planting'.<sup>112</sup> Childers's main difficulty was the one that he had faced in Lands, securing enough land to maintain the forestry programme. In the Dáil deputy Blowick advised Childers that 'nothing less than good financial help will induce farmers to plant trees'.<sup>113</sup> Forestry was a labour intensive industry and Childers could influence emigration from poorer areas through forest development. His deliberations at government level proved positive and he announced in the Dáil that 'the government has decided to double the grant for private planting, raising it from £10 to £20 an acre'.<sup>114</sup>

A campaign to promote private forestry was introduced with the assistance of rural organisations and forestry societies. Childers asked for 'the help of Muintir na Tíre in securing a massive increase in the level of private planting of trees'.<sup>115</sup> He assured the Dáil that farmers who planted waste land would not have their land rates increased as trees were considered as crops in determining land valuations. As an agricultural country development was planned over twenty to fifty years. The thousands of medium and larger sized farms had areas of cutaway bog or moor which was suitable for planting and which were producing little or nothing in their current state. The Department of Lands was for the first time charged with promoting private forestry as being of equal importance to State afforestation. Childers stressed the significance of trees as an investment. Properly planted, trees were 'a magnificent investment – as safe as any gilt-edged investment or bank deposit'.<sup>116</sup> Childers

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<sup>111</sup> Childers memo. on forestry, Feb. 1958 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9936/3).

<sup>112</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.161, 24 Apr. 1957.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.169, 25 Jun.1958.

<sup>115</sup> Childers speech to Muintir na Tíre, Roscrea, Co. Tipperary, 14 Aug. 1958 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers' Speeches 1957-60, MS GIS 1/59).

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

explained the financial returns in simple terms as follows. One acre of Spruce would yield a return of about one thousand two hundred pounds at intervals of over fifty years. This would provide an endowment for family members from what was unproductive and unused land. A keen outdoor activist, Childers's vision for the countryside included 'a tree studded horizon'.<sup>117</sup>

The forestry section of Childers's portfolio provided him with the opportunity to plan and implement a policy for the forestry industry. This was a period of appeals for greater production and increased exports across all areas of production. Childers envisaged the immediate and longer-term benefits of investments in forestry. Ireland's survival as an independent state depended on the maximum use of native resources. He viewed Ireland's land resource as vital to the campaign for survival: 'no land, absolutely no land, in the Republic capable of producing wealth and family security shall lie idle, apart from the lands that provide gardens and the ordinary social domestic and leisure time amenities'.<sup>118</sup> More land was required for forestry to maintain the programme's momentum. Childers always gained great pleasure when land was donated to his department for forestry. When the acreage was of considerable size he publicised the event and encouraged more donations to his department. Such a donation was made at Doneraile in County Cork. His speech at the event was published in local newspapers to encourage owners of land suitable for State afforestation to offer it to his department. Childers was referring here to the offering of larger areas of land not likely to be privately planted by the landowner. Useless land was a liability to owners as rates and annuities had to be paid on it. Those offering land to the department were 'playing a vital role in a work of great national importance'.<sup>119</sup> Childers's efforts in dealing with forestry issues were generally supported by deputies across all political parties. In reply to a question in the Dáil on the length of time he expected to plant 25,000 acres per year he speculated

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<sup>117</sup> Childers speech to forestry organisations, Shelbourne Hotel, Dublin, 21 Oct. 1958 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers' Speeches 1957-60, MS GIS 1/59).

<sup>118</sup> Childers speech to forestry organisations, Shelbourne Hotel, Dublin, 21 Oct. 1958 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers' Speeches 1957-60, MS GIS 1/59).

<sup>119</sup> Childers speech at Carker, Donnerile, Co. Cork, 24 Jan. 1959 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers' Speeches 1957-60, MS GIS 1/59). Childers was taking possession of 1,070 acres of land from Mr. William Evans for state afforestation.

‘for as long as I have the responsibility of the Department of Lands and Forestry which may be for quite a long time’.<sup>120</sup>

The Department of Fisheries completed Childers’s trilogy of responsibilities. Although not responsible for tourism at this time, Childers’s previous experience in this area aided his vision in the development of fisheries and the waterways in general. As usual, he undertook a comprehensive study of fisheries to ensure the preservation of fishing stocks and the continued development of the industry. In bringing the estimates before Dáil Éireann in June 1957 he reminded deputies that his short term in fisheries meant that he had not sufficient time to study the needs of the industry. He was however appalled ‘by the poor provision which has been made for the acquisition of technical knowledge by our fishermen’.<sup>121</sup> He was aware of the potential that lay in Irish waters but Ireland’s sea fishing industry was confined to inshore fishing. If Ireland remained an inshore fishing country, exports would increase a little and funds would continue to be expended on boats and minor improvements to harbours. However, this was not Childers’s vision for the future of Ireland’s fishing industry. His policy was centred on long term development of fisheries and he outlined to deputies the changes required so that Irish fishermen could ‘catch some more of the 206,000 tons of fish that are caught in Irish fishing grounds of which we catch 5.2 per cent’.<sup>122</sup>

To compete with the Spanish, English and French vessels, infrastructure, recruitment and training were required. Ports had to be developed, freeze and processing plants established and a marketing organisation established. An increase in fish consumption in the home market was required but it would not help Ireland’s economy ‘unless we can also link it with an export programme’.<sup>123</sup> There was a vast export market available with Britain alone importing thirty-three million pounds worth of fish annually.<sup>124</sup> An Bord Iascaigh Mhara was charged with the development of the sea fishing industry and Childers proposed that they ‘spend state aid in trying

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<sup>120</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.169, 25 Jun. 1958.

<sup>121</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.162, 4 Jun. 1957.

<sup>122</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.162, 19 Jun. 1957.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>124</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.169, 26 Jun. 1958.



out new markets....and in experimenting with new techniques in fishing and processing'.<sup>125</sup>

Private investment was in its infancy with Childers telling deputies that 'encouraging progress is being made by private enterprise in the development of the processing side of the industry'.<sup>126</sup> Programmes were put in place to train fishermen as skippers and to encourage new recruits to train as fishermen. Two fishing vessels were adapted as training vessels for new recruits. Despite considerable advertising the response was disappointing with 'only 24 applicants attended interview'.<sup>127</sup> The following year Childers reported that despite widespread publicity 'the response this year has been even less encouraging; only eleven candidates attended for interview'.<sup>128</sup> Childers had the opposite problem he faced in the Department of Lands. Ireland could not provide 'enough land to go round all who seek farms but we have sufficient coastline to accommodate thousands'.<sup>129</sup> Without fishermen and skippers the industry would not develop.

From an employment point of view Childers knew that 'in a developed fish industry up to 14 people are employed on shore for every one on a boat'.<sup>130</sup> Catching power, according to Childers, was another key element in the development of the fishing industry. Bigger fishing boats were required to successfully 'engage in fishing at greater distances from our coasts'.<sup>131</sup> Some deputies feared the destruction of the inshore fishing industry with the onset of bigger boats. However, Childers assured them that 'I have no intention of destroying the inshore industry'.<sup>132</sup> The grants provided by the government to assist potential buyers of boats were outlined by Childers during his 1959 estimate speech. Buyers received a grant of fifteen per cent of the cost price and the deposit a fisherman had to put down on a boat could be as low as five per cent of the cost price. Interest on borrowings to purchase boats was reduced to four per cent. However, bigger boats required fishery harbours and none of Ireland's harbours were developed as fishery harbours. Childers engaged an outside

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<sup>125</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.169, 26 Jun. 1958.

<sup>126</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.175, 4 Jun. 1959.

<sup>127</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.169, 26 Jun. 1958.

<sup>128</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.175, 4 Jun. 1959.

<sup>129</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.169, 26 Jun. 1958.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.175, 4 Jun. 1959.

consultant to recommend harbours for development and emphasised that the remaining harbours would not be neglected. The development of the sea fishing industry could not 'easily be accelerated'.<sup>133</sup>

The development of Ireland's inland waterways was entrusted to the Inland Fisheries Trust which was a voluntary organisation run by anglers. Childers encouraged all anglers to become members of the Trust. Their work was appreciated by the government and Childers increased their grant in 1958 to £20,000.<sup>134</sup> Childers recognised the contribution Ireland's inland waters made to tourism and the importance of the tourist industry to the national economy. Within inland fisheries the salmon export trade was 'vital to this country'.<sup>135</sup> In 1957 exports of salmon amounted to six hundred thousand pounds and this was separate from the value of the fishing industry as a tourist attraction.<sup>136</sup> Poaching, particularly of salmon had to be stopped in order to exploit the full potential of the salmon industry. He considered poaching as utterly irresponsible and 'he would have no mercy on poachers insofar as his limited responsibility was involved'.<sup>137</sup>

In the development of inland fisheries Childers advocated self-help at local level rather than government spending as the route to national success and prosperity. The concept of local self-help was a common theme throughout Childers's political career. He congratulated the Westmeath Vocational Education Committee for their co-operation with Bord Fáilte in sponsoring a boat building course for instructors of Vocational Education committees. Childers attended boat-launching events across the country and the programme of co-operation in building new boats was referred to by Childers as: 'one of the finest examples of co-operation and voluntary help towards bringing prosperity to their country'.<sup>138</sup>

He was particularly interested in sea angling development and for its success Ireland needed to control costs, be efficient, methodical, co-operate together, be hospitable and 'do a great deal of voluntary work in re-organisation'.<sup>139</sup> Sea angling

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<sup>133</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.169, 26 Jun. 1958.

<sup>134</sup> *Westmeath Independent*, 31 May 1958.

<sup>135</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.162, 19 Jun. 1957.

<sup>136</sup> Childers speech to the National Salmon Anglers' Federation, 23 Nov. 1957 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers' Speeches 1957-60, MS GIS 1/59).

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> *Westmeath Independent*, 9 Aug. 1958.

<sup>139</sup> Childers speech to Tralee Chamber of Commerce, 11 Jan. 1958 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers' Speeches 1957-60, MS GIS 1/59).

was generally unexplored at this time and Childers earnestly urged the formation of sea angling clubs in all coastal areas. He suggested that this form of angling, like any other, be exploited in a controlled and steady manner rather than an over-enthusiastic approach. Visiting anglers treated well and provided with good fishing would return to the area again and bring others with them. The government assisted by inviting groups of anglers to visit various fishing centres and the industry was adequately publicised in the market place.<sup>140</sup> However, he had no doubt that the success or failure of angling depended 'on the many angling and development associations which have been called into being and are still being formed'.<sup>141</sup> In a memorandum on inland fisheries Childers stated that 'of all the economic projects in the entire country, angling tourism probably showed the highest return and had one of the highest rates of expansion'. The government guaranteed the promotion of the inland fisheries programme but its success lay 'in the hands of the people'.<sup>142</sup>

Speaking at the Bord Fáilte angling exhibition in Dublin on 15 April 1958, Childers announced the establishment of a joint long term plan between Bord Fáilte and the Inland Fisheries Trust. It aimed at stocking rivers and lakes with suitable fish types and providing the necessary infrastructure of jetties and footpaths to improve access. Childers emphasised that the plan needed the support of every angler if a successful outcome was to be achieved. He demonstrated the enormous potential of angling to the Irish economy by reference to market availability. France, Belgium and Holland had some half a million-sea anglers each, and there were approximately three million coarse fishing enthusiasts in Britain.<sup>143</sup> Bord Fáilte estimated that within four years expenditure by anglers, Irish and foreign, would be a minimum of two million pounds. This revenue would provide thousands of jobs indirectly in addition to the five thousand people employed in the inland fishing industry. Local development was a key factor in the preparation of reports on the type of fishing available and an analysis of the accommodation available by categories. Provision of brochures and advertising would be necessary and Childers gave an undertaking that Bord Fáilte

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<sup>140</sup> Childers speech to Tralee Chamber of Commerce, 11 Jan. 1958 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers' Speeches 1957-60, MS GIS 1/59).

<sup>141</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.175, 4 Jun. 1959.

<sup>142</sup> Childers memo. entitled 'The Inland Fisheries Campaign (Part of the Programme for Economic Expansion)', 22 Jan. 1959 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9936/13).

<sup>143</sup> Childers speech to Bord Fáilte's angling exhibition in Dublin, 15 Apr. 1958 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers' Speeches 1957-60, MS GIS 1/59).

would advise and assist in this.<sup>144</sup> Local initiatives to provide additional fishing boats and generally improve fishing conditions were necessary to maximise the tourist potential from fishing. Childers cautioned against the false economy of high charges for boat usage by anglers and urged local organisations to co-ordinate the hiring of boats in an effort to reduce costs.<sup>145</sup> The tourist industry needed all the help it could get during this period. Fianna Fáil were ‘worried about the poor state of Irish tourism....only one new hotel had been opened since the foundation of the state’.<sup>146</sup> Childers would get an opportunity to make his contribution to the tourist industry later in his career.

Along with the varied challenges of his portfolio, other national issues arose during his term as Minister for Lands, Fisheries and Forestry. Nearing retirement, de Valera considered the future of Fianna Fáil and a change in the voting system appeared necessary to guarantee Fianna Fáil majorities. He proposed abolishing proportional representation and replacing it with the straight vote system. Despite his dependence on proportional representation for his political success Childers backed the introduction of the straight vote system. It is interesting to note Childers elections results from 1938 to his final general election campaign in 1973. Only once in his political career, his last election in 1973 was Childers first past the post. He was an example of a candidate who benefited enormously from proportional representation, yet he strongly advocated the straight vote system proposed by de Valera but defeated on 17 June 1959.<sup>147</sup> This contradiction, one of many in Childers long political career, is simply explained. Childers believed that the straight vote system would produce the best government for Ireland; a Fianna Fáil one. A man of high principles he advocated the straight vote system because he considered it the best system. Throughout his political career Childers made decisions that cast doubts on whether he ever was a politician at heart.

Childers explained the proposed new system as simply as he could. At the polling booth ‘the elector would have one vote to cast for one candidate. Any number

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<sup>144</sup> Childers speech to Bord Fáilte’s angling exhibition in Dublin, 15 Apr. 1958 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers’ Speeches 1957-60, MS GIS 1/59).

<sup>145</sup> Childers speech to the Dublin Rotary Club and at a boat launching at Loch Gowna, Co. Cavan, 19 May and 5 Jun. 1958 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers’ Speeches 1957-60, MS GIS 1/59).

<sup>146</sup> Gary Murphy, ‘From economic nationalism to European Union’ in Brian Girvin and Gary Murphy (eds), *The Lemass era* (Dublin, 2005), p.31.

<sup>147</sup> J.J. Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985, politics and society* (Cambridge, 2001), p.331.

of candidates could be nominated. The candidate receiving the largest number of votes would be elected'.<sup>148</sup> However, in his political career to date Childers was never first past the post. This was another contradiction in the political career of Childers. From 1932 to 1957 the opposition parties were convinced that de Valera alone held the vote and that the party would collapse without him. With de Valera and the older leaders of all parties retiring gradually Childers questioned the pessimism from Fine Gael and other parties on the proposed change to the voting system.<sup>149</sup> He concluded that the fear was borne out of the fact that Fianna Fáil had devised every creative and imaginative plan and that Fine Gael had incorporated whole sections of Fianna Fáil policy. The opposition to the straight vote lay in the assumption that only Fianna Fáil would benefit from this system. However he discounted this by saying that any new group of candidates with new ideas on how to develop the economy could appeal to the electorate.<sup>150</sup> Childers assured workers that they had nothing to fear from the proposed change and in every country using the straight vote system there were positive changes in social services. Despite his election record Childers was confident in his own ability and his appeal to his constituents. Childers now in his fifties, was still a relatively young man and was excited by the challenge of future political undertakings and changes.

However, to develop his political career Childers needed to appeal to the Fianna Fáil leadership, especially Lemass. He continued to show political naivety and appeared not to have benefited from his previous experiences. This is clearly demonstrated in his letter to Lemass on 19 March 1959. Rather than exercise some degree of caution Childers had to 'state some opinions about the present political situation in view of the changes that will be taking place in the course of the next twelve months'.<sup>151</sup> Lemass soon to be Taoiseach was accustomed to receiving detailed memoranda from Childers. Lemass was a man of action and preferred to receive a one page memorandum direct and to the point rather than several pages of analysis and comparison. Childers's own views would no doubt have been welcomed by Lemass

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<sup>148</sup> Childers speech in Portlaoise, 7 Jun. 1959 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers' Speeches 1957-60, MS GIS 1/59).

<sup>149</sup> Childers speech in Moate, Co. Westmeath, 13 Mar. 1959 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers' Speeches 1957-60, MS GIS 1/59).

<sup>150</sup> Childers speech to Tallaght, Dublin Comhairle Ceanntair meeting, 8 Apr. 1959 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers' Speeches 1957-60, MS GIS 1/59).

<sup>151</sup> Childers letter to Lemass, 19 Mar. 1959 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9954/76).

but he did not impress Lemass when he acknowledged that ‘I am only emphasising what obviously are your own views many times expressed’.<sup>152</sup> Childers’s enthusiasm somehow blocked out the message Lemass had previously given him. Lemass wanted solutions not a revised presentation of problems no matter how well argued and presented. What he certainly did not want was a rehash of his own ideas.

Childers’s term as Minister for Lands, Fisheries and Forestry can not be regarded as spectacularly successful. His undoubted successes in fisheries and forestry were overshadowed by his record in lands. Lands was the central and key aspect of his portfolio. This was somewhat of a crossroads in Childers’s political life. De Valera retired from active politics in 1959 and was succeeded as Taoiseach by Lemass. De Valera had taken Childers under his wing on his return to Ireland in 1931 and launched his political and ministerial career. Childers’s political future now lay in the hands of Lemass whose style of leadership was very different to that of de Valera. No doubt Childers wondered if he would retain his current portfolio or perhaps fulfil his ambition and be appointed Minister for Agriculture.

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<sup>152</sup> Childers letter to Lemass, 19 Mar. 1959 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9954/76).

## Chapter 4

### What price solvency? Minister for Transport and Power, 1959-69

With de Valera's retirement from politics in 1959 many felt that Fianna Fáil would not flourish without his presence. However, the new Taoiseach, Seán Lemass, provided the link with the past having followed de Valera into constitutional politics. As Minister for Industry and Commerce and Minister for Supplies during the years of the emergency he gained a reputation for ruthless efficiency. Lemass was one of the principal architects of Fianna Fáil's constituency organisation and was responsible for the revival of the party after the defeat in 1948. With 'an almost instinctive understanding of economic problems....the new Taoiseach was admirably equipped to preside over a period of rapid expansion'.<sup>1</sup> The Irish economy grew 'at an unprecedented rate during the 1960s'.<sup>2</sup> Finance minister Jim Ryan forecast a rise in population and by December 1962 Lemass could tell the Dáil that in many industrial occupations there was a scarcity of workers. The contrast between de Valera and Lemass in conducting business is revealing. De Valera engaged everyone around the table whereas Lemass 'was more direct in handling government meetings'.<sup>3</sup> This was a period of immense change and Brian Girvin correctly states that Lemass transformed the state during his period as Taoiseach, a transformation that he had been planning since the post-war period. According to Girvin the important point about Lemass was that he was 'willing to give the leadership that de Valera so patently did not'.<sup>4</sup> The Lemass era lasted from June 1959 to November 1966; it was a period of profound change. The 1960s were, stated Cormac Ó Gráda 'Ireland's golden age'.<sup>5</sup> However, this period was not golden for Childers personally and the development of his political career.

While the Fianna Fáil party did not face a crisis with de Valera's departure, Childers's political career did not prosper under the new Taoiseach, Seán Lemass. The contrast in styles between the two men was illustrated in a letter from Childers to Lemass dated 21 October 1960. In the letter Childers suggested that statistics would

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<sup>1</sup> F.S.L. Lyons, *Ireland since the famine* (London, 1973), p.584.

<sup>2</sup> Cormac Ó Gráda, *A rocky road: the Irish economy since the 1920s* (Manchester, 1997), p.29.

<sup>3</sup> J.J. Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985: politics and society* (Cambridge, 2001), p.388.

<sup>4</sup> Brian Girvin and Gary Murphy (eds), *The Lemass era: politics and society in the Ireland of Seán Lemass*, (Dublin, 2005), p.11.

<sup>5</sup> Cormac Ó Gráda, *A rocky road: the Irish economy since the 1920s* (Manchester, 1997), p.29.

show that the opposition were incorrect in asserting that Fianna Fáil policy was forcing small farmers to emigrate and wondered if ‘you would like to make use of it rather than myself’.<sup>6</sup> The reply from Lemass showed the different styles and approaches of both men. Lemass acknowledged Childers’s letter and continued:

I do not think that there is much to be gained by entering into a statistical battle regarding its intensity. There is no question that it is much too high, and what the public will want will be evidence of determination to relieve the causes of it rather than the fluctuations in its incidence.<sup>7</sup>

What the public wanted, indeed what was expected of politicians by the public, was not always apparent to Childers. He was divorced from grassroots politics and was not taken entirely seriously by some as a politician. As Garret Fitzgerald noted during his interview with the author, this was ‘especially true in the case of Lemass’.<sup>8</sup> Not well equipped for politics, Childers’s hard work and integrity did not produce the effective outcome due to what Garret Fitzgerald has described as ‘his remoteness from politics’.<sup>9</sup> Childers was an efficient administrator but longwinded; Lemass was one of de Valera’s ablest ministers who got things done and was very impatient. Yet Childers was popular with his constituents and was very aware of the power of communications and propaganda when he had responsibility for the broadcasting service. This apparent contradiction in Childers can only be explained by recognising that he knew the value of communications to his party but could not apply this to his own career. Leaving aside party and family considerations, Childers’s personal popularity with his constituents is somewhat difficult to explain. Childers’s work ethic and the many meetings he addressed made a positive impact with the electorate. He was different in many ways from his party colleagues and this also appealed to the electorate. Childers did not have the charisma of Jack Lynch or the mystique of de Valera but he did have a relationship with the electorate that survived even when Fianna Fáil as a party failed at the polls.

Childers’s term as Minister for Lands had not been particularly successful and not surprisingly he did not secure the agriculture portfolio. Jack Lynch succeeded Lemass at the Department of Industry and Commerce and he quickly realised that the

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<sup>6</sup> Letter from Childers to Lemass, 21 Oct. 1960 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9954/8).

<sup>7</sup> Letter from Lemass to Childers, 26 Oct. 1960 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9954/9).

<sup>8</sup> Garret Fitzgerald interview with the author, 20 Dec. 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.



department was responsible for far too many semi-state bodies. As a result Lemass formed a new Department of Transport and Power and appointed Childers as minister. This new department established on 27 July 1959 had responsibility for semi-state companies in the transport and power sectors. These companies included Coras Iompair Éireann, Aer Lingus, Electricity Supply Board and Bord na Móna. While there is no evidence to show Childers's feelings towards his new portfolio he could not have been impressed with a body of work that was discarded by the Department of Industry and Commerce. Although this was an important portfolio Childers was effectively a voice for the semi-state companies. His portfolio was expanded with the transfer of responsibility for tourism from the Department of Industry and Commerce to Childers in October 1961 and his additional appointment as Minister for Posts and Telegraphs in 1966. The diversity of Childers's portfolio is testament to his abilities as an administrator but it nevertheless was a mixed bag and could not be viewed as a progression of his political career. He was maturing into the political process and the experience he gained over his many portfolios would finally come together during his term as Minister for Health.

This chapter focuses on the controls available and exercised by Childers over the semi-state companies as he had little or no input into the daily workings of the semi-state companies. However, with responsibility for transport Childers had to handle the very emotive subject of uneconomic rail closures and this is examined in some detail. His handling of this issue demonstrated that Childers used the available legislation to avoid questions and proposals from opposition deputies and the general public. This is not to say that he hid behind the legislation; in the case of the railway closures he genuinely felt that line closures was the correct solution. His stance in this instance is one which can be traced right through his political career. While Minister for Lands he ignored calls from farmers with small holdings to divide estates among them. The Land Commission did not interfere in well run estates. While this was Land Commission policy it could also be argued that Childers conveniently used this policy to avoid dealing with the grievances of small farm holders. However, from Childers's point of view the issue was one of land utilisation and productivity; it did not matter who owned the land as long as it was worked to its maximum potential. In both

examples Childers was correct in principle but should have been aware of what the public expected of him. Once again Childers showed his lack of understanding and appreciation of the dynamics of grassroots politics. Childers was informed and aware of the issues but did not appreciate how emotive the issues were to the public.

The transfer of responsibility for tourism in 1961 enthused Childers and his handling of this familiar sector will be reviewed in some detail. Childers renewed his interest in broadcasting with his appointment as Minister for Posts and Telegraphs in 1966 for the second occasion. The ongoing development of the telephone system proved to be one of the highlights of his second term as Minister for Posts and Telegraphs. Outside of his direct ministerial responsibilities the most challenging issue for Childers during this period was his decision to leave Longford-Westmeath and move to Monaghan in 1961. This was a difficult decision for Childers and some of the issues surrounding his move to Monaghan are explored.

As this was a new department Childers was questioned at some length in the Dáil as to his responsibilities and powers as Minister for Transport and Power. Deputies were aware that Dáil Éireann had no authority to probe into the administrative routines of semi-state companies. These companies now had a minister responsible for their actions and deputies queried Childers on the issue of his authority to examine the running of semi-state companies. Did he have this power and if so would deputies be able to question him and get answers to their queries? In presenting his first estimate in the Dáil, Childers was informed by deputy McQuillan, National Progressive Democrats, that he did not ‘propose to subscribe one penny towards your salary until I know what you are going to be paid to do’.<sup>10</sup> This was not an unreasonable approach given that the Minister for Lands had ‘very little power. Are we now to appoint another Minister in charge of transport and power who will have as little responsibility?’.<sup>11</sup> Although deputy McQuillan did not directly state that he was referring to Childers in his lands reference this was in fact the case. Childers did have responsibility and power while in Lands, his problems arose mainly due to the insufficient volume of land for distribution. His limiting factor was acreage not power.

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<sup>10</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.178, 09 Dec.1959.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

In his reply to the Dáil Childers observed that it had been the ‘established tradition that the Minister does not interfere with the day-to-day working of state companies’.<sup>12</sup> Childers assured deputies that if a situation arose where he felt it correct to inquire into the workings of any state company then he would do so. He believed that it was impossible to devise a set of rules which would define the relationship between a minister, members of the Dáil and a state company. He did however outline his powers and methods of control in dealing with state companies. He examined general policy, financial position and how the companies affected the economy as a whole. New policies were issued when required and discussions involving adequacy and efficiency of the services were ongoing. The Dáil had the opportunity to comment on pieces of legislation as they progressed through the system and ‘there is also the debate on the annual estimate on which a number of matters can be raised’.<sup>13</sup> In answering questions on the lack of control of state companies Childers responded:

The minister exercises very definite control through the appointment of members of the board....accounts of each of these companies are subject to scrutiny in my Department....there is very close contact between the minister, his department and the higher officers of the boards of these companies.<sup>14</sup>

Childers regarded it as his duty ‘to see that in the overall plan of a company a reasonable balance of interests is maintained’.<sup>15</sup> He was always firm on the issue of daily interference in the operations of state companies. The whole purpose of creating such a company would be lost ‘if the directors and operatives of the companies felt that from week to week they could be constantly interfered with’.<sup>16</sup> Childers’s presentation of the yearly estimates in the Dáil followed the same pattern year after year. He outlined the workings and achievements of the state companies in great detail and responded to as many questions as he could without interfering or causing unnecessary difficulties for the management teams of the state companies. In reality Childers was but a voice for the semi-state companies who were controlled by their management teams. The number of semi-state companies and their diversity of

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<sup>12</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.178, 09 Dec.1959.

<sup>13</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.191, 13 Jly. 1961.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.207, 25 Feb.1964.

<sup>16</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.191, 13 Jly .1961.

activities made it impossible for Childers, or any minister, to have any direct input into the daily operations of these companies.

However as a matter of general policy Childers believed that all subsidies should be discontinued as quickly as possible and that the transport companies should pay their way. He set out his strategy for Irish transport early in 1960. The taxpayer should not be asked to subsidise 'the running costs of any form of public transport because there is great amplitude of transport facilities'.<sup>17</sup> This sentiment was no doubt genuinely felt by Childers, but it also strengthened his stance for the closure of the uneconomic railways. However his comment on state companies to the Dáil in July 1961 raised an issue which supported the retention of uneconomic railways. Replying to a question from deputy McGilligan, Fine Gael, Childers declared that state companies 'taken as a whole, are successful undertakings, and that the capital invested by the State can be fully justified from the economic and social standpoint'.<sup>18</sup> On the issue of investment in public transport deputy Treacy, Labour, commented that 'it is reasonable to suggest that a transport service of this kind in most other countries is not a paying proposition. It was taken over here because it was not a paying proposition....it was an essential public service which must be maintained'.<sup>19</sup> However, Childers ignored the social aspect when he steadfastly supported the closure of uneconomic railways despite arguments from communities and deputies on the grounds of social necessity. From his time working in Paris he would have been aware of the necessity to meet every requirement of the tourist and the development of the rail system would have been positive for tourism. The Transport Act of 1958 empowered Coras Iompair Éireann (hereafter cited as CIE) to close uneconomic railways and Childers used it to support his position. From a purely economic point of view the process was justified but Childers ignored the social dimension and did not envisage the retention of the railways as an asset in building rural communities and aiding tourism.

Speaking in Cork in October 1960 Childers stated that modernised railways were and would be for the foreseeable future an essential component of the transport system. He considered rail transport particularly suited to long distance travel but that

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<sup>17</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.182, 08 Jun. 1960.

<sup>18</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.191, 13 Jly.1961.

<sup>19</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol. 198, 29 Nov.1962.

the railways needed to be tailored to conditions prevailing at that time. Childers was obviously not compiling his notes at this time on the future requirements of Irish transport. Focusing on the economics of rail operation he was determined not to persist 'in running at a loss services by rail which can, with equal satisfaction, and indeed, perhaps, with greater convenience to the public, be operated with profit by road'.<sup>20</sup> The theme of regional and local organisation was favoured by Childers and can be found throughout his ministerial portfolios. In keeping with this theme, Childers oversaw the process of decentralisation within CIE. A major reorganisation of the Board's management was introduced during 1960-1 when 'a policy of decentralisation was implemented whereby much of the direct responsibilities for the Board's operations was delegated to 5 Area Managers located at Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Waterford and Galway'.<sup>21</sup> The primary aim was to set up a relatively autonomous local management to improve customer service, increase sales and make most effective use of personnel and rolling stock.

A keen outdoor person and having walked almost every hill in Ireland, it would not be unreasonable to expect Childers to champion the cause of rural Ireland. Instead, it appeared that in relation to the railway line closures he was concerned with the economics of the issue ignoring the present and future social results of his actions. In the past de Valera accused Childers of caring too much on the economics of farming and not enough on the farmer. CIE was free to close the uneconomic lines and Childers saw no use in local interests requesting postponement. In reply to questions in the Dáil on the closure of the Claremorris-Ballinrobe railway, Childers set out his position, which he stuck to rigidly:

The Transport Act, 1958, empowers CIE to terminate any particular train service provided the Board is satisfied that its operation is uneconomic and that there is no prospect of its continued operation being economic within a reasonable period. This means, in effect, that the fate of any particular line or station must depend on whether sufficient public support is given to it to justify its retention. I should make it clear that under the Act I have no function in the matter.<sup>22</sup>

In this statement Childers was correctly passing all responsibility over to CIE but it was uncharacteristic of him not to at least consider future prospects and expectations.

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<sup>20</sup> Childers speech in Cork, Oct. 1960 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9966/717).

<sup>21</sup> Taken from notes on state companies, Feb. 1944 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9938/23).

<sup>22</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.178, 10 Dec.1959.

In previous portfolios Childers was accused of sheltering behind legislation, policies and committees to avoid confrontation. Childers removed the emotive issues from the situation and made his decision on the facts available to him. He was consistent in his approach; whether or not he was correct was another matter. Wherever CIE decided to close rail lines there was local opposition from all sections of the community. The closing of the West Cork Railways, for example, demonstrated the feeling of anger generated in communities. Childers as minister was often by-passed by the local community with letters posted directly to Sean Lemass. One such letter to Lemass accused him of killing off a whole community and pleaded with him not to 'act Pilate in the death of our area'.<sup>23</sup> Letters were also addressed to Áras an Uachtaráin requesting the president meet a delegation on the proposed closing of the rail lines. However, this was refused, as it was not a matter the president could comment upon.<sup>24</sup>

Pressure was also brought to bear on Childers and Lemass by local people living abroad. In December of 1960 Edward McCarthy, a native of Bantry, living in the Sudan wrote to Lemass and included an article, which he forwarded to the *Southern Star* newspaper. In the article McCarthy made the case for leaving the rail lines open and downplays the total economic focus argued by Childers. McCarthy's opening paragraph asks 'if Mr Lemass's little finger were one day crippled, would he cut it off because it was no longer of any use to him? Or would he not rather have it treated, at great expense even, in order to make it function again normally?'<sup>25</sup>.

In the Dáil, Childers was questioned on the employment consequences of closing the West Cork railway. His answers produced all the necessary facts, but there was no mention of the social consequences of the closures. All those made redundant would receive redundancy compensation and CIE was discharging their responsibilities as directed in the Transport Acts. When questioned as to the suitability of the roads to take the additional traffic due to the rail closures, Childers response

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<sup>23</sup> Letter from J.P. O'Regan to Lemass, 7 Jan. 1961 (N.A.I., Dept. of the Taoiseach, MS S8090B/61). See also Dept. of the Taoiseach, reference S8090B/2/94 for replies from Childers to West Cork Development Association and Cork County Council explaining the economic factors for closing the rail lines. Childers responses on other rail closures can be had from Dept of the Taoiseach files references S8090B/3/63 and 96/6/192. The economic theme remains the same.

<sup>24</sup> Letter from Fergus Williams to Áras an Uachtaráin, 31 Jan. 1961 (N.A.I., Dept of the Taoiseach, MS S8090B/61).

<sup>25</sup> Letter from Edward McCarthy to Lemass, 25 Dec. 1960 (N.A.I., Dept. of the Taoiseach, MS S8090B/2/94). The article was published in the *Southern Star* on 7 Jan. 1961.

was: 'I have no direct responsibility for the roads'.<sup>26</sup> This was the easy way out for Childers; the fact was that the roads were not designed to take the additional traffic generated as a result of rail closures. The concerns within the political system were echoed when Lemass wrote to Childers suggesting that he briefly intervene in the following week's debate on CIE closures. He requested information that Childers was preparing for his own use and also wrote to the Minister for Lands, Forestry and Fisheries requesting information about activities of that department in the West Cork area.<sup>27</sup> Childers supplied detailed notes and statistics for Lemass on the rail closure debate and in a letter to Lemass stressed that 'not even the most unused rail line would close if petitions were accepted as a valid reason for maintaining the line open'.<sup>28</sup> Childers's statistics on the West Cork railway line included passenger numbers, tonnage carried by category and the stations connected with the closure. A point at the end of his notes stated that 'we have received no undertaking from any agricultural society, industrial undertaking or merchant that we will be given new business if the line is left open'.<sup>29</sup>

There was no possibility of generating new business in the future or supporting the development of local communities with Childers's economic approach to the closing of railways. A feature of Childers's political career was his desire for local development and involvement in issues. Childers believed strongly in a community doing all it could for its own area and interests. This theme of self-help coupled with state assistance was echoed by Childers when he was in charge of forestry and fisheries. Rail closures occurred because they had not received sufficient local support to maintain them in operation. This was true at a point in time, but Childers's position contradicted his previous desire for a partnership approach in developing local projects. In relation to the closing of rail lines he failed those very communities with his narrow economic perspective.

Childers had no difficulty in defending his position. The responsibility for deciding whether to close any particular railway was 'vested solely in CIE'.<sup>30</sup> The

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<sup>26</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.186, 9 Feb 1961.

<sup>27</sup> Letter from Lemass to Childers, 9 Feb. 1961 (N.A.I., Dept. of the Taoiseach, MS S8090B/61).

<sup>28</sup> Letter from Childers to Lemass, 11 Feb. 1961 (N.A.I., Dept. of the Taoiseach, MS S8090B/61).

<sup>29</sup> Childers memo. entitled 'Notes on Taoiseach's queries', 11 Feb.1961 (N.A.I., Dept. of the Taoiseach, MS S8090B/61).

<sup>30</sup> Childers notes on the closing of uneconomic rail lines, 11 Feb. 1961 (N.A.I., Dept. of the Taoiseach, MS S8090B/61). Point 1.

1958 Transport Act had the full support of all parties when it was being enacted. Despite subsidies from the exchequer CIE was losing one million six hundred thousand pounds per year up to 1956.<sup>31</sup> In 1956 the Beddy Committee was established to inquire into internal transport. The government generally accepted its report in 1957 and its recommendations included a reduction in the mileage of rail lines from one thousand nine hundred and eighteen to eight hundred and fifty miles.<sup>32</sup> The important issues in public transport were 'not the closing of some hopelessly uneconomic branch lines but the imminent prospect of complete solvency'.<sup>33</sup> The 1958 Transport Act was based on the 'general principle that there is no special merit in a rail service as such and that the objective is to establish the most efficient widely used type of public transport in each area'.<sup>34</sup> Speaking at the Annual General Meeting of the Irish Tourist Association in 1961 Childers stated that tourists came to Ireland partly 'because Ireland had a distinctive character free from oppressive density of traffic'.<sup>35</sup> However, Childers's actions did not support the continuance of low density of traffic. He failed to realise that communities would grow and that the road congestion would spread across the country.

In a letter to the general secretary of Fianna Fáil Childers continued to argue for rail closures: 'nowhere in Europe are railways being maintained that carry such a trifling amount of traffic'.<sup>36</sup> By 1963 some 621 miles of rail line had been closed. Childers argued that there was no evidence that a growth in the national economy would necessarily bring a proportionate share of the additional traffic to the public transport system. However, the 'huge increase in private car numbers and the large increase in the number of heavy private lorries' did not appear to have registered with Childers as something that needed his foresight and thought.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Childers notes on the closing of uneconomic rail lines, 11 Feb. 1961 (N.A.I., Dept. of the Taoiseach, MS S8090B/61). point 3.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., point 4.

<sup>33</sup> Childers notes on the closing of uneconomic rail lines, 11 Feb. 1961 (N.A.I., Dept. of the Taoiseach, MS S8090B/61).Points 19-20.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., page 18.

<sup>35</sup> Childers speech to the Irish Tourist Association, Dublin, 19 Oct. 1961 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers' Speeches 1961-3, MS GIS 1/61).

<sup>36</sup> Letter to general secretary of Fianna Fáil from Childers, 1 Mar. 1962 (U.C.D.A., Fianna Fáil archives MS P176/84).

<sup>37</sup> Childers speech to the Institute of Transport, Dublin, 17 Dec.1963 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers' Speeches 1963, MS GIS 1/62)..



Childers's support for the closing of uneconomic railways and his policy of non-interference in the selection process by CIE brought criticism from Dáil deputies. Deputy Casey, Labour, suggested 'that there is no need for a Minister for Transport and Power'.<sup>38</sup> Childers refused to meet deputations in his previous portfolio and also refused to meet a deputation concerning the closure of the West Cork railway line, referring them back to the board of CIE. Childers was correct in principle but his action can be interpreted as politically naïve. Naïve in the sense of what the public expected from their public representatives. Another politician in Childers's position would have seen the benefits in meeting such deputations, irrespective of its impact on the final outcome. Childers time and time again showed his complete rejection of the back-slapping approach to politics. In 1966 deputy Dunne, Labour, reminded Childers of the social aspect of CIE and that profit should not have been the primary consideration but 'it has been the primary consideration of his whole approach to CIE. The question of whether a branch line should exist or be put out of existence depended entirely on whether it was making or losing money'.<sup>39</sup>

In 1961 Childers forecast what Irish transport requirements were likely to be in 1970 and made some general assumptions. Among these were, the world would grow richer by 1970 and the desire to travel would grow. In the area of air services he predicted the development of a low cost short-haul aircraft which should lead to more economy in air travel. Due to the predicted increase in travel, additional hangars and a doubling of Dublin Airport terminal and apron would be required by 1970. Extensions to the conveyor system for baggage would be required and computers would control the complete ticket reservation system. On the economics of air transport, an important consideration was the relationship between the cost of travel and the income levels of potential travellers. Childers predicted the development of small airfields in the vicinity of larger provincial towns or in suitable production areas. These were for the future as the needs arose to meet export or tourist requirements.<sup>40</sup> Although actual evidence has not been located by the author, there is the possibility that Childers foresaw, in 1961, a network of air travel as an alternative to rail. He also

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<sup>38</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.216, 9 Jun.1965.

<sup>39</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.225, 3 Nov. 1966.

<sup>40</sup> Childers speech, 'Transport and power services in 1970' to a Fianna Fáil meeting, Dublin, 25 Apr. 1961 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers' Speeches 1960-1, MS GIS 1/60).

assumed that Ireland's economic status would advance rapidly and there would also be rapid internationalising of trade. He predicted that car traffic would double by 1970 and the process of 'double carriageways, where required, would be in process of development'.<sup>41</sup> In Dublin City, the corporation 'had a great opportunity to prevent the inevitable complete jam up of traffic, provided the members had courage and some imagination'.<sup>42</sup> There were vastly more cars per mile of road in England than in Ireland but as Childers assumed, roads would improve and speed limits would go up.

However Childers saw these developments as providing further competition for CIE, which was correct, but he failed to see the inevitable results of road expansion and improvement. He recognised that CIE would have to increase schedule speeds, require newer and better-designed coaches, improve the track for noise reduction and provide better service for passengers. Train and bus services would have to be better co-ordinated whereby commuters from the provinces would be able to purchase all-in tickets including rail fare, bus service and a ticket to a destination or event of their choosing. Childers specified possible events of interest to the public, which included football matches and attendance at the theatre. There would also be, he suggested, an enormous increase in train tours.<sup>43</sup> Childers had a blue-print for a modern rail network but closed rail lines in advance of the introduction of these improvements and expansion plans.

Childers was also considering a blue-print of a different kind during this period; he would soon have to decide where his future political career would lie. In the March 1957 general election Fianna Fáil took one of the three seats in Monaghan, which shares a border with three of the six northern counties. Fianna Fáil was anxious to take a second seat in Monaghan and Childers appeared to be the ideal candidate as someone of suitable standing and reputation. Childers was the only Protestant Fianna Fáil deputy in successive governments but rarely mentioned this fact and made nothing of it, but he was capable of attracting Protestant support from the north of the county and retaining the traditional Republican vote in the south. It was now crucial to Fianna Fáil that his Protestantism be publicised. Rumours of Childers's transfer to

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<sup>41</sup> Childers speech, 'Transport and power services in 1970' to a Fianna Fáil meeting, Dublin, 25 Apr. 1961 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers' Speeches 1960-1, MS GIS 1/60).

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Childers speech, 'Transport and power services in 1970' to a Fianna Fáil meeting, Dublin, 25 Apr. 1961 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers' Speeches 1960-1, MS GIS 1/60).

Monaghan circulated within the constituency of Longford-Westmeath resulting in a letter from Athlone Comhairle Ceanntair to Lemass, dated 7 March 1961, which outlined the concerns of the local Fianna Fáil organisation and supporters:

Considerable concern is felt at such a prospect, not only by Fianna Fáil supporters, but by opposition supporters as well.

Mr. Childers has served this constituency faithfully and loyally for the past twenty-two years, whether in or out of office.

We sincerely hope that Head Quarters will not take any action that would result in his departure from here.<sup>44</sup>

The post-script on the letter, signed by T. Fahy, reads ‘Dear Erskine, This is a copy of a letter I sent to Mr Lemass. I hope it meets with your approval’.<sup>45</sup>

The saga of Childers’s transfer to Monaghan appeared to have its roots in a south Monaghan Comhairle Ceanntair meeting held on the 7 October 1960. The first item on the agenda was organisation and the chairman suggested that a split in the local organisation as a result of:

the manoeuvres of the various factions in the past, that some action should be taken to insure a tightening of the organisation. He suggested that we should take advantage of a suggestion voiced by Eddie Woods of Broomfield some time ago and invite Mr Erskine Childers Minister of Transport and Power to be our nominated candidate from South Monaghan at the next County Convention.<sup>46</sup>

The south Monaghan organisation understood, even at this early stage, that Childers was available and if he moved to Monaghan he would be capable of uniting the organisation. The meeting unanimously agreed to write to the Fianna Fáil head-office inquiring on Childers’s availability to accept an invitation to their next meeting and to be their nominee for selection as a candidate in the next Dáil Éireann election. This was a very delicate matter for Childers. He had successfully contested all general elections in Longford-Westmeath since 1938 and having received a copy of the Monaghan letter to Fianna Fáil head-office replied: ‘as I have absolutely no intimation at the moment that my leaving the Longford-Westmeath seat would either be welcomed or advantageous to the party....I will write to you as soon as possible about

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<sup>44</sup> Letter from Athlone Comhairle Ceanntair to Lemass, 7 Mar. 1961 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9959/16).

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Monaghan Comhairle Ceanntair meeting, 7 Oct. 1960 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9960/1).

the matter'.<sup>47</sup> Childers had to be cautious and adopted a conservative approach. While officially neither accepting nor refusing the Monaghan offer he requested that they 'take it that I have made, as yet, no decision whatever to change my present position and I am sure you will understand my attitude in regard to this'.<sup>48</sup> From this comment the south Monaghan organisation could at least take it that Childers was considering the idea of a move.

He wrote to Senator Carter of Longford and outlined the request from Monaghan and that his response was that they 'must take it that I have no intention of altering my present position at the moment'.<sup>49</sup> However, among his closest colleagues and party leadership, Childers had seriously considered, perhaps even decided, on a transfer to Monaghan. He and Carter had decided to meet the Taoiseach prior to his letter of 14 October 1960. Childers had to act quickly as the public in general would soon be aware of the situation. Resolutions were passed by the south Monaghan Comhairle Ceanntair and Childers requested Lemass meet himself and Senator Carter 'in the first week of November, when we could get the benefit of your long experience in regard to these matters'.<sup>50</sup> In a hand note dated 21 October 1960 marked 'URGENT', Childers wrote: 'particulars of the Monaghan and Cavan 1954, 1957 elections i.e. the total vote, quota, candidates, transfers, surpluses and final result'.<sup>51</sup> This piece of evidence is a further indication of his intentions to transfer to Monaghan and his successful response for a meeting with Lemass is recorded by hand on a piece of paper, 'Taoiseach, Thursday week, 3 Nov'.<sup>52</sup> Following on from the meeting with Lemass, Childers wrote to the South Monaghan Comhairle Ceanntair on 10 November 1960 outlining his current position:

I feel honoured that such an invitation should have been extended to me.... you will understand my making very clear the conditions under which I would accept nomination....I would examine sympathetically a nearly unanimous invitation....My name cannot be put forward with others for balloting....and if all goes well the press must not be told I have accepted until I give the word myself.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Childers letter to the Monaghan organisation, 14 Oct. 1960 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9960/3).

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Childers letter to Carter, 14 Oct. 1960 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9960/4).

<sup>50</sup> Childers letter to Lemass, 20 Oct. 1960 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9960/5).

<sup>51</sup> Childers note for his own use, 21 Oct. 1960 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9960/6).

<sup>52</sup> Confirmation of meeting with Lemass on 3 Nov. Childers wrote to Senator Carter on 28 Oct. 1960 confirming their meeting with Lemass (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9960/7).

<sup>53</sup> Childers letter to Monaghan Comhairle Ceanntair, 10 Nov. 1960 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9960/11).

Childers replied to the Athlone Comhairle Ceanntair letter to Lemass dated 7 March 1961 in which he reinforced the connection he had with Longford-Westmeath:

I have received your letter quoting the resolution that you have sent to the Taoiseach. I very much appreciate this, as thanks in the political world are few and far between.

I, in my turn, am very grateful for the support I have received from the stalwart and long-standing members of the Fianna Fáil organisation in Athlone. I would be very loath to break the bonds that have been established through the years.<sup>54</sup>

His choice of words left his options wide open; the writing was on the wall. Childers's transfer to Monaghan was not without its share of controversy in Monaghan.<sup>55</sup> However, all problems were eventually sorted out and Childers was unanimously invited to become a candidate for the Fianna Fáil party in the Monaghan-Louth constituency. In a letter to Senator John Brennan of Monaghan, Childers expressed the honour he had received and that he would: 'now make the final decision, after consultation with the officers of the Westmeath-Longford organisation.'<sup>56</sup> On 4 July 1961 Childers wrote to the South Monaghan Comhairle Ceanntair and accepted 'with pride and pleasure the invitation you extended to me to stand for Monaghan at the General Election'.<sup>57</sup>

The question to be answered is – why did Childers decide to leave Longford-Westmeath for Monaghan? Childers never lived in the midlands and perhaps saw the constituency as too remote from the centre of power. On the other hand, he made no secret of the fact that he wanted the agriculture portfolio and would therefore enhance his chances representing a rural constituency. In 1948, 1951, 1954 and 1957 the constituency of Longford-Westmeath was a five seat constituency. With the constituency revised to a four seat constituency for the 1961 general election, this obviously caused Childers concern. Childers was never elected on the first count in Longford-Westmeath.

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<sup>54</sup> Childers letter to Athlone Comhairle Ceanntair, 7 Mar. 1961 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9960/17).

<sup>55</sup> For a detailed account of the problems faced by Childers see (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9960/27-58).

<sup>56</sup> Letter from Childers to Sen. Brennan, 20 Jun. 1961 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9960/54).

<sup>57</sup> Letter from Childers to south Monaghan Comhairle Ceanntair, 4 Jyl. 1961 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9960/74).

A further consideration is highlighted by Childers in his letter to Frank Carter, Fianna Fáil senator, Longford-Westmeath, dated 24 June 1961. Childers asked Carter to attend the North-East Longford Comhairle Ceanntair meeting and read a letter at the meeting. In this letter Childers stated that:

two candidates interested in the Longford/Athlone area cannot stand with any hope of both being elected. There is a vacancy in Monaghan for a candidate....under these circumstances I wish to leave the Longford/Athlone area to the candidate whose qualifications will be considered satisfactory to the Convention. I have no doubt that Frank Carter will be the person chosen.<sup>58</sup>

In a short note to Carter accompanying the above letter, Childers stated that ‘there is an implication in it that if I remained the choice between you and me would go to a vote. I don’t know how to deal with this – if at all’.<sup>59</sup> Carter’s response to Childers indicated that in such a situation he would stand aside, ‘loyalty would demand a solution in the shape of seniority, apart altogether from personal considerations’.<sup>60</sup> Childers had great respect for Carter and kept him fully updated on events concerning his move to Monaghan. Childers’s priority was of course to secure his own political future but he no doubt genuinely considered the dilemma he faced if he remained in Longford-Westmeath. In reply to a letter from a constituent in Longford, Childers again stated the situation concerning the nomination of candidates:

Either I or Frank Carter would stand down. I know he would, if I offered to accept nomination. I think he is entitled to election.  
There is a vacancy in Monaghan.  
So there is the story.  
Please keep this letter to yourself.<sup>61</sup>

Despite the many contradictions and instances of his ignoring the electorate during his political career, Childers nevertheless continued to appeal to the electorate. There are many reasons for Childers’s success and a letter from constituent Pat Carthy of Co. Longford to Childers alludes to some of those reasons:

I repeat now as I have often done before – that Longford was not worthy of you as you were too upright and straight. The first morning that I met you in 1938 I seen honour in your face. It was bred in you both by father and mother.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Childers letter to Frank Carter, 24 Jun. 1961 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9960/62).

<sup>59</sup> Childers note to Frank Carter, 24 Jun. 1961 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9960/63).

<sup>60</sup> Carter’s letter to Childers, 27 Jun. 1961 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9960/65).

<sup>61</sup> Childers letter to constituent, 28 Jun. 1961 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9960/67).

<sup>62</sup> Letter from Pat Carthy to Childers, 25 Jun. 1961 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9960/64).

Childers was once more successful in a general election, this time in Monaghan. Fianna Fáil lost eight seats in the 1961 general election, but they remained in power with the support of Independent candidates. As usual Childers contributed to the national debate on issues of public and national interest. The late 1950s saw the publication of T.K. Whitaker's economic plan, and many of issues raised within it were echoed and supported by Childers. Along with Lemass he realised that in the modern world there could be no 'reliance on protection or isolationism'.<sup>63</sup> He understood the need for foreign investment, the use of marketing organisations and the latest scientific techniques in industry. Childers remarked on Ireland's progress since independence and the challenge ahead:

the truth must be accepted that independence presented more challenges to be met than benefits to be enjoyed. Independence provided opportunities for progress, but the wishful thinking it encouraged had to be swept aside. There lay the challenge to any young virile nation.<sup>64</sup>

Irish industry proved unable to sustain growth and break into export markets. Childers encouraged a much closer working relationship between employers and employees with incentive bonus schemes becoming more widespread.<sup>65</sup> Irish industry would have to rationalise industrial production and co-ordinate marketing as was now common in British and European commerce. Design and packaging were vital for which 'a thousand per cent advance in policy was a pre-requisite to success'.<sup>66</sup> Gary Murphy states that against this background Lemass decided to incorporate the trade unions, business interests and farmer groups into the economic policy-making process. He had to do this, according to Murphy, if his attempt to move Ireland from 'economic nationalism to European union was going to be successful'.<sup>67</sup> Ireland had applied for membership of the Common Market, and the Fianna Fáil slogan was "A better day's work by everyone", to ensure that Ireland could avail of the many

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<sup>63</sup> Childers speech to Cathal Brugha Cumann, Dún Laoghaire, Dublin, 21 Nov. 1959 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers' Speeches 1957-60, MS GIS 1/59).

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Childers speech to Drogheda Chamber of Commerce, 30 Nov. 1959 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers' Speeches 1957-60, MS GIS 1/59).

<sup>66</sup> Childers speech to the Association of Advertisers in Ireland, 31 Jan. 1962 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers' Speeches 1961-3, MS GIS 1/61).

<sup>67</sup> Gary Murphy, 'From economic nationalism to European Union' in Brian Girvin and Gary Murphy (eds), *The Lemass era*, (Dublin, 2005), p.28.

opportunities in the new Europe.<sup>68</sup> This was a far cry from the Childers of the mid-twenties who did not want to see Ireland industrialised and competing with the nations of the industrialised world. However, this was the Lemass era. Protectionism was gone, foreign investment was encouraged and the markets of Europe beckoned. Ireland had moved away from de Valera's vision for the country.

Following the 1961 general election Lemass retained his cabinet with the welcome news for Childers that responsibility for tourism was transferring from the Department of Industry and Commerce to Transport and Power in October 1961.<sup>69</sup> To develop the tourist industry Childers had to compete for a share of government funding. In this process he experienced a mixture of success and setbacks. The tourist industry soon became familiar with the words 'when I was a travel agent in Paris', in relating to a point he was making in a speech or lecture.<sup>70</sup> Addressing the Annual Convention of the Association of British Travel Agents, held in Dublin on 15 October 1962, Childers prefaced his address by saying:

As a retired manager of a European travel agency in Paris, where I worked from 1928 to 1931, I welcome you, not only as minister in charge of tourism but as an ex-colleague of yours knowing all the satisfaction, the headaches and the really difficult problems of a service where your job is to sell future happiness.<sup>71</sup>

His experience of the travel industry had been an excellent introduction to politics. Both care for the future needs of people, although in politics Childers suggested in a different and more complex environment. Childers related to tourism in a special way. Despite the general improvement in the tourist industry, improvement in living standards and the total bedroom accommodation in the Republic had shown no significant change in ten years. The number of rooms with bath had increased by only a few hundred during this period. Childers advised the Irish Tourist Association on 22 October 1959 that: 'the provision of baths or showers was no longer required for only the rich; it was indispensable for almost every grade of American traveller

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<sup>68</sup> Childers speech to north Monaghan Comhairle Ceanntair, 4 Mar. 1962 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers' Speeches 1961-3, MS GIS 1/61).

<sup>69</sup> Documentation transferring tourism to the Dept. of Transport and Power, 31 Oct. 1961 (N.A.I., Dept. of the Taoiseach, MS S16885B/61).

<sup>70</sup> John N. Young, *Erskine H. Childers President of Ireland a biography* (Buckinghamshire, 1985), pp 127-8.

<sup>71</sup> Childers speech to the Association of British travel Agents, 15 Oct. 1962 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers' Speeches 1961-3, MS GIS 1/61).



and the demand was rapidly growing elsewhere'.<sup>72</sup> Childers urged far greater effort and progress in the future. The real potential of the United States market could only be achieved by investing in advertising and forming closer relationships with travel agents. Bedroom population was crucial for continued tourist expansion but a massive improvement in standards was necessary. Childers opened the new offices of Irish International Airlines in New York in December 1960. Entering the transatlantic air service was a bold step for a small country like Ireland but the opening of new offices in New York was a measure of the company's success. This success had proved that Ireland could present two worlds to the tourist; the unspoiled countryside and hospitality of the Irish, alongside the most up-to-date management techniques and the desire to work hard while retaining an old-world atmosphere. Childers made reference to his administrative training with an American business in Europe and declared that he could always look at Ireland objectively. He would not be content until the 'Republic was as perfect as possible – a model to the whole world'.<sup>73</sup> Given what happened to his father this was a remarkable statement from Childers.

A review of the tourism structure revealed that too much emphasis was placed on Dublin. Childers had previously demonstrated his keenness to decentralise and give more control to regional and local enterprises. In keeping with this theme, eight Regional Tourism Organisations were established in 1962.<sup>74</sup> These were limited companies funded by Bord Fáilte and led to the establishment of tourist offices providing information for visitors; the local tourism drive could now be co-ordinated. There were however delays in the operation of the regional organisations. Membership was open to local authorities and to local development associations concerned with the tourist industry. Bord Fáilte invited suitable persons to act as caretaker directors until the general meetings of the regional organisations could be held. When questioned in the Dáil regarding how the caretaker directors were selected, Childers replied that Bord Fáilte: 'selected representatives from each area whom they thought would be most suitable'.<sup>75</sup> Those selected represented the

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<sup>72</sup> Childers speech to the Irish Tourist Association, 22 Oct. 1959 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers' Speeches 1957-60, MS GIS 1/59).

<sup>73</sup> Childers speaking at the opening of the New York offices of Irish International Airlines, 7 Dec. 1960 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers' Speeches 1960-1, MS GIS 1/60).

<sup>74</sup> Documentation and map of eight regional tourism organisations, 1962 (N.A.I., Dept. of the Taoiseach files, MS 13087 H/95).

<sup>75</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.208, 12 Mar. 1964.

professional, industrial and local authority sections and Childers was requested to explain why the trade union movement was ignored. His response was that ‘the people who were interested in and concerned with tourism were invited to take part’.<sup>76</sup> The opposition parties in the Dáil reminded Childers that ‘the trade union people have a greater interest in the tourist industry than many who are represented. The trade union people are employed in the industry’.<sup>77</sup> Childers acknowledged that there were complaints with some of the regional organisations but he felt that ‘it would be best to wait until the final organisation was established in which everybody interested in the area would be able to elect representatives’.<sup>78</sup> The set-up of the regional organisations attracted criticisms but the general opinion favoured Bord Fáilte getting on with the job.

Childers had a particular interest in youth hostel associations and was associated with An Óige almost since its foundation. Youth hostelling developed a love of the countryside and Childers was a strong believer in the value of foreign travel as a means of broadening the mind. Young hostel associations provided people with an opportunity of travelling to foreign countries and without this movement many would not have had this experience. Many who visited Ireland would return again in the future with their friends and families. Childers was well aware that the tenants of the hostels were the potential hotel clients of the future.<sup>79</sup>

Many of those who stayed in youth hostels and tourists in general, visited Muckross House in County Kerry and its future as a tourist location was decided while Childers had responsibility for tourism. In a note to the secretary of his department he suggested three options for the house and estate. The first, and his personal preference, was that it be developed as an Irish heritage museum. The second suggestion was its conversion and use as a V.I.P. house, and his third choice was a botanical centre. Over the years a number of other proposals had been made concerning its use. These included a youth hostel, a country residence for the President and a dairying instruction centre.<sup>80</sup> Having read a memorandum on the

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<sup>76</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.208, 12 Mar. 1964.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.208, 12 Mar. 1964.

<sup>79</sup> Childers speech to the International Youth Hostellers’ Rally, 23 Aug. 1963 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers’ Speeches 1963, MS GIS 1/62).

<sup>80</sup> Childers note to the secretary of his dept., 12 Apr. 1962 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9954/88).

possible uses of Muckcross House, Childers concluded that: 'this building should be a more direct attraction to tourists of all kinds and I can think of no better way of using it than for the purposes of establishing a museum of the Irish heritage'.<sup>81</sup> Lemass had received an approach concerning the use of Muckcross House and Childers wrote to him outlining his views for the house. He suggested that Ireland needed a location to present its image and proposed the establishment of a museum. The museum was to illustrate Ireland's missionary work from the fourth to the eighth century and to demonstrate Irish heritage from the sixteenth century to the present day. The gardens were already open to visitors and the house, suggested Childers: 'would be an ideal location for such a museum being situated in a national park in our most renowned tourist area'.<sup>82</sup>

However, the government was considering the house as a centre for administrative studies under the Institute of Public Administration and as additional hotel accommodation in Killarney. Childers had a visit from the son of the donor of the properties who 'expressed his disappointment with the proposed use of the house for Administrative Studies. He [son of the donor] has since written to me confirming his views and has expressed his preference for the idea of a Heritage Museum'.<sup>83</sup> In his letter to Lemass, Childers also emphasised the views of the local tourist organisation that Muckcross House should be used as a tourist amenity. Despite the fact that Childers had the backing of the donor family and local tourism interests his proposal appeared to have been ignored by Lemass. In a letter to the Minister for Finance he stated that 'it is a curious fact that the Taoiseach never seems to accept any suggestions from me about ways of advertising the country, but I, nevertheless, am going to persevere'.<sup>84</sup> This presents us with a further indication of the relationship that existed between Lemass and Childers. Their styles of working were different and their past had nothing in common other than the fact, which in itself was a lot, that Childers father and Lemass fought on the anti-treaty side in the Civil War.

Childers did persevere in his efforts which also included the establishment of popular museums and the preservation of national monuments. Numerous letters to

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<sup>81</sup> Childers note to the secretary of his dept., 4 May 1962 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9954/89).

<sup>82</sup> Childers letter to Lemass, 16 May 1962 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9954/90).

<sup>83</sup> Childers letter to Lemass, 7 Nov. 1963 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9954/97).

<sup>84</sup> Childers letter to the Minister for Finance, 2 Dec. 1963 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9954/98).

the Departments of the Taoiseach, Finance and Education finally led to a response from the Department of Finance stating that a new branch in the Office of Public Works, The National Parks and Monuments Branch, had been established.<sup>85</sup> One of the objectives of the new branch was to develop better information and interpretative services for the benefit of those visiting parks and monuments. As to the specific issue of provincial museums, the Department of Finance found Childers's suggestion: 'very attractive and I have no doubt but that they would add considerably to the presentation of our National Monuments....You will have been pleased therefore to hear that the Minister for Finance has authorised An Taisce to undertake a survey, to be paid for by the State, of provincial museums, great gardens and historic houses'.<sup>86</sup>

To develop such tourist amenities and allow Bord Fáilte achieve its targets set for tourism under the Second Economic Programme, scheduled to run from 1964 to 1970, Childers had to convince his colleagues, especially those in the Department of Finance and its minister deputy James Ryan, of the necessity to maintain sufficient funding of Bord Fáilte. Childers was aware of the controls and restrictions imposed by the Department of Finance when he had responsibility for the broadcasting service. Advertising, promotion, market research, improved sales techniques, higher capacity aircraft were all vital to the success of the tourist industry. The North American market was especially positive to Ireland following President Kennedy's visit to Ireland and Lemass's visit to Washington. Bord Fáilte emphasised the opportunity available to exploit the American market, which may not return or would be costly to create in the future. In a letter to deputy Ryan, Childers stated that: 'I am personally convinced more than ever that now is the time for significant investment in tourism if we are to achieve the sort of progress which I believe to be possible'.<sup>87</sup>

Ryan explained to Childers that due to demands for other services, which he had already brought to the attention of the government, he could not make available the amount requested by Bord Fáilte for the year 1964-5. Ryan's proposed solution was not agreeable to Childers and a stalemate situation developed. Childers wrote to Ryan and stated that if he remained adamant: 'I will have no alternative but to take the

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<sup>85</sup> Correspondence on this issue, 17 May 1968 to 2 Jly. 1969 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9954/102-129).

<sup>86</sup> Letter from the Dept. of Finance to Childers, 2 Jly. 1969 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9954/129).

<sup>87</sup> Letter from Childers to the Minister for Finance, 30 Jan. 1964 (N.A.I., Dept. of the Taoiseach, MS S13087 H/95).

matter to arbitration by the government. I appreciate your difficulties and am sorry if I appear to be uncooperative. I am sending a copy of this correspondence to the Taoiseach'.<sup>88</sup> In a post-script to the letter Childers assumed that Ryan had read Bord Fáilte's memo on the practical effectiveness of their promotional work. The volume of contacts with travel agents and details of package tours increased greatly and was vital to their campaign. In trying to persuade Ryan he concluded 'if every other country is stepping up promotion, we must!'<sup>89</sup>

Childers's letter to Lemass detailed the proposed cut to Bord Fáilte's grant request for the year 1964-5 and the reasons why this should not be done. The circumstances were now right for a major effort in the defined markets and 'I feel it would be disastrous if we were not to take full advantage of these circumstances'.<sup>90</sup> Lemass acknowledged Childers's letter and accompanying documents relating to Bord Fáilte's grant for 1964-5. While agreeing that Childers had a very considerable case for a higher allocation Lemass did not think that is was:

within the realm of financial possibility in the circumstances of this year. I think you should, before the government meeting, consider what modification of your proposals would still permit of a useful increase in the Board's promotional work. The proposals of the Minister for Finance seem to me to be reasonable, and I shall be greatly surprised if the Government do not share this view.<sup>91</sup>

Lemass decided in favour of his Minister of Finance despite the compelling arguments made by Childers. The Minister for Finance had demands from all government departments to contend with, Childers's only priority was to secure the maximum funding for his own department. While the finance minister had to balance overall spending and commanded a strong voice in government, this issue is again indicative of the working relationship that existed between Lemass and Childers. Childers would learn from this episode and take a different approach on the next occasion.

Having argued his position within government for the maximum funding for his departments, Childers then distanced himself from the operations of his

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<sup>88</sup> Childers letter to the Minister for Finance, 3 Feb. 1964 (N.A.I., Dept. of the Taoiseach, MS S13087 H/95).

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Childers letter to Lemass, 3 Feb. 1964 (N.A.I., Dept. of the Taoiseach, MS S13087 H/95).

<sup>91</sup> Lemass's letter to Childers, 3 Feb. 1964 (N.A.I., Dept. of the Taoiseach, MS S13087 H/95).

departments. Childers would not interfere in land allocation decisions, he refused to meet deputations in relation to rail closures and in keeping with his policy, he refused to meet a deputation from County Leitrim in relation to tourist development. While Childers was correct in explaining that the Tourist Traffic Acts entrusted tourist development to Bord Fáilte, his understanding of the relationship between the public and their elected representatives in Ireland can once again be questioned. Childers was not interested in wasting time discussing issues for the sake of discussions. He should have played the political game but did not. He was concerned with practical consequences, a pragmatist.

Childers was very interested in forging links between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Bord Fáilte was of the opinion that there were a number of areas where they and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board could cooperate in a practical way. He did not support partition and suggested that if the island were one there would be new ideas and energies that would benefit the whole island. A common promotional campaign highlighting the island's potential would surely encourage investment. The results of this type of promotion would inevitably lead to an increase of tourists from Europe and America.<sup>92</sup> With similar economic problems and facing all the problems of a small nation: 'there was an overwhelming case for the presentation of one all-Ireland image to the European Economic Community'.<sup>93</sup> Childers believed that as the years went by the world would become more integrated and internationalised. He emphasised that the promotion of Ireland through unification was not intended to isolate Great Britain:

Let it be stated again that a United Ireland would have a far more genuine solidly based friendship with the English people, a better mutual understanding of differences in attitude and of mutual problems and a far more effective economic and social relationship.<sup>94</sup>

Childers stated that entry into the European Economic Community would lead to eventual re-unification of Ireland provided that outdated prejudices were abandoned. Childers and Lemass did have something they could agree on, an end to partition.

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<sup>92</sup> Childers proposed the motion 'That the re-unification of Ireland is inevitable', at Queen's University, Belfast, 1 Dec. 1961 GIS-Ministers' Speeches 1961-3, MS GIS 1/61).

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

For now Childers had to be less ambitious and face the practical realities of life and politics as they existed then. Bord Fáilte suggested the production of a single travel brochure covering the whole of Ireland with the advantage of marketing Ireland as a destination rather than two separate sections. Tours and familiarisation sessions for travel agents should cover the whole of Ireland and the same should apply to publicists and marketing agencies. Research information could be exchanged and the offices of both tourist bodies could answer queries and provide information on the whole island. The possibilities for joint promotion of Irish holidays in the British market were also listed for consideration.<sup>95</sup> However, political questions would arise such as the border and the ‘desirability of identifying our interests too closely with those of Britain’.<sup>96</sup> Relations between Bord Fáilte and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board were fairly friendly while relations with the British Tourist Authority were very good. It appeared from the memo that some members of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board feared that ‘any joint publicity might be the occasion of showing an undivided Ireland’.<sup>97</sup>

The Director-General of Bord Fáilte, Dr T.J. O’Driscoll, agreed with the Irish Association for Cultural, Economic and Social Relations in selecting tourism as an activity with possibilities for co-operation between the two parts of Ireland.<sup>98</sup> Newspaper reports of a possible joint promotion campaign between Bord Fáilte and the British Tourist Authority resulted in Lemass writing to Childers. Lemass suggested ‘that you should keep yourself very fully informed of any such development, which could have political implications, and which might not in my view be very advantageous in our tourist promotion effort’.<sup>99</sup> Lemass requested Childers, at his convenience, to let him know what was intended. At last Childers was engaged in an activity that got the attention of Lemass.

Childers informed Lemass that the proposed co-operation envisaged by Bord Fáilte with the British Tourist Authority while probably ‘desirable from a purely commercial point of view, might possibly involve too close an identification of our

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<sup>95</sup> Childers note on tourism, 24 Oct. 1963 (N.A.I., Dept. of the Taoiseach, MS S13087 H/95).

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Director-General was speaking at a meeting of the Irish Association for Cultural, Economic and Social Relations in the War Memorial, Belfast, 12 Mar. 1964 (N.A.I., Dept. of the Taoiseach, MS S13087 H/95).

<sup>99</sup> Letter from Lemass to Childers, 3 Apr. 1964 (N.A.I., Dept. of the Taoiseach, MS S13087 H/95).

interests with those of the British'.<sup>100</sup> Childers had taken on the Minister for Finance and lost, he did not want to give Lemass any further reasons to doubt his capabilities and sense of judgement. To reassure Lemass on the separate identity issue Childers stated that:

There would be absolutely no question of the use of the description "British Isles"...there are no concrete proposals under consideration at present but I have arranged for Bord Fáilte to keep me fully informed of the position and I shall write to you again in the event of further developments or of any concrete proposals.<sup>101</sup>

There was however reason for Childers to question the judgement of Bord Fáilte after they planned a visit for young Northern Ireland soldiers to Achill Island. The British Army was forced to cancel the proposed visit by seventy young soldiers following reports of anti-British slogans daubed on roads and bridges on the island. The Achill Tourist Association planned a welcome for the soldiers and they regretted what had happened.<sup>102</sup> Lemass wrote to Childers and stated that the circumstances surrounding the proposed visit by the soldiers 'must be regarded as a bad blow to the whole tourist promotion effort'.<sup>103</sup> He was aware that Bord Fáilte organised the visit without consulting the government and it revealed a serious lack of judgement on their behalf. Bord Fáilte should have envisaged what happened in Achill as a possibility. Lemass suggested that Childers 'should consult with Bord Fáilte, and advise them that, whenever arrangements contemplated by them appear likely to involve political consideration, they should consult with you in advance'.<sup>104</sup> In his reply to Lemass, Childers informed him that he had already decided to take the action, which Lemass suggested.<sup>105</sup> These were not good times for Childers. Even though Childers was not directly responsible for the proposed visit, it was his department and his direct responsibility. At best it must have cast doubts in Lemass's mind as to the controls and communications Childers had in place with Bord Fáilte. But Lemass did not intervene himself and showed confidence in Childers to remedy the situation.

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<sup>100</sup> Childers letter to Lemass, 13 Apr. 1964 (N.A.I., Dept. of the Taoiseach, MS S13087 H/95).

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> *Irish Times*, 6 Aug. 1964.

<sup>103</sup> Letter from Lemass to Childers, 6 Aug. 1964 (N.A.I., Dept. of the Taoiseach, MS S13087 H/95).

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Childers letter to Lemass, 6 Aug. 1964 (N.A.I., Dept. of the Taoiseach, MS S13087 H/95).



Childers's position on partition and his desire to develop relationships with Northern Ireland no doubt caught the attention of Lemass; on this occasion they were both singing from the same hymn-sheet. According to Michael Kennedy: 'Lemass had been expecting that a meeting with [Terence] O'Neill would eventually come about'.<sup>106</sup> Lemass had shown an interest in developing good relations with Northern Ireland since coming to power in 1932. In 1959 Lemass continued to press for cross-border co-operation. He was prepared to 'explore any promising prospect of developing useful co-operation for the sake of the practical benefits it may yield to the ordinary people in the North and the South'.<sup>107</sup> This did not change his stance on partition; it was still his government's desire to see the Irish people and country reunited. In March 1963 Terence O'Neill became Prime Minister of Northern Ireland and the process commenced which resulted in the meeting of Lemass and O'Neill at Stormont on 14 January 1965. The meeting had no pre-arranged agenda, it was exploratory, but it had occurred. The issues discussed included the promotion of tourism, trade liberalisation and the exchange of information across a wide area of common concerns. This was one of the most sensational events since the establishment of the border and led to further meetings and co-operation at ministerial level.<sup>108</sup> Childers must have been elated at these developments. At last, talks and co-operation between North and South; through his work in tourism he did his bit to help the process along.

Childers learned some hard political lessons after his attempts to secure Bord Fáilte funding for the year 1964-5. On the next occasion he did not take on the Minister for Finance but rather reminded Lemass of 'the taxation from tourist spending – over £5m. from each additional £10m. of tourist expenditure'.<sup>109</sup> Funding was becoming more difficult to secure as banks concentrated on projects of a productive nature that would increase exports. Childers argued that tourism generated considerable tax revenues, was an export industry and provided significant employment. His solution to fund development was 'to establish a Hotel Credit

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<sup>106</sup> Michael Kennedy, 'Northern Ireland and cross-border co-operation' in Brian Girvin and Gary Murphy (eds), *The Lemass era*, (Dublin, 2005), p.116.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 107-8.

<sup>108</sup> Michael Kennedy, 'Northern Ireland and cross-border co-operation' in Brian Girvin and Gary Murphy (eds), *The Lemass era*, (Dublin, 2005), chapter seven.

<sup>109</sup> Letter from Childers to Lemass, 7 Dec. 1965 (N.A.I., Dept. of the Taoiseach, MS 98/6/150).

Agency, either on the lines of the Industrial Credit Company or the Agricultural Credit Corporation or to give Bord Fáilte borrowing powers and to provide them with a line of credit to advance to hotels'.<sup>110</sup> In his reply Lemass stated that 'our problem, at this time, is to allocate wisely the scarce resources which are available'.<sup>111</sup> This would involve a curtailment of investment in worthwhile developments, including tourism.

Worse was to come for Childers as Lemass suggested that he was not convinced as to the further need of government grants in bringing about an expansion of tourist accommodation. A time had to come when 'a momentum of growth will have been set up which should enable these grants to be withdrawn'.<sup>112</sup> Lemass suggested that it was not impossible that the same rate of growth, or close to it, could be maintained without grants. As to Childers's suggestion of a Hotel Credit Agency, Lemass was not at all convinced that the government should take responsibility for the hotel industry's credit requirements. Lemass concluded: 'I will need a great deal of convincing of the desirability of this course, apart altogether from the Minister for Finance's difficulty in regard to it'.<sup>113</sup> Childers agreed with Lemass that it was possible to build a new hotel and operate it economically without the benefit of grants. These circumstances could be found in Dublin and a few other places where there was an extended tourist season and adequate off-season business. However, the objective of the tourist industry was according to Childers:

to secure the provision of accommodation in or near scenic areas not only because the tourist expects to find accommodation there, especially with the growth of motoring tourism, but also because tourist traffic passing through an area is of no benefit to the people of the area unless accommodation is available to induce the visitors to stay.<sup>114</sup>

He continued to impress upon Lemass 'the urgently needed investment requirements for this industry, whose contribution to exports has now become paramount'.<sup>115</sup> Childers was now speaking the language Lemass understood and wanted to hear. Additional grants led to improvements in accommodation, resorts and recreation

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<sup>110</sup> Letter from Childers to Lemass, Dec. 1965 (N.A.I., Dept. of the Taoiseach, MS S13087 H/95).

<sup>111</sup> Letter from Lemass to Childers, 20 Dec. 1965 (N.A.I., Dept. of the Taoiseach, MS S13087 H/95).

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Childers letter to Lemass, 23 Feb. 1966 (N.A.I., Dept. of the Taoiseach, MS S13087 H/95).

<sup>115</sup> Childers letter to Lemass, 27 Apr. 1966 (N.A.I., Dept. of the Taoiseach, MS 98/6/150).

facilities. Farmhouse accommodation was heavily promoted and grants were made available for additional development of this sector.<sup>116</sup>

Throughout his career Childers encouraged local community involvement in projects that benefited the area. He repeated this theme with his plea in relation to greater regional involvement in tourism. He was not prepared to continue funding activities that should be sponsored locally. Shannon Airport was the natural landing place for tourists who wished to see the West of Ireland but there was need for greater regional publicity and 'the people would simply have to dip their hands in their pockets for this purpose'.<sup>117</sup> Childers advocated a Promotion Officer to deal with tourism in every county. Hotel managers should collaborate with each other and appoint agents to travel to the United States and Great Britain and promote the concept of hotel chains. Coach tours from Shannon should be increased and every locality should create its own image to attract tourists. The tourist potential of Clare was just barely exploited but he could not be expected to do more than provide basic publicity material.<sup>118</sup>

Childers had shown a keen interest in the development of fisheries in his previous portfolio and his contribution to this area of tourism can be judged from the increased number of fishing visitors. In 1957 12,000 fishing visitors came to Ireland and contributed £285,000 to tourist revenues.<sup>119</sup> By 1962 this figure had increased to 58,000 visitors spending £1,346,000.<sup>120</sup> Development plans for all types of fishing resulted in 117,400 anglers visiting Ireland in 1968 spending £4,134,000.<sup>121</sup> In general great progress was made in the tourist area during Childers's term as minister. Speaking at the Annual General Meeting of the Irish Tourist Association in October 1961, Childers stated that standards in accommodation, recreation and transport had all improved, but were still short of what they should be. He stated that 'success in the

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<sup>116</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.230, 9 Nov. 1967, vol.231, 16 Nov. 1967.

<sup>117</sup> Childers speech to Ennis Chamber of Commerce, 3 Mar. 1962 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers' Speeches 1961-3, MS GIS 1/61).

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>119</sup> Notes on state companies for which Childers was responsible, Feb. 1964 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9938/23).

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>121</sup> Childers notes on his dept. estimates for 1968-9, Mar. 1969 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9938/30).

tourist industry and eulogies by tourists should stimulate greater effort and not cloak deficiencies'.<sup>122</sup>

Despite his considerable efforts deficiencies in the system still persisted in 1969 as evidenced in a letter from an American tourist to the then Taoiseach, Jack Lynch. The conditions experienced by the tourist led her to describe Ireland as truly backward compared for example to Scotland. Beggars on the streets of Dublin and Athlone and the visible conditions of young children 'made me sick. Do you not take care of the poor people in Ireland? the way other countries do'.<sup>123</sup> The Grand Hotel in Moate, County Westmeath got a special mention in the letter to Lynch. Having stayed there for four days and nights the tourist paints a very bleak picture of the hotel and the town. The rear of the hotel was full of debris and very dirty. No hot water in the hotel and no water at all for two days, no soap, dirty towels used by other tenants and: 'a back breaking bed, held together with ropes and the food was positively sickening'.<sup>124</sup> The tourist concluded: 'the Irish are a backward, stupid, dirty and lazy lot of people. As for the village of Moate, well it's a pitiful place to live'.<sup>125</sup> Outside of the larger cities the tourist experienced only dirt and starving dogs and cats. Having found her uncle she was dismayed by his living conditions. His house was filthy, no furniture, no wash basins or sinks and he 'badly in need of a bath'.<sup>126</sup> The restaurant in Moate, the Bon Bon, was also dirty and the tourist wondered why the government did not check out the facilities in towns for tourists. Why was there no Department of Health and why were new houses being built in Moate with no bathrooms or running water? According to the angry tourist, given these conditions, it was easy to understand why so many young people were leaving Ireland.<sup>127</sup>

By 1965 Lemass was considering retirement and when he finally did so in November 1966 there was no one obvious successor. However, Bruce Arnold suggested that Jack Lynch was favoured by both Lemass and de Valera as leadership material.<sup>128</sup> Fianna Fáil faced a leadership election but Childers was not among those

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<sup>122</sup> Childers speech to the Irish Tourist Association, 19 Oct. 1961 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers' Speeches 1961-3, MS GIS 1/61).

<sup>123</sup> Letter from Mrs Rita C. Thomson to Jack Lynch, 12 Sept. 1969 (N.A.I., Dept. of the Taoiseach, MS 99/1/131).

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Bruce Arnold, *Jack Lynch, hero in crisis* (Dublin, 2001), p.64.

in the reckoning. Childers was somewhat of a loner and was not one to socialise in the Leinster House bar. He appeared distant to the younger deputies but always gave of his knowledge and commanded respect. T.K. Whitaker suggests that ‘because of his English education, accent and mannerisms I feel he was never quite accepted as “one of us”, though his patriotism would never have been in doubt’.<sup>129</sup> Childers was one of the fifty-two deputies who voted for Jack Lynch as leader and the government had a new Taoiseach on 10 November 1966. Lynch was the first Taoiseach to have no direct involvement in the civil war and therefore a new era commenced in Irish politics. More important personally for Childers was the fact that Lynch’s style of management was similar to that of de Valera. Lynch was not considered as a candidate from the beginning but emerged victorious over George Colley with Charles Haughey having withdrawn from contention. Lynch presided over a government in which many members considered themselves candidates for his position. In time of crisis Lynch would come to depend on the support of Childers. For now, Childers was made Minister for Posts and Telegraphs in addition to his other responsibilities in a cabinet re-shuffle. He was now one of the most senior members of government and had two departments to control.

Childers had previously held the portfolio of Minister for Posts and Telegraphs during 1951-4. Having responsibility once again for the broadcasting service Childers looked at the general position of the service and drafted a report on Radio Éireann (hereafter cited as RE). His eighteen-point summary of the radio service suggested that a large number of listeners tune into other services and although RE provided a good service, it was ‘not meeting needs of majority’.<sup>130</sup> The service operated from inadequate premises and costs were excessive. In Dáil Éireann Childers outlined Radio Telefís Éireann’s (hereafter cited as RTE) plans for the acquisition of a new site for its broadcasting service. Negotiations were taking place for the purchase of eight acres at Donnybrook and part of the property would be used ‘for a radio centre which is a much overdue need’.<sup>131</sup> Young people in particular were listening to foreign radio and he suggested that RE follow the example of pirate stations, which were popular.

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<sup>129</sup> Letter from T.K. Whitaker to the author, 13 Dec. 2005.

<sup>130</sup> Childers report on the radio service, 4 Aug. 1967 (N.A.I., Dept. of Posts and Telegraphs, MS 2001/78/81).

<sup>131</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.230, 26 Oct. 1967.

Childers was not supporting the actual presence of pirate stations but rather suggesting an analysis of programming schedules used by pirates. At this time pirate radio ships were broadcasting off the English and Dutch coasts and several member states of the Council of Europe had introduced legislation to combat such ships. Childers questioned the level of local interest programmes and suggested the establishment of local radio stations.<sup>132</sup>

Childers also updated himself on the current position of RTE and predictably prepared a memorandum for the government. The financial position of RTE had deteriorated in recent years due to increased expenditure on both television and radio without a corresponding increase of incomes. In his memorandum to the government dated 11 December 1967, Childers outlined the financial requests of RTE. Among the requests was the proposal that the combined radio and television licence be increased from five pounds to six pounds and five shillings from 1 April 1968. This was refused by Childers but he did agree with RTE for exchequer advances towards its capital programme. The Minister for Finance considered that RTE should arrange its capital expenditure so as to be able to fund it from its own resources. His view was influenced by the inability of the exchequer to fully meet the capital requirements for productive development and social projects such as housing, education and health. Resources had to be allocated on schemes that encouraged economic growth. The Minister for Finance recommended that action be taken to prevent large deficits occurring and to maximise incomes from licence fees and advertising. Childers's response was that:

it will simply not be practicable for the Authority to continue to finance its capital programme for the next few years entirely from its own resources unless a substantial increase is authorised in the licence fees.<sup>133</sup>

His argument on the licence fee issue was not clear as he said that he did 'not consider that an increase in the licence fees would be justified at present' and that he was not convinced that RTE's 'capital programme should be carried out as quickly as

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<sup>132</sup> Childers report on the radio service, 4 Aug. 1967 (N.A.I., Dept. of Posts and Telegraphs, MS 2001/78/81).

<sup>133</sup> Childers memo. on the financial position of RTE, 11 Dec. 1967 (N.A.I., Dept. of the Taoiseach, MS 2000/6/26).

planned'.<sup>134</sup> The confusion in this memorandum was highlighted in a note from the Taoiseach's department:

His argument against the increase of the licence fees is not clear or forceful. Finally the material on the capital programme is spread all over the memorandum & spiced with details about cost control techniques, comparisons with other countries etc which do not greatly help, detailed as they are, in determining a solution.<sup>135</sup>

The note recommended sending back the memorandum for revision, however, the Taoiseach, Jack Lynch, while acknowledging that 'the memo is quiet diffuse I think we might circulate for next Tuesday, 19 Dec. 1967'.<sup>136</sup> Childers's memoranda were longwinded and included considerable amounts of data supporting the problem but this very often clouded the issues at hand and a search for a solution.

If Childers was uncertain on the issue of licence fee increases for RTE there was no such uncertainty when it came to granting free licences to old age pensioners. He refused a request from deputy Luke Belton, Fine Gael, to extend the provision of free radio and television licences to old age pensioners. His department referred to the provision of free radio licenses to blind persons who satisfied certain well-defined conditions. The provision of this concession was to facilitate such persons, who because of their disability, 'generally appreciate radio far more than listeners who have their sight'.<sup>137</sup> The question of extending the concession to television licenses and to a broader category of people was considered from time to time but was always rejected because it would be difficult to define categories of people who would qualify. Any extension of the concession 'would involve a substantial loss in broadcasting licence revenue' and although the department had a good deal of sympathy for the old age pensioners whose means were limited 'it was not possible to relieve them of the need to pay the ordinary broadcasting licence fees'.<sup>138</sup> Belton's reply suggested that Childers no longer had a requirement to determine the circumstances of applicants as 'Mr Haughey has agreed to give free electricity to old

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<sup>134</sup> Childers memo. on the financial position of RTE, 11 Dec. 1967 (N.A.I., Dept. of the Taoiseach, MS 2000/6/26).

<sup>135</sup> Note from Taoiseach's dept. on Childers memo. on financial position of RTE, to Jack Lynch, 12 Dec. 1967 (N.A.I., Dept. of the Taoiseach, MS 2000/6/26).

<sup>136</sup> Jack Lynch's reply to his dept., appended at the bottom of note, Dec 1967 (N.A.I., Dept. of the Taoiseach, MS 2000/6/26).

<sup>137</sup> Letter from the Dept. of Posts and Telegraphs to Luke Belton, 5 Apr. 1967 (N.A.I., Dept. of Posts and Telegraphs: Broadcasting Division, 1941-1989, MS 2001/78/05).

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

age pensioners'.<sup>139</sup> Further pressure on Childers came from the Society of St. Vincent de Paul who wrote to Childers in December 1967. They earnestly requested that Childers: 'consider sympathetically the proposal to issue television licences free to old age pensioners'.<sup>140</sup> They were particularly concerned with those old age pensioners living alone and the free television licences would 'bring untold pleasure into many drab and lonely lives'.<sup>141</sup> Childers gave careful consideration to the free television licences request and highlighted the existing concessions of travel and electricity. These concessions went 'far towards easing the lot of old age pensioners' and Childers regretted that he was 'unable to agree to your Society's representations'.<sup>142</sup> The Society were apparently not prepared to drop the issue and a further letter from them once again emphasised those living alone and the fact that they were already receiving travel and electricity concessions. They were prepared to purchase the television sets and continue to pay for the licences although this would be a drain on their limited funds. Childers was requested to consider the matter again as this would be 'very much in keeping with the present State policy regarding the old, and for the State the cost would not really be excessive'.<sup>143</sup> Determined to maintain his position Childers commended the Society for its excellent work but he was 'unable to agree to any extension of the existing licence concession'.<sup>144</sup> However, within a few weeks of Childers's refusal, a letter from the Society was thanking him and the Minister for Finance for the proposal: 'to give free TV and Radio licences to certain categories of old age pensioners'.<sup>145</sup> The decision by deputy Haughey to grant free electricity to old age pensioners was more representative of the social needs of the time and showed a more realistic understanding of peoples' needs.

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<sup>139</sup> Letter from Luke Belton to the Dept. of Posts and Telegraphs, 18 May 1967 (N.A.I., Dept. of Posts and Telegraphs: Broadcasting Division, 1941-1989, MS 2001/78/05).

<sup>140</sup> Letter from Society of St. Vincent de Paul to Childers, 15 Dec. 1967 (N.A.I., Dept. of Posts and Telegraphs: Broadcasting Division, 1941-1989, MS 2001/78/05).

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Letter from Childers to the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, Jan. 1968 (N.A.I., Dept. of Posts and Telegraphs: Broadcasting Division, 1941-1989, MS 2001/78/05).

<sup>143</sup> Letter from the Society of St. Vincent de Paul to Childers, 14 March 1968 (N.A.I., Dept. of Posts and Telegraphs: Broadcasting Division, 1941-1989, MS 2001/78/05).

<sup>144</sup> Letter from Childers to the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, 2 Apr. 1968 (N.A.I., Dept. of Posts and Telegraphs: Broadcasting Division, 1941-1989, MS 2001/78/05).

<sup>145</sup> Letter from the Society of St. Vincent de Paul to Childers, 24 Apr. 1968 (N.A.I., Dept. of Posts and Telegraphs: Broadcasting Division, 1941-1989, MS 2001/78/05).



A proposal by the Department of Health in 1968 initiated another loss of revenue situation for Childers. The department drafted a memorandum on the problems in public health which cigarettes posed and the steps to be undertaken to intensify the anti-smoking campaign. Among the items for discussion was cigarette advertising on television. They suggested to RTE to limit cigarette advertising on television until after 10 p.m. and to discourage participants in home produced programmes from smoking cigarettes.<sup>146</sup> The Department of Health also proposed the showing of short film clips during children's programmes to be screened free of charge by RTE. Their reply stated that the loss in revenue 'could not be made good in any significant degree from other possible advertising sources'.<sup>147</sup> Childers responded in his usual way and gathered all the facts pertinent to the issue. He requested his department to gather 'in countries where tobacco product advertising is permitted in newspapers and periodicals but not on TV or Radio what has been the effect?'.<sup>148</sup> It is difficult to say what impact his personal involvement had in RTE deciding 'to discontinue the advertising of cigarettes on television'.<sup>149</sup> The phased process was to be completed by 1971 and the loss of revenue was to be compensated by an application for an increase in licence fees. The Department of Health had shown that the discontinuance of cigarette advertising on television in Britain had no overall loss of revenue to the independent television companies. A more important point was the balance to be made between revenue and human suffering. This was not the end of the issue for Childers as his next portfolio was health.

When discussing controversial matters in which government departments were concerned RTE had assured Childers that the relevant department would be afforded the opportunity of giving the official view before such programmes were broadcast. Childers required that three days' notice be given to departments to enable them prepare their case. Programmes broadcast without obtaining relevant department views or which were not balanced brought swift and decisive action from Childers. In

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<sup>146</sup> Letter and memo. from the Dept. of Health to RTE, 20 Jun. 1968 (N.A.I., Dept. of Posts and Telegraphs: Broadcasting Division, 1941-1989, MS 2001/78/07).

<sup>147</sup> Letter from RTE to the Dept of Posts and Telegraphs, 26 June 1968 (N.A.I., Dept. of Posts and Telegraphs: Broadcasting Division, 1941-1989, MS 2001/78/07).

<sup>148</sup> Childers request to his dept. for information on the issue, 28 June 1968 (N.A.I., Dept. of Posts and Telegraphs: Broadcasting Division, 1941-1989, MS 2001/78/07).

<sup>149</sup> Letter from RTE to the Department of Posts and Telegraphs, 18 July 1968 (N.A.I., Dept. of Posts and Telegraphs: Broadcasting Division, 1941-1989, MS 2001/78/07).

December 1968 RTE broadcast a programme on Bantry Bay which had a direct effect on Childers's own department. In his opinion this programme was not objective and contrary to his agreement, his department was not consulted in relation to the content of the programme. The programme focused on Bantry Bay and Gulf Oil but Childers was annoyed because it suggested: 'that my department just accepted Gulf Oil's proposition. The suggestion was made that my department was sleepy and did not drive a hard enough bargain'.<sup>150</sup> Childers's department was not given the opportunity to stress the long negotiations that had taken place with Gulf Oil to ensure a pollution free environment. On the financial side, the programme did not mention the rates and rent paid to Cork County Council. This was the first time an industrial enterprise was established in the Western area without the payment of 40-50% free grants. A very angry Childers concluded his letter by saying:

I am extremely angry. I have been made a fool of by Justin Keating, one of your practising Communists who had a subtle sneering manner. The programme is brilliantly conceived to cast doubt and to deliver quiet innuendoes.<sup>151</sup>

A further letter to RTE in March 1969 outlined Childers's views on a programme that included a discussion on the mining industry. He suggested that the programme was prepared 'on a biased Socialist basis, completely contrary to the Broadcasting Act impartiality section'.<sup>152</sup> The programme should have included discussions on topics such as the heavy speculative capital costs and the problems associated with marketing the products. Nothing was said in relation to new prospecting techniques that were far too expensive for Ireland to fund. This was a technical programme and the Department of Industry and Commerce should have been consulted on the above and other issues. The programme 'was brilliantly designed to present a case that the government had been deceived, fooled, exploited to the limit'.<sup>153</sup> Childers concluded by saying: 'I cannot permit this kind of debate to continue. I will discuss it with the Board'.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Letter from Childers to Dr C.S. Andrews, Chairman of RTE, 19 Dec. 1968 (N.A.I., Dept. of Posts and Telegraphs, MS 2001/78/34).

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Letter from Childers to Dr C.S. Andrews, 8 Mar. 1969 (N.A.I., Dept. of Posts and Telegraphs, MS 2001/78/34).

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

Childers was not anti-liberal and his record as minister with responsibility for broadcasting showed that he encouraged open and balanced debate. However, Childers ensured that the Fianna Fáil position was adequately covered. The state controlled television service often had according to Diarmaid Ferriter: ‘a difficult time in trying to establish and measure the extent of its true independence, given the ease with which political and social pressure could be brought to bear when it was deemed to have strayed beyond its brief’.<sup>155</sup> Lemass expressed the view in 1966 that the state broadcaster should not be completely independent of government supervision in regards to its current affairs programmes.<sup>156</sup> However, the *Irish Times*, suggestion in 1969 that: ‘in his heart Mr. Childers would like to give the nation piped television from his Party’s H.Q.’ was a little harsh.<sup>157</sup> This relatively new medium of communication was there to be exploited by all political parties. There was truth in the sentiment that politicians must ‘adjust their rather proprietorial attitude in regard to television....they set up this thing and they are entitled to the benefit of it’.<sup>158</sup> The view that RTE would become: ‘an extension of the Government propaganda service where there would be no objectivity, no controversy, only the neutered views of the ruling cliqué’ was not likely to become a reality.<sup>159</sup> Having responsibility for the broadcasting service in the 1950s Childers well understood the power of the communications media.

Childers most significant contribution as Minister for Posts and Telegraphs was in the development of the national telephone service. He wanted to build on the experience he gained while Minister for Posts and Telegraphs during 1951-4 and continue with the improvements in the telephone service. The Swedish telephone system was considered one of the best in Europe and Childers, along with the chief engineer from the Department of Posts and Telegraphs went to Stockholm to examine the Swedish system.<sup>160</sup> Following Childers’s visit to Sweden an agreement was signed between the Swedish telephone company, Ericsson, and the Department of Posts and

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<sup>155</sup> Diarmaid Ferriter, *The transformation of Ireland 1900-2000* (London, 2005), p.539.

<sup>156</sup> For further on this see Diarmaid Ferriter, *The transformation of Ireland 1900-2000* (London, 2005), pp 601-3.

<sup>157</sup> *Irish Times*, 3 Mar. 1969.

<sup>158</sup> *Irish Independent*, 1 Mar. 1969.

<sup>159</sup> *Irish Times*, 3 Mar. 1969.

<sup>160</sup> Childers letter to Jack Lynch outlining details of visit, 31 Aug. 1967 (N.A.I., Dept. of the Taoiseach, MS 98/6/380).

Telegraphs. This agreement, signed: ‘in 1972 for a five year duration involving an industrial package which included local employment in manufacturing’ was one of Childers’s outstanding success stories.<sup>161</sup> On a national level, it led to the modernisation of Ireland’s telephone network, and on a local level it provided much needed employment when Ericsson opened a manufacturing facility in Athlone, County Westmeath, in 1974. Ericsson continues to be a key employer in Athlone with the emphasis on software development.

Politically, the Department of Posts and Telegraphs was not regarded as one of the senior ministries. Yet it was one of the biggest public enterprises with the appearance of an unwillingness to face the need for change. The department did not react quickly enough to modernise and develop the telephone system to meet public demand. Households could be waiting a couple of years for a telephone. The department had not ‘attuned itself to the modern Ireland’.<sup>162</sup> The *Irish Times* article of 19 June 1965 described the outward signs of the department. Postal vans and pillar boxes were painted a depressing shade of green, telephone booths were relics from a bygone era, its uniforms were outdated and premises were often shabby. Changes were taking place but these seemed to be dictated by changes in technology and not ‘by a bold and imaginative vision for the future’.<sup>163</sup> The British Post Office was to become a public corporation in order to increase its efficiency. It would still be a government department with a minister at its head answerable to parliament for its day-to day operations.<sup>164</sup> A consultant’s report was severely critical of the management structure of the telephone service. Childers once again confronted the control of the civil service over his department. Under the control of the civil service new innovations were not being considered and the management structure was too rigid. Childers suggested changing the telephone administration over to a state company management team. Eager to implement the findings of the report, continue with the services of the consultant and conduct a thorough examination into the desirability of changing the telephone administration, Childers wrote to the then

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<sup>161</sup> Taken from brochure produced by Ericsson, 30 Sept. 1989. (Copy in possession of the author).

<sup>162</sup> *Irish Times*, 19 Jun. 1965. Childers was not responsible for the Dept. of Posts and Telegraphs at this time.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>164</sup> Memo. entitled ‘Reorganisation of the Post Office’ presented to the British Parliament by the Postmaster General, Mar. 1967 (N.A.I., Dept. of the Taoiseach, MS 99/1/351).

Taoiseach, Jack Lynch.<sup>165</sup> In his reply to Childers, Lynch agreed that some change was necessary and requested that Childers consult with the Minister for Finance before undertaking a full-scale examination.<sup>166</sup> In February 1968 Childers wrote to the then Minister for Finance, Charles J. Haughey, enclosing a memorandum proposing the incorporation of the Department of Posts and Telegraphs as a state corporation. Childers wanted Haughey's reaction to his proposal before he presented them to government. He had completed his examination of the department's operations and informed Haughey that he had arrived at the: 'inescapable conclusion that the Postal and Telecommunication services should be operated by a state company with the same statutory organisation and powers such as the E.S.B. and subject to specific ministerial control'.<sup>167</sup>

To support his position Childers outlined the current position of the department. It employed 18,000 people, about half of the civil service, and many of its operations were commercial.<sup>168</sup> These operations included a telecommunications service, letter and parcel transport service, a banking type service, a purchasing organisation for its own and other Departments of State and general supervision of the broadcasting service. Childers stressed that department officers 'live in a paradoxical world of trying to operate a business while at the same time being tied to Civil Service procedure'.<sup>169</sup> In his reply Haughey was anxious to establish: 'whether a State-sponsored body would provide a better service without imposing further charges on the Exchequer'.<sup>170</sup> The provision of long-term capital for the development of the telephone service was of particular interest to Haughey. Subject to his difficulties in relating requirements to available resources he had considerable sympathy with Childers's views. Haughey suggested to Childers that he explore the possibility of the 'segregation of the telecommunications service as a separate public enterprise'.<sup>171</sup> He was not convinced that Childers's proposals would not lead to additional charges on the Exchequer. Both acknowledged that the retention of the Post Office within the

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<sup>165</sup> Letter from Childers to Jack Lynch, 6 Mar. 1967 (N.A.I., Dept. of the Taoiseach, MS 98/6/380).

<sup>166</sup> Letter from Jack Lynch to Childers, 7 Mar. 1967 (N.A.I., Dept. of the Taoiseach, MS 98/6/380).

<sup>167</sup> Memo. from Childers to Charles Haughey, 12 Feb. 1968 (N.A.I., Dept. of the Taoiseach, MS 99/1/351).

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Letter from Charles Haughey to Childers, 30 Jly. 1968 (N.A.I., Dept. of the Taoiseach, MS 99/1/351).

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

civil service caused problems. The suggestion that the telephone service be a separate public enterprise brought a positive response from Childers. He wrote to the Taoiseach, Jack Lynch, to see if he was prepared to consider the principle of incorporation. If he was: 'the question of whether the whole or part of the service can be incorporated can be examined'.<sup>172</sup> Evidence of Childers's maturity as a politician; negotiation and compromise had replaced a singled minded approach previously exhibited by Childers.

The period 1959-69 was not one in which Childers progressed his political career. In general this period of Childers's political career was disappointing but it was a time of continued political learning, and Childers showed definite signs of maturing politically. He did however have his successes during this period and towards the end of this period he held two ministries. His vision for co-operation between Northern Ireland and the Republic echoed that of Lemass. His eagerness and total commitment to his portfolios were admirable and there was no doubting Childers's work ethic and administrative abilities. However, his lack of understanding of the Irish political system demonstrated in his portfolios to date did not argue favourably for his candidacy for the more senior government portfolios. Childers did learn from his political experiences and with Jack Lynch as Taoiseach and the radically changing position of the Catholic Church as a result of the Second Vatican Council, the political horizon looked more positive for Childers.

The approaching June 1969 general election and the worsening situation in Northern Ireland were of concern to Childers. Apart altogether from his hatred of violence he was apprehensive of the effect on tourism. With Frank Aiken soon to retire to the backbenches, Childers would be the senior member of the Fianna Fáil government if he held his seat in Monaghan and Fianna Fáil won the June 1969 general election.

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<sup>172</sup> Letter from Childers to Jack Lynch, 29 Nov. 1968 (N.A.I., Dept. of the Taoiseach, MS 99/1/351).

## Chapter 5

### **Tánaiste and Minister for Health, 1969-73; forerunner of the modern presidency, 1973-4**

Jack Lynch led Fianna Fáil to victory in the general election of 18 June 1969 winning seventy-five of the 144 Dáil seats. The scale of his victory had shown that he was not merely an interim party leader. His rivals had their ambitions thwarted but they were not going to take this set-back lightly. George Colley had decided to bide his time for the leadership, but three other contenders, Charles Haughey, Neil Blaney and Kevin Boland were waiting for the opportunity to challenge Lynch. When the crisis broke on 6 May 1970 Lynch had few colleagues he could trust. The moment had arrived for Childers not only to firmly back his party leader but to show his calmness and control under severe pressure. The early 1970s were troubled times for Lynch but he managed to survive. He not only survived as leader of Fianna Fáil but registered considerable success during this period. Among these were the establishment of special courts to deal with gunmen and the winning of the referendum in May 1972 in favour of Ireland's entry into the European Economic Community. Childers support of Lynch and his part in maintaining calm during this crisis deserves more recognition than has been afforded to him.

Childers secured his own seat in Monaghan in the 1969 election and was about to undertake the most rewarding and challenging portfolio of his political career. Although never considered for the position of Taoiseach, his political maturity and experience was about to be rewarded by Jack Lynch. Article twenty eight, section six of Bunreacht na hÉireann states that:

The Taoiseach shall nominate a member of the Government to be the Tánaiste. The Tánaiste shall act for all purposes in the place of the Taoiseach if the Taoiseach should die, or become permanently incapacitated, until a new Taoiseach shall have been appointed.<sup>1</sup>

When the Dáil resumed in July 1969, Frank Aiken retired to the back benches and was replaced as Tánaiste by Childers, Lynch's most senior colleague, on 2 July 1969. Childers remained as Tánaiste until he resigned from political life on 14 March 1973 to contest the presidential election. Lynch made minimal changes to his government with Charles Haughey, Neil Blaney and Kevin Boland all returning to their portfolios.

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<sup>1</sup> *Bunreacht na hÉireann*, 1937 (<http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/index.asp?docID=243>) (23 May 2008).

Childers's contribution to Irish political life was rewarded and he fulfilled the expectations and trust which Jack Lynch bestowed upon him. In the ensuing cabinet re-shuffle Childers was allocated the health portfolio, the ministry in which Childers most effectively demonstrated his talents as an administrator and manager. In an interview in early 1971 Childers admitted that he wanted 'to be Minister for Agriculture. I wanted that ministry most of all. Nobody would think me suitable, though'.<sup>2</sup> Although not realising this ambition Childers had never the less gained his first senior portfolio at the age of sixty-three. Health had been his first choice of study at Cambridge and it was as Minister for Health that he would gain the most personal satisfaction and general recognition of his accomplishments. One of his primary tasks in his new portfolio was the implementation of the 1970 health act which had its origins in a government white paper in 1966.<sup>3</sup> This complex piece of legislation demonstrated Childers's administrative and organisational abilities. Having the new structures in place Childers concentrated on the real work as Minister for Health; the opportunity to bring real and positive change to the lives of people and his areas of interest ranged from child care to the care and protection of the aged.

In July 1969 Childers confronted a health system with administrative routines based mainly on the county council system established in 1898 and visitations to local doctors were through the dispensary system created in 1852. This dispensary system was also responsible for the provision of medicines, often dispensed by the doctor. It was realised, stated John Devlin, that to take advantage of improvements in healthcare and new technology, it was necessary to introduce new administrative procedures 'to maximise access to healthcare.'<sup>4</sup> The 1970 Health Act gave Childers the authority to remove these antiquated systems. It is important to emphasise that Childers worked from a loose framework on how the new system would be structured. The 1966 proposals on health were vague and this presented Childers with the opportunity to use his negotiation and administrative skills. The vagueness of the proposed new health structures can be appreciated by referring to one of the key elements of the new structures, the provision of health boards. It was envisaged that health boards be

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<sup>2</sup> Press cutting, unidentified, early 1971(T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9977/659).

<sup>3</sup> Childers memo. to government, 28 Feb. 1969 (N.A.I., Department of the Taoiseach, MS 2000/6/198).

<sup>4</sup> John Devlin, 'The state of health in Ireland' in Joseph Robins (ed.), *Reflections on health* (Dublin, 1997), p.21.



created but the number of boards and the negotiations necessary to implement these boards rested with Childers. He was now in a position where administrative skills alone were not sufficient. He had to plan, lead, control and motivate. This was a real test for Childers and the opportunity to use the political skills he had amassed during his political career.

On 15 July 1969 Childers proposed to the Dáil that ‘the Health Bill, 1969, which had reached Committee Stage prior to the dissolution of the Dáil on 22 May 1969, be restored to the Order Paper’<sup>5</sup> The Dáil passed the motion and Childers commenced his direct involvement with the health bill. The new health structure was based on the creation of eight health boards, three regional hospital boards in Cork, Dublin and Galway and a new body called Comhairle na nOspidéal. The dispensary system was abolished and replaced by the choice-of-doctor scheme. The provision of medicines was transferred from the dispensary and allocated to chemist outlets. Childers faced the enormous task of replacing structures and practices in operation from the foundation of the state. People and institutions were required to accept change and the uncertainty it brought with it.

Provision of health services was the responsibility of twenty-seven local authorities and this role passed to the eight new health boards each responsible for a group of counties. Childers planned on having the health boards in place by October 1970 and that they would be in a position to take over the responsibility of the health services on 1 April 1971.<sup>6</sup> All hospitals owned by the local authorities transferred to the health boards but this left the problem of the voluntary hospitals whose ownership was not affected by the introduction of the health bill. There was also the problem of cooperation between hospitals outside the control of individual health boards.

There were mixed feelings about the establishment of the health boards and Childers emphasised the unique features, which he believed, would assist in their success. The membership of the boards comprised public representatives, medical and other professional people whose daily lives ‘were spent in the provision of health services in one form or another’.<sup>7</sup> With responsibility from April 1971 for the

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<sup>5</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol. 241, 15 July 1969.

<sup>6</sup> Childers address to the NHC, 7 Nov. 1969 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers’ Speeches 1969-70, MS GIS 1/68).

<sup>7</sup> Childers speech to the inaugural meetings of the Eastern, North Eastern, South Eastern and Midland Health Boards in Dublin, 26 Nov. 1970 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers’ Speeches May 1970-May 1971, MS GIS 1/69).

administration of the health services, each board would have control and responsibility for the provision of all health services in its area. When the decision was taken to change the system of administration, arguments were made for leaving the administration of services outside of hospitals in the hands of local authorities. This was rejected and Childers suggested that:

all of the services were inter-dependent on one another, and there could not be proper planning or resource allocation in a situation where one body was not responsible for taking an overall look at the total health care needs of an area.<sup>8</sup>

Most commentators were in agreement with Childers's desire to rationalise the number of local health authorities. However, while agreeing with the general membership of the health boards, former Labour party deputy Barry Desmond, has suggested that Childers gave too much power to the various bodies that comprised the health boards.<sup>9</sup> Childers expected the various professional groups that comprised the membership of the health boards to work towards the provision of better health services and not indulge self-interests.<sup>10</sup> Childers was a man of principle and would have expected the health boards to take an objective view on all policy discussions. It can also be argued that the provision of eight health-boards was excessive given the size and population of the country. Childers could have amended the proposed structure and looked at the overall health service from the point of view of the entire country. This would have led to enormous cost savings in personnel and general administration but would not have facilitated Childers's view of the future development of health care. His plan was for the development of community health teams under the control of the health boards. Childers encouraged local community efforts in relation to all aspects of social and economic life and the new health and welfare systems 'would be welded into one and shaped to meet the needs of the local community'.<sup>11</sup> Local development was a theme that constantly emerged throughout

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<sup>8</sup> Childers speech to the inaugural meetings of the Eastern, North Eastern, South Eastern and Midland Health Boards in Dublin, 26 Nov. 1970 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers' Speeches May 1970-May 1971, MS GIS 1/69).

<sup>9</sup> Author's interview with Barry Desmond, 22 Nov. 2005 in the Dáil Éireann café and notes provided to the author by Mr Desmond dated 12 Feb. 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Childers speech to the inaugural meetings of the Eastern, North Eastern, South Eastern and Midland Health Boards in Dublin, 26 Nov. 1970 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers' Speeches May 1970-May 1971, MS GIS 1/69).

Childers political career. The health board structure provided the opportunities for moving health care into the communities.

Local authorities were apprehensive of the proposed developments. They no longer controlled the provision of health services and were anxious as to the effects on their counties. Childers held conferences to answer their questions and update them on issues of interest. Childers's former constituency of Longford-Westmeath shared the same concerns and uncertainties experienced by other county officials. Westmeath County Council was invited to send six representatives, together with the County Manager to a conference with Childers on the new health bill proposals. Westmeath was grouped with Longford, Laois and Offaly to form the new Midland Health Board. The retention of hospital facilities was of concern to Westmeath County Council and it was decided that Westmeath and Longford should work closely together to secure the best hospitalisation in their counties. Laois and Offaly County Councils had a similar co-operation pact. The concerns were not only experienced at county level and the debate quickly emerged as to which towns would benefit from the new health structures. In Westmeath there was the perception among councillors that Athlone was a town of factories and Mullingar was a town of hospitals. Childers faced difficult decisions on a national and local level in determining where hospitals were to be situated. The Buchanan Report, published in 1968, had recommended Athlone as the major growth area for the Midlands and with the expected transfer of the Department of Education to Athlone; local councillors could expect a positive outcome for Athlone when details of the new health structures were announced.<sup>12</sup>

One of the major questions to be answered in the Midland Health Board area was the intended location of the Regional Hospital. Regional Hospitals would be located at central locations and when pressed on this issue by the various interested parties in the Midlands, Childers acknowledged that there were: 'plenty of headaches involved in making a decision and in trying to satisfy everybody'.<sup>13</sup> In Offaly the council recognised that the issue of the Regional Hospital would be the most important item to be considered for a long time to come. Offaly councillors were not only considering the Regional Hospital but also suitable locations for the Regional

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<sup>12</sup> *Westmeath Independent*, 4 and 18 Oct. 1969.

<sup>13</sup> *Westmeath Independent*, 8 Nov 1969.

Board should it be sited in Tullamore.<sup>14</sup> In Athlone, councillors were confident that the Regional Hospital would be located there, while representatives in Tullamore were reminding Childers that the Fitzgerald Report had recommended their area for the Regional Hospital.<sup>15</sup> The Fitzgerald Report was produced in 1967 by a council made up entirely of hospital consultants and was part of the re-appraisal of the health services undertaken in the 1960s. A letter from Childers to Laois-Offaly TDs dated 19 November 1969 stated that no final decision had been made on the location of a new Regional Hospital for the Midlands. Childers promised that: ‘before any final decision is taken as to the future of the Midland hospital services, I will be in touch with the local health authorities involved’.<sup>16</sup> The complex and demanding decisions required of Childers in relation to the Midland Health Board was representative of concerns and challenges faced by him across all the health board areas. Through inclusive negotiations Childers managed the uncertainty and fears faced by concerned organisations. However, he was determined to implement hospital changes and no amount of local pressures would deter him as he had shown in previous portfolios. Childers had made unpopular decisions in the past and he continued to make objective decisions based on the evidence and facts available to him. Addressing the National Health Council (cited hereafter as the NHC) in November 1969, Childers stated that no amount of local pressure would deter him from making firm decisions regarding the concentration of acute surgical services in large well-equipped hospitals. This would, stated Childers, lead to a reduction in deaths and a reduction in the numbers of people who suffered disability as a result of acute illness. The reorganisation of hospital services was also necessitated by the need to improve facilities for the training of graduates and nurses. Referring to an English survey Childers told the NHC that ‘deaths from coronary thrombosis were markedly lower when patients were treated in a teaching hospital as compared with an ordinary hospital’.<sup>17</sup>

To overcome the difficulties the health boards would have in relation to voluntary hospitals and other issues the health bill proposed the formation of three regional hospital boards. Their function was the regional development and general

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<sup>14</sup> *Westmeath Independent*, 22 Nov 1969.

<sup>15</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol. 241, 29 Oct. 1969.

<sup>16</sup> *Westmeath Independent*, 22 Nov 1969.

<sup>17</sup> Childers speech to the National Health Council, 7 Nov. 1969 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers’ Speeches 1969-70, MS GIS 1/68).

organisation 'of hospital services in an efficient and satisfactory manner in the hospitals administered by health boards and other bodies in its functional area which are engaged in the provision of services under the Act'.<sup>18</sup> At a national level Comhairle na nOspidéal was established to control the allocation of medical personnel to the hospitals, both health board hospitals and voluntary hospitals. It regulated consultant appointments and the development of specialties in the hospitals providing services under the health act. Childers regarded this body as: 'highly important, both for the quality of the services and for ensuring the best use of resources, that there should be control on the creation of new specialties in hospitals and the appointment of new consultants'.<sup>19</sup>

In the dismantling of the old structures the most fundamental issue to Childers was the abolition of the dispensary system and its replacement by the choice-of-doctor scheme. To Childers this was 'the most important change in the services'.<sup>20</sup> He was determined that: 'nothing would stand in the way of achieving what in effect would be the final point of departure from 19<sup>th</sup> century concepts of public medicine'.<sup>21</sup> The choice of doctor scheme for medical card holders removed the social discrimination which existed under the dispensary system.

Having successfully negotiated the structure of the health system for the following thirty odd years, Childers continued his desire for efficiency in the department of health. Throughout his political career Childers constantly sought efficiency in all portfolios he held. He endorsed the acute surgical hospital services in large well-equipped hospitals and set up a special unit in the Department of Health to improve hospital efficiency. Childers recognised the need for a complete overhaul of hospital administration in order to reduce cost and to increase productivity of all medical staff. While determined to implement changes and new procedures Childers knew that he had to convince the existing organisations of the need for change and he would include them in the decision-making process by requesting their input and advice. This inclusive approach was shown by Childers in his dealings with An Bord Altranais in relation to improved efficiency in the nursing area. His hospital efficiency

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<sup>18</sup> *Seanad Éireann debates*, vol. 67, 14 Jan. 1970.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Childers speech to the Irish Medical Association, 17 Apr. 1971 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers' Speeches May 1970-May 1971, MS GIS 1/69).

unit would include work study in relation to nurse-patient ratios and would lead to a more efficient method of operation for nurses and a happier working environment.<sup>22</sup>

Addressing the NHC he outlined the proposed new administration of the health services. The NHC had themselves given much thought to the area of health administration and Childers emphasised that their contributions helped mould several provisions of the new health bill.<sup>23</sup> Childers used his experience and people skills in conveying the future position of the NHC itself. With the proposed new administration of the health services the position of the NHC came under review. He conceded that the new health arrangements would not affect the need to have a widely-based authoritative advisory body such as the NHC, but in future its membership would be drawn from the health boards and other new administrative bodies. This was not to say that the NHC would become a consultative body of the new health boards but that half its members would come from the health boards. The council's function was to advise the minister on health issues referred to them by the minister. Childers suggested that the new membership would provide a good mixture of the medical professions and those engaged in practical administration of the health services.<sup>24</sup> He suggested to the NHC that they might consider whether it would be advantageous to them in their discussions if they had more close and direct contact with his department. He wondered if it would be of help to the NHC if senior officers of his department were to attend their meetings. Childers suggested that senior officers who had specialist knowledge of a particular subject share their expertise with the NHC. These officers would not be attending as members of the NHC and it would be for the NHC, and not Childers, to decide if the suggestion would be accepted, 'he was throwing it out for their consideration'.<sup>25</sup> The NHC accepted Childers's suggestions and testimony to the cooperation between the department of health and the NHC is found in the 1972 annual report of the NHC. They concluded their report by expressing their sincere appreciation to 'the many Departmental officials who

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<sup>22</sup> Childers speech to An Bord Altranais, 25 Mar. 1970 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers' Speeches 1969-70, MS GIS 1/68).

<sup>23</sup> Childers speech to the National Health Council, 7 Nov. 1969 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers' Speeches 1969-70, MS GIS 1/68).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

contributed so much to the Council's discussions during the past two years'.<sup>26</sup> The approach adopted by Childers was typical of his negotiating stance during this period. Gone were the days when he was singled minded in his approach and not prepared to compromise or negotiate his position. He had learned from his previous experiences and now skilfully led the medical organisations through a very delicate process.

Childers's philosophy on health can be summarised in his assertion that 'we have an obligation to ensure the health services should be of the best standard attainable and should be readily available to those whose needs are greatest'.<sup>27</sup> To deliver health services Childers recognised the vital role of the nursing profession. He was eager that those nurses who had a particular understanding of the problems of children work in this area of the health service. Childers called for a greater emphasis on the value to the community of the public health nurse. He became more involved with nursing developments and supported An Bord Altranais in every way open to him to achieve their aims and goals. He saw it as vital to have sufficient numbers of highly qualified nurses and to have post-graduate nursing training to meet future demands of the health services. To provide training in a wide range of nursing skills Childers recommended the amalgamation of training schools thus providing training schools of at least three hundred beds. The Fitzgerald Report also recommended the establishment of hospitals of not less than three hundred beds in order to provide student nurses with the range of skills and techniques required.<sup>28</sup>

While the introduction of new systems and a continued drive for efficiency were important ingredients of the new health structures, it was the care of people that was of paramount importance to Childers. Three areas of interest are considered to demonstrate Childers contribution to health development during his reign as minister.

One of Childers's areas of special interest was the development of child care services and he instigated a planned programme of child health care covering the years 1970-4. Child care was of interest to Dáil deputies particularly those in the medical profession. In December 1969 deputy Browne, Labour, questioned Childers

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<sup>26</sup> Taken from the annual report of the NHC, 31 Mar. 1972 (N.A.I., Department of the Taoiseach, MS 2003/16/224).

<sup>27</sup> Childers speech to the Irish Medical Association, 17 Apr. 1971 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers' Speeches May 1970-May 1971, MS GIS 1/69).

<sup>28</sup> Childers speech to the National Health Council, 7 Nov. 1969 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers' Speeches 1969-70, MS GIS 1/68).

on the eligibility of children for free treatment under the school medical services. Deputy Tunney, Fianna Fáil, asked Childers if he was prepared: 'to extend school medical inspections to all children under the age of fourteen'.<sup>29</sup> In relation to child care, Childers's priority lay in 'pre-school service for all children and the existing school service in national schools'.<sup>30</sup> Addressing the Dáil during his presentation of the health department spending estimates for 1970-1 he told deputies that: 'pre-school children will receive at least three or four detailed examinations...school children will have more detailed and selective school health examinations'.<sup>31</sup> Child welfare and school health services had been a feature of the public health system for many years. Young children were examined in clinics and the school service generally provided three medical examinations for national school children during the term of their school life. However, deficiencies were identified within child health services and Childers set about remedying the situation. Pre-school examinations were confined to urban areas and this limited its impact as it 'reached slightly less than half of the total number of pre-school children'.<sup>32</sup> The effectiveness of the school examination system was hindered by the fact 'that the examination of large numbers of healthy children was an obstacle to the fuller examination of children needing particular care and attention'.<sup>33</sup> Childers proposed to introduce his new child care service 'gradually over a period of 4 years'.<sup>34</sup> The ever maturing politician within Childers realised that his programme needed time and he was aware of the many demands on the finance minister. His ultimate objective was to:

provide a comprehensive medical examination for children at the ages of 6 months, 12 months and 2 years....comprehensive medical examinations for children over 6 years....pre-school developmental paediatric examinations in rural areas....as soon as practicable.<sup>35</sup>

Part of this programme was the introduction of developmental screening for babies of six months old. It was not intended for children who were obviously ill and being treated by the family doctor. This service was to reassure parents that their

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<sup>29</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.243, 10 Dec.1969.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.245, 8 Apr. 1970.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*



children were perfectly healthy or to identify medical problems at the earliest stage. The new service was a preventative one and extended to include one and two year old children. His aim 'was a modern child health service stretching from the cradle to the teenage stage and laying the foundation for a healthy and well adjusted adult life'.<sup>36</sup> Childers's plan envisaged an integrated system whereby all relevant records concerning the health of a child were brought together.

At the other end of the health spectrum were the aged and Childers was not satisfied with their care. He believed that a social service community care programme was 'the most important single programme of health policy yet to be developed over the whole country'.<sup>37</sup> This was not to say that essential and effective institutional services were not required. Replying to deputy Browne's suggestion that the 'concept of the county home should be abandoned', Childers agreed that the traditional concept of indiscriminate admissions and general poor standards of accommodation should be abandoned.<sup>38</sup> However, this did not mean that 'homes in which satisfactory standards of accommodation and facilities for the proper care of patients have been provided....need to be abandoned'.<sup>39</sup> This was a reasonable position for Childers to adopt, but he emphasised that the primary aim of services for the aged would be 'to assist persons to continue to live in the community for as long as possible with the aid of supportive services'.<sup>40</sup> The new health boards would give high priority to developing services for the aged. Childers believed that community care was more beneficial than institutional care. His personal conviction was that: 'voluntary home help service, which is in essence merely an extension of normal good neighbourly relations, is far more desirable than the recruitment of home help staff by the Health Board'.<sup>41</sup> Childers urged health authorities to encourage voluntary bodies to accept 'greater responsibility for the care of the aged in the community'.<sup>42</sup> Throughout his

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<sup>36</sup> Childers speech to launch the new child health services, Dublin, 26 Oct. 1970 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9967/1691).

<sup>37</sup> Childers speech to the Irish Medical Association, 17 Apr. 1971 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers' Speeches May 1970-May1971, MS GIS 1/69).

<sup>38</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.245, 19 Mar.1970.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Childers speech to the Finglas Community Services Centre, 12 Sept. 1972 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers' Speeches Jly. 1972-Jun. 1973, MS GIS 1/71). Underlined by Childers.

<sup>42</sup> Taken from Childers memo. on the care of the aged, 26 Feb. 1970 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9947/4).

political career Childers championed the cause of self-sufficiency and the need for communities to take ownership of local projects. He included provision in legislation for the provision of a comprehensive home help service for the aged in their homes. This service envisaged a local woman carrying out household duties which would enable the aged person to continue living at home and away from institutions. There were many issues in relation to county homes that Childers could not provide satisfactory answers to. Deputy Browne pressed Childers hard on accommodation facilities in county homes for married couples and, where it arose, their children. Childers response was that county homes were 'designed on the basis of segregated accommodation...accommodation for married couples was not provided'.<sup>43</sup> This practice was, according to deputy Browne 'scandalous....forcibly divorcing married aged couples'.<sup>44</sup> Childers's response was that progress was being made at a pace which the economy could afford. In reply to Childers deputy Coogan, Fine Gael, stated: 'those whom God has joined, let no man put asunder'.<sup>45</sup>

The county homes issue was just one of the many problems faced by Childers in relation to the care of the aged. He continued to show his political maturity and understanding of the demands placed upon a limited source of funding. In relation to the care of the aged Childers told deputies that: 'our resources are not unlimited and that even among priority projects, the competition for a share of funds available is intense...we have to be flexible....however....to aim for the ideal'.<sup>46</sup> Childers was still an idealist but had learned from his previous experiences.

The area of mental illness occupied a considerable part of Childers's time as health minister. His targets included a reduction in the number of long-stay patients and 'that patients admitted to our psychiatric hospitals receive intensive care so that they may be returned to the community as quickly as possible'.<sup>47</sup> While appreciating that great improvements had taken place and that district mental hospitals had greatly 'changed from places of custody to places of treatment', much more needed to be done.<sup>48</sup> Additional medical staff needed to be recruited and properly utilised. To

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<sup>43</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.245, 19 Mar.1970.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.245, 8 Apr. 1970.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Childers speech to a conference of managers and chief psychiatrists in St. Brendan's Hospital, Dublin, 27 May 1970 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers' Speeches May 1970-May 1971, MS GIS 1/69).

advance a proper psychiatric service additional nursing staff were required. On the physical environment in which many patients were maintained, Childers was shocked and questioned why standards were accepted 'which would not be tolerated anywhere else'.<sup>49</sup> He was concerned with the number of patients in psychiatric hospitals, as numbers were exceptionally high by international standards. The percentage of voluntary admissions to psychiatric hospitals was, according to Diarmaid Ferriter, low, with the World Health Organisation highlighting in 1963 Ireland's extraordinary mental health statistics.<sup>50</sup>

In creating the health and regional boards Childers endorsed the use of bigger hospitals with a wide range of facilities and expertise. The Fitzgerald Report had recommended larger hospitals 'on the grounds of safety, medical and nursing training and economics'.<sup>51</sup> Not so in relation to mental health facilities. He did not support the expansion of the mental institutions and reduced the capital financing for such projects. The report of an inquiry into mental illness published in 1966 recommended that large psychiatric hospitals gradually be replaced with psychiatric units attached to general hospitals.<sup>52</sup> Childers instructed his department to divert the main capital expenditure to 'short-stay psychiatric units in general hospitals or to out-patient clinics'.<sup>53</sup> He advised that all current expenditure be allocated to community services and 'the quick development of psychiatric social worker service. A new effort to be made to attract psychiatric social workers'.<sup>54</sup> Mental health was to receive additional aid for lectures 'to the public on young age group mental illness'.<sup>55</sup> Awareness, prevention and again, community involvement, underpinned Childers's approach to mental health. In common with all areas of health, the issues in relation to mental illness would be tackled, according to Childers, in a 'steady programme of improvement over a period'.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Childers speech to a conference of managers and chief psychiatrists in St. Brendan's Hospital, Dublin, 27 May 1970 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers' Speeches May 1970-May 1971, MS GIS 1/69).

<sup>50</sup> Diarmaid Ferriter, *The transformation of Ireland 1900-2000* (London, 2005), p.592.

<sup>51</sup> Patricia Brown and Geoffrey Chadwick, 'Management and the health professional' in Joseph Robins (ed.), *Reflections on health* (Dublin, 1997), p.195.

<sup>52</sup> Padraig O'Morain, *The health of a nation, the Irish healthcare system 1957-2007* (Dublin, 2007), p.9.

<sup>53</sup> Childers memo. to his dept., 7 Jan. 1972 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9947/19).

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.246, 5 May 1970.

While in the department of lands Childers frequently commented on issues relating to agriculture. This was not always greeted with applause by his fellow ministers but it showed that he was thinking outside the boundaries of his own department and the possible effects each department had on the other. When he came across unsatisfactory procedures or events he highlighted these in order to make improvements. Childers viewed health not only in terms of structures and procedures within his department but also on conditions and issues outside the immediate ambit of his department which affected health. The issues he put forward for consideration included the effects of urban life compared to that of rural living. The anonymity of life in urban areas due to the migration to new housing areas and the reduction of social and moral controls by the clergy as compared with rural areas contributed to 'the evils of metropolis life'.<sup>57</sup> Mental and physical illness could be reduced in incidence by the development of community associations 'devoted to the encouragement of adult education, cultural activity, hobbies, etc.'.<sup>58</sup> Childers was also concerned with the young age at which people were admitted to mental hospitals and suggested that this must be associated in part with difficulties at home and the failure 'of society to help those who are bad communicators. The unsure people'.<sup>59</sup> He emphasised the lack of community associations to deal with the problem of 'nothing to do in the evenings'.<sup>60</sup> He advocated the necessity to develop community centres on an equal level with housing developments.

Bad housing and under-privileged conditions contributed towards stress and associated problems. Childers suggested that a very big question arose in the area of marriage guidance counselling. In a very direct comment he said that: 'I am absolutely convinced that many marriages break down and mental stress occurs because of the inability of a wife to look after her house and because she has never been taught to cook properly for the modern age. Domestic science for both girls and, possibly, boys enters into the picture'.<sup>61</sup> To put Childers's views into context, it is worth remembering that 1970 was the year that Ireland's Catholic bishops agreed to

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<sup>57</sup> Childers memo. to his dept., 4 Feb. 1970 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9947/5).

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

lift the church ban which prevented its members from attending Trinity College, Dublin. The beginning of the 1970s saw Ireland:

Well and truly caught up in the stepped-up tempo of social change....a will to challenge what was called 'the establishment'....student sit-ins, contraceptive trains....campaigns for....equal pay, contraception and divorce. The women's liberation movement began to be a formidable presence in Irish life, not so much in its particular organisational forms and activities, but more in the whole atmosphere of questioning traditional sex roles that gave rise to it.<sup>62</sup>

Was Childers out of touch with developments in the 1970s or was he attributing blame to the social changes that were contributing, in his opinion, to problems such as marriage break downs and mental health issues? New conditions in the 1970s presented, according to Childers, new challenges. Growing affluence, a belief that wealth brings solutions to personal and moral problems and the introduction of the forty hour week thus creating leisure stress problems contributed to the new challenges. This era also experienced mass communication of violence and unrest from the whole world and the 'clamour of anti-establishment protest'.<sup>63</sup> Childers's solution was to develop 'health education on a far greater scale'.<sup>64</sup> He concluded his memorandum by seeking his officials' advice and by emphasising that he 'was not going to leave this problem unexamined'.<sup>65</sup>

Childers considered the statistics on the death rate per one hundred as the 'most valid evidence of health service efficiency' and life expectancy statistics as the 'most valid of all'.<sup>66</sup> To Childers 'health must be viewed in context of all aspects of living'.<sup>67</sup> His desire to identify the range of problems that affected health but were outside the control of his department demonstrated his understanding of public health. Having learned from previous experiences that his ideal solution may not be politically possible he stated that: 'if we cannot invade the fields covered by other departments, we can at least encourage community associations'.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> DCU course Social History and TV Drama. Chapter 5, The 1970s: Progress, Pressures and Protests ([www.comms.dcu.ie/sheehan/70s-itvd.htm](http://www.comms.dcu.ie/sheehan/70s-itvd.htm)) (8 Oct. 2007).

<sup>63</sup> Childers memo. to his dept., 4 Feb. 1970 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9947/5).

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Childers hand-written notes, undated (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9947/44-46).

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9947/46).

<sup>68</sup> Childers memo. to his dept., 4 Feb. 1970 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9947/5).

Childers demonstrated an understanding of health issues in the broadest sense. However, he was accused of ignoring the health issues in relation to smoking. In the Dáil Childers was questioned on the possibility of introducing legislation to ensure the discontinuance of cigarette advertising on television and in the press. The RTE deadline for ceasing cigarette advertising was 1 April 1971 but Childers did not feel ‘justified in seeking to compel the discontinuance of press advertising’.<sup>69</sup> He was going to avoid compulsion and rely on cigarette manufacturers to comply ‘with a code of standards for advertising which limits considerably the effectiveness of such advertising’.<sup>70</sup> When pressed on the dangers of smoking and the increase in the number of people dying from lung cancer Childers argued the point of voluntary restraint, having regard to the fact ‘that the incidence of lung cancer depends to a considerable degree on the number of cigarettes consumed over a given period’.<sup>71</sup> The number of deaths from cancer of the bronchus, trachea and lung in 1966 was 777.<sup>72</sup> By 1968 the number had increased to 908.<sup>73</sup> In light of this trend and other medical conditions arising from cigarette smoking Childers was urged to reconsider his attitude. His reply to the Dáil was that:

this matter will always be kept under review but as in connection with the fatalities and deaths that occur from a number of other causes an element of voluntary restraint must come into the picture.<sup>74</sup>

The response to this statement from deputy Noel Browne, now of Labour, was ‘Rubbish’.<sup>75</sup> His position on cigarette advertising conflicted with opposition opinion and the medical statistics during these years. Statistics for 1970 for the corresponding illness showed total deaths of 957 and this figure increased to 1004 in 1971.<sup>76</sup> When pressed by deputy Browne if he intended to stop all cigarette advertising Childers replied: ‘On the question of banning advertising of cigarettes entirely, I must say that I

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<sup>69</sup> Extract from Dáil debate, 9 Jly. 1969 (N.A.I., Dept. of Posts and Telegraphs: Broadcasting Division, 1941-1989, MS 2001/78/07).

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Notes from the Dept. of Health and Children to the author, 29 Nov. 2005 (MS INACT/INA/O/438136).

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Extract of Dáil debate, 9 Jly. 1969 (N.A.I., Dept. of Posts and Telegraphs: Broadcasting Division, 1941-1989, MS 2001/78/07).

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Notes from the Dept. of Health and Children to the author, 29 Nov. 2005 (MS INACT/INA/O/438136).

am disinclined to use any element of compulsion whatsoever'.<sup>77</sup> Childers preached personal and community responsibility, people helping themselves and their communities. During his term in the department of lands Childers stated that people were too dependent on their public representatives. His initial position on smoking was in keeping with this view. While he led campaigns directed at young people in relation to the hazards of smoking, he was not a pioneer in the drive to abolish cigarette advertising from the media in general.

The introduction of any new system brings its own problems and challenges and Childers's new health structure was no different. During 1969 the then finance minister, Charles Haughey, urged his fellow ministers, including Childers, to look for areas where expenditure could be reduced or deferred. Health costs were increasing and in September 1970 the then Minister for Finance George Colley reminded Childers of his department's proposed scheme to introduce a health contribution scheme for the middle income group. The NHC also accepted that it was reasonable to expect those who could contribute towards the cost of health care to do so. By September 1970 the cost of health services were continuing to rise 'without reckoning the cost of new services such as choice of doctor and supply of drugs through pharmacies'.<sup>78</sup> Replying to a question from deputy Cooney, Fine Gael, in the Dáil concerning the cost of general practitioner services in the Midland Health Board, Childers stated that 'while it has been possible to make estimates of the cost of the new scheme on a broad national basis it would...be difficult...to estimate the cost implications in a particular part of the country'.<sup>79</sup> By 1973 there were concerns in government regarding abuses within the choice-of-doctor scheme with an Taoiseach, Jack Lynch, urging Childers that action was required to avoid the situation getting out of control. The expenditure on medicines provided under the general medical services revealed a continuing upward trend during the period 1966-7 to 1970-1. The cost of the service was £1,281,200 in 1966-7 and this had risen each year until it reached £3,056,100 for the year 1970-1.<sup>80</sup> Medical services were increasing in cost and

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<sup>77</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol. 251, 27 Jan. 1971.

<sup>78</sup> Letter from George Colley to Childers, 2 Sept. 1970 (N.A.I., Department of the Taoiseach, MS 2002/8/149).

<sup>79</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol. 254, 24 Jun. 1971.

<sup>80</sup> Notes from the Dept. of Health and Children to the author, 9 Feb. 2007 (MS INACT/INA/O/461049).

Childers set about restoring confidence within government on the expenditure within the general medical services. On 10 January 1973 Childers prepared a memorandum for government on the choice-of-doctor scheme. In it he gave some historical information detailing events up to the introduction of the scheme including how doctors were to be compensated for using the new scheme. During an address to the Irish Medical Association in July 1966, an officer of the department of health stated:

I am not suggesting that doctors are more likely than others to take advantage of circumstances where their earnings can be varied more or less at their will but doctors, not much less than other mortals, are bedevilled with the effects of original sin.<sup>81</sup>

Within the memorandum Childers prepared a table showing the estimated earnings of doctors from the scheme. While the vast majority were expected to earn less than 6,000 pounds some doctors' earnings were expected to be in the range of 12,000 to 15,000 pounds. Childers concluded that if a doctor was full time dedicated to the service then: 'a gross income ranging up to about £10,000 in a year might, in the Minister's view, be quite reasonable and not out of accord with earnings from fees from public funds by some other professions'.<sup>82</sup> Doctors with relatively small incomes could also be abusing the system as they 'may be claiming excessive amounts in relation to the numbers on their lists'.<sup>83</sup> Childers detailed the investigation procedures where abuse was suspected and suggested that 'for most of the doctors participating in the scheme, there does not seem to be evidence of abuse'.<sup>84</sup> Where the number of visits by patients to their doctors was high Childers proposed, in co-operation with the medical profession, to launch a publicity campaign to educate the public on the use of the service. Childers also urged programmes of education for participating doctors in the scheme in relation to visiting and prescribing patterns. As a long-term project there would be constant monitoring of the system 'with a view to making improvements'.<sup>85</sup> In considering the scheme one essential factor that had to be kept in mind was, according to Childers, 'the cost of keeping and treating a patient in

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<sup>81</sup> Childers memo. to government, 10 Jan. 1973 (N.A.I., Department of the Taoiseach, MS 2004/21/106).

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.



hospital'.<sup>86</sup> In many cases this was 'exceeding £10 a day...more than a general practitioner, even with a high visiting rate, would receive for the average patient in a year.'<sup>87</sup> Childers argued that the expenditure on the choice-of-doctor scheme had reduced the numbers going to hospital for in-patient and out-patient care. The new scheme gave the doctor the incentive to keep patients at home, the old dispensary system encouraged hospitalisation. Apart altogether from the positive financial benefits of the new system it also went some way towards Childers's aim of keeping people away from institutions and treating them in their own communities. Local and community care was paramount in Childers's health policies. However, the benefits derived from the new system did not in any way justify abuses and Childers was 'determined....to eliminate abuses as far as possible'.<sup>88</sup>

While his direct priorities and responsibilities lay in the health portfolio, Childers's position as Tánaiste exposed him to issues he would not otherwise have encountered. In October 1969 Lynch wrote to Childers for his views on a department of defence review of Ireland's emergency preparations and the effect of a war on Ireland. Lynch requested Childers's 'observations on the subject prior to any necessary submission to the government'.<sup>89</sup> In his reply, Childers stated that 'I do not believe we can be neutral, even if we believed in a neutrality policy'.<sup>90</sup> In the event of a world war involving Britain, Ireland could not remain neutral because of partition. De Valera had used the partition issue as one of his arguments for remaining neutral during the Second World War. He also suggested that measures to counter nuclear bombing or fall-out were beyond Ireland's capacities and that the army 'in my view, can only be used for internal security'.<sup>91</sup>

The early 1970s was a testing time for Lynch and his government on many fronts and he could count on the absolute support of Childers. Ireland's negotiations for entry into the European Economic Community, the situation in Northern Ireland and the arms crisis, led to 'grave responsibilities placed upon the government' during

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<sup>86</sup> Childers memo. to government, 10 Jan. 1973 (N.A.I., Department of the Taoiseach, MS 2004/21/106).

<sup>87</sup> Ibid. underlined by Childers.

<sup>88</sup> Childers letter to Taoiseach, Jack Lynch, 11 Jan. 1973 (N.A.I., Department of the Taoiseach, MS 2004/21/106).

<sup>89</sup> Letter from Jack Lynch to Childers, Oct. 1969 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9955/5).

<sup>90</sup> Letter from Childers to Jack Lynch, 21 Oct. 1969 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9955/6).

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

this period.<sup>92</sup> This was, stated Childers, a time for unity within Fianna Fáil on all major issues. The government required support in relation to ‘national security and the maintenance of law and order’.<sup>93</sup> Childers pleaded the case for the ‘absolute and imperative need to support the Taoiseach and in so doing to accept government policy in regard to reunification and the general policy regarding the present Northern situation’.<sup>94</sup> Childers appeared on Ulster Television along with the then Northern Ireland Minister of Development, Mr Faulkner, and discussed the setting up of a North-South study group. He called for a peaceful settlement ‘of the old historical quarrel, a peaceful coming together and greater understanding’.<sup>95</sup> Childers could never contemplate violence as a solution to any problem. In relation to Northern Ireland he suggested that the religious hatred ‘had been fermented for political reasons’.<sup>96</sup> He remembered that his father shook hands with the firing squad shortly before his execution and spoke to him of ‘this horror of the war of brothers’.<sup>97</sup> Childers never forgot those words and he realised that the strife in Northern Ireland was ‘a thousand times more deadly than the events of 1922 in the South’.<sup>98</sup>

The fact that Childers was a Protestant may lead one to speculate that he had a part to play in discussions between the British and Irish governments in the 1970s and earlier. However there is no evidence in the archives to suggest that Childers had any part to play in events in Northern Ireland during the early 1970s. His background, ability to communicate and his desire for reconciliation would suggest that he would have been actively involved in discussions between the two governments. T.K. Whitaker recalled that Childers:

Englishness and Protestantism would have given him access to moderate Unionists, while, possibly, raising suspicions amongst more extreme elements on both sides! He was not, to my knowledge, given any specific responsibility in the NI context.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Childers speech to a Fianna Fáil meeting in Castleblayney, 19 Jun. 1970 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers’ Speeches May 1970-May1971, MS GIS 1/69).

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> *Irish Independent*, 23 Jly. 1970.

<sup>96</sup> Childers speech to the Fourth International Congress of Jesuit Ecumenists, Dublin, 16 Aug. 1971 (N.A.I., GIS-Ministers’ Speeches May 1971-Jly. 1972 MS GIS 1/70).

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> Taken from T.K. Whitaker’s letter to the author, 13 Dec. 2005.

Whitaker's suggestion of suspicions of Childers by some was echoed by Michael Cunningham.<sup>100</sup> Cunningham argued that Childers message over the years 1969-73 was always the same:

Protestants were good and Republicans were bad. He appeared to hate things Irish and republican. On one occasion a man who later became a Cabinet Minister in Dublin said of Childers: 'He knows no Irish but speaks fluent French and English like a native'.<sup>101</sup>

Furthermore, Childers appointment as Tánaiste in 1969 was significant, according to Cunningham, because he had 'close ties with the British, being married to a former member of the British Embassy staff'.<sup>102</sup> According to Cunningham, Childers showed his true colours following bloody Sunday when he spoke of the murders in Derry and commented: "I regret the OVERKILL of Catholics".<sup>103</sup> The historical record demonstrates that Cunningham's portrayal of Childers is not accurate. It is true that Childers never had any time for extreme republicanism and that he steadfastly held the view that violence was never justified in resolving differences. It is also true that despite pressure from his mother, Childers refused to learn Irish. He would not, stated Young, pretend to be something he was not. Childers had every reason to hate things Irish, given what happened to his father but the fact of the matter is that he dedicated his working life to the Irish state. Cunningham's views are worth mentioning as they demonstrate the suspicions that some harboured towards Childers to which T.K. Whitaker referred.

Was Childers really so utterly insensitive and undiplomatic? On bloody Sunday, 30 January 1972 paratroopers killed thirteen men following a march in Derry, a fourteenth victim died later.<sup>104</sup> During the Dáil debate on 4 February 1972 on the Northern Ireland situation, Childers commented on the 'appalling events which took place in Derry, the murder of thirteen Derry men'.<sup>105</sup> He praised the civil rights movement for its ability to mount 'massive protest against discrimination and against

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<sup>100</sup> Michael Cunningham was born in Tyrone and educated at CBS Omagh and Warrenstown, County Meath. An authority on Northern Ireland political affairs, he saw the British occupation forces as the root cause of the violence in Northern Ireland. His father, Patrick Cunningham was the anti-partition MP for the Tyrone/Fermanagh Westminster constituency for fourteen years. Both of his parents were involved with Sinn Fein and in the struggle for Irish independence during 1918-22.

<sup>101</sup> Michael Cunningham, *Monaghan: county of intrigue* (Cavan, 1979), p.46.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p.86.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.* capitals used by Michael Cunningham.

<sup>104</sup> J.J. Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985, politics and society* (Cambridge, 1989), p.440.

<sup>105</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol. 258, 4 Feb. 1972.

deprivation of fifty years....to highlight the abuses of power on the part of the Northern government....to do this without any intent to physical violence and without espousing the cause of those who sought gun violence was remarkable'.<sup>106</sup> The civil rights movement had, according to Childers, resisted sectarian action and had 'condemned the bombing of Unionist premises in the same way as they have condemned the acts of the British Army in their overkill attitude and in their brutality'.<sup>107</sup> Childers commended the civil rights movement for its resistance to violence, sometimes at moments of anxiety and pressure largely 'as a result of the tactics of the British Army and the British government'.<sup>108</sup> The British government stated Childers had been, 'indulging in self-deception'.<sup>109</sup> Civil rights had to be implemented in a way that would end 'the complete domination of one group in the community by the local majority in the community'.<sup>110</sup> Then in 1970-1 the IRA began to enter the scene and they were not, according to Childers, approved by the civil rights movement, or by Dáil Éireann. The result of the IRA presence led to, stated Childers, 'extreme pressure by the Stormont administration for overkill and over-reaction by the British troops'.<sup>111</sup> The British government could not succeed, according to Childers 'by over-kill and over-reaction....the British army have been doing their best in the past year to build up the strength of the IRA'.<sup>112</sup> In relation to the IRA, Childers stated that 'they may condemn internment....condemn the over-kill attitude of the British army' but none of them could 'justify the intervention of the IRA'.<sup>113</sup> Childers understood the explosive feeling concerning the 'appalling situation in Derry' but realised that their must be reconciliation. However, this would not happen 'unless Unionists and Catholics start a dialogue and communicate with each other'.<sup>114</sup>

Childers should not have used the word 'overkill' if for no other reason that it left him open to the type of misinterpretation indulged by Michael Cunningham. Given that it should not have been used, Childers cannot reasonably be accused of

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<sup>106</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol. 258, 4 Feb. 1972.

<sup>107</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol. 258, 4 Feb. 1972.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

‘close and friendly association with the forces of occupation and hatred of those who wanted rid of them’.<sup>115</sup> The implication by Cunningham that Childers would not have regretted some killing of Catholics in Derry can best be answered by reference to Childers’s actions during his thirty-five years in public life.

Childers continued to voice his opinions on the Northern Ireland situation. Addressing the Dublin University Business and Economic Society at Trinity College, Dublin, on 16 February 1971, Childers stated that the bitterness and ferocity of the violence in Northern Ireland would only postpone reunification. Violence only made the understanding between the two communities more difficult to bring about. He suggested that all sides in the conflict should, as civilised peoples, demonstrate the capacity to settle disagreements by peaceful means. Childers urged neither side to claim victory as this would never achieve the best result, there was ‘room for all Irish traditions in a united Ireland and an opportunity of creating the kind of society we could all be proud of’.<sup>116</sup>

On 6 May 1970 the arms crisis became public when Taoiseach Jack Lynch dismissed two Fianna Fáil ministers, Neil Blaney and Charles Haughey for allegedly using government funds to import arms for the Irish Republican Army. This involvement in arms was an expression of concern within the more republican personnel of Fianna Fáil over the development of the conflict in Northern Ireland. It is important to give a brief account of the impact the Northern Ireland civil rights movement had on the politics of the entire country. By August 1969 the situation had become, according to Justin O’Brien, ‘uncontrollable...the conditions had been created for an Irish Government to have a profound influence...provided an opportunity to complete the unfinished business of the Irish revolution’.<sup>117</sup> Following serious sectarian violence in Derry in August 1969, Jack Lynch made a television broadcast and stated that the government could not stand by and see people injured or even worse. However, as stated by O’Brien, ‘it was one thing to be the moral guardians of the nation’s ideology, quite another to take on the British army’.<sup>118</sup> Ensuing events led to the prosecution of Charles Haughey, among others. On 23

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<sup>115</sup> Michael Cunningham, *Monaghan: county of intrigue* (Cavan, 1979), p.86.

<sup>116</sup> Extract from address given by Childers to the Dublin University Business and Economic Society, 16 Feb. 1971 (U.C.D.A., Fianna Fáil archives, MS P176/948/12).

<sup>117</sup> Justin O’Brien, *The arms trial* (Dublin, 2000), p. x.

<sup>118</sup> Justin O’Brien, *The arms trial* (Dublin, 2000), p.xii.

October 1970 Haughey was acquitted along with others and he ‘demanded the resignation of the Taoiseach’.<sup>119</sup> The arms trial was ultimately, according to O’Brien, not centred on the legitimacy or otherwise of providing arms for Northern nationalists but rather on a ‘power play for the soul of Fianna Fáil’.<sup>120</sup>

The Taoiseach now required the backing of the Fianna Fáil party and Childers as Tánaiste. Childers’s revulsion of violence naturally led him to oppose those who would attempt to illegally import arms for use in the conflict in Northern Ireland and thereby incite ‘civil war and nothing else’.<sup>121</sup> This was a situation that demanded a cool head and a sense of calm. Childers’s exposure to events and circumstances experienced before his return to Ireland in 1931 helped to mould his personality and personal attributes. His education and independent lifestyle from an early age meant that Childers was not attracted to the many political groups and factions within Dáil Éireann. He was well positioned to defend his party leader and made no small contribution to the survival of the government. Childers was, according to former Taoiseach and Fine Gael leader, Garret Fitzgerald, ‘of considerable assistance to Jack Lynch, particularly during the arms crisis’.<sup>122</sup> Childers ably demonstrated the qualities that the situation demanded. His reputation was that of a capable administrator and efficient minister rather than that of a leader. A special edition of the current affairs programme *Seven Days* was broadcast by RTE in May 1970 to discuss the departure of the ministers. Childers appeared on the programme and his handling of probing direct questions led to a sense of calm. He reassured people that everything was under control and that the government was working normally. The *Irish Independent* reported his television appearance as follows:

Mr. Erskine Childers was a steadying influence at a time when rumour was rife and hard information was as scarce as ice cream in hell. In a statesmanlike performance he managed to preserve the coolness of a master mariner who knows every trick of the weather. Strange that with his unflappable manner and fluent speech he has not been seen more frequently as a spokesman for his party on T.V.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Justin O’Brien, *The arms trial* (Dublin, 2000), p.x.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, p.x.

<sup>121</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol. 258, 4 Feb. 1972.

<sup>122</sup> Garret Fitzgerald interview with the author, 20 Dec. 2007.

<sup>123</sup> *Irish Independent* report on Childers television performance, 13 May 1970 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9977/635).

During his career in politics Childers worked hard to understand and contribute positively to the many portfolios he held. He worked diligently and sought to apply his administrative abilities to his department. However, Childers never sought the limelight or the public glory for the work he undertook. Now forced into a very difficult situation he responded with the maturity and leadership qualities of a party leader. He had finally arrived on the Irish political scene some thirty odd years after entering public political life.

Eager to preserve the unity of the party, Childers made his position quiet clear on the importation of arms into Northern Ireland:

Nobody in the Fianna Fáil Party who wishes to remain a member of the Fianna Fáil Party can directly or indirectly, privately or publicly or otherwise, engage in the importation of arms into the North, go into the North and inspire activity or the use of arms by any of the groups there. Anybody in Fianna Fáil who does that can no longer remain a member of Fianna Fáil.<sup>124</sup>

Replying to a motion of confidence in the government on 14 May 1970, Childers reminded deputies of the history of Fianna Fáil and their competence in dealing with difficult situations for many years. He stressed the spirit of unity in Fianna Fáil and drew deputies' attention to the fact that Fianna Fáil dealt successfully with illegal armed organisations during the Second World War and during the period 1956-62. Childers emphasised the stability of Fianna Fáil government since 1932 while admitting the shock of recent events. However, in reply to deputy Cruise O'Brien, Labour, Childers denied any suggestion of defections or a collapse in Fianna Fáil and stated that 'deputy O'Brien is going to be grievously disappointed'.<sup>125</sup> Childers dismissed the idea of an alternative coalition government. There was, stated Childers, no agreement in place between Fine Gael and Labour and that coalition government would not be 'advisable for this country....at this time with all the difficulties that are faced in the north and....the prospect of our negotiating to join the European Economic Community'.<sup>126</sup>

Childers broadened the debate and urged deputies to realise that people north and south have to live together. He emphasised that whether people in the north were

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<sup>124</sup> Taken from the *Irish Independent*, 15 May 1970 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9977/636).

<sup>125</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol. 246, 14 May 1970.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

Unionists or Nationalists ‘they are not English’.<sup>127</sup> While recognising that all political parties failed to consider a long-term policy on relations with Unionists, he referred to the co-operation he achieved with the tourist authorities in the north when he was minister. Childers called for the voices of the moderate people in the north to be heard. He wished that they spoke more openly and they would be encouraged to do so ‘if we all agree in this House that armed intervention on our part can only result in these voices becoming more silent, more afraid, more suspicious’.<sup>128</sup>

Rallying Fianna Fáil TDs, Childers stated that he knew ‘of no political party among the 20 most civilised democracies where there has been so much remarkable unity as there has been within the Fianna Fáil Party’.<sup>129</sup> There were occasions of differing opinions on issues by members but Childers stressed that the main point about Fianna Fáil ‘is that we remain together and those members....who feel that some particular aspect of policy is not entirely in accordance with their wishes, accept the majority decision and honour it’.<sup>130</sup>

Childers was always a Lynch supporter and both Blaney and Haughey had leadership ambitions. He was inoffensive, decent and honest and now found himself ‘the no. 1 Hate Figure of the Blaney camp followers’.<sup>131</sup> This may well have started with Garret Fitzgerald’s double edged compliment to Childers during the Dáil debate on 9 May 1970:

I want at this point to refer to one man sitting on the opposite benches-the Tánaiste. Neil Blaney’s father was sentenced to death, but Erskine Childers father was executed in the most tragic circumstances. Never by word or deed has this man shown the slightest resentment of those who sent his father to his death. If Neil Blaney were such a man as Erskine Childers, there would be no danger to the peace of this country.<sup>132</sup>

Whether Garret Fitzgerald’s comments did or did not contribute to Childers’s difficulties within Fianna Fáil is not important. Childers’s own comments and the stance he adopted clearly defined his position. The arms crisis represented ‘the greatest

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<sup>127</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol. 246, 14 May 1970.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>129</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol. 256, 09 Nov 1971.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> Taken from *Hibernia*, 12 Jun 1970 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9977/637).

<sup>132</sup> Extract from Dáil debate, 9 May 1970 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9977/637).



threat to the stability of the state in a generation and arguably since its foundation’, and Childers played a significant role in the survival of Jack Lynch’s government.<sup>133</sup>

Seán Sherwin, current national organiser of Fianna Fáil recalled, during an interview with the author, one particular incident during the arms crisis. Sherwin represented the constituency of Dublin Southwest at that time and recounted the occasion when he and other Fianna Fáil deputies were in the parliamentary rooms of Dáil Éireann. Childers entered the room and declared that ‘those accused [Blaney and Haughey] were guilty and the evidence is there to prove it’.<sup>134</sup> Childers statement was made prior to any trial and according to Sherwin was ‘injudicious in the extreme’.<sup>135</sup> Sherwin was not sure whether Childers took it upon himself to convey such a message or was acting on the Taoiseach’s instructions.

It is ironic that upheaval within Fianna Fáil led to the defining moment in Childers’s political career. Childers continued to speak out in the cause of peace. His television appearances outnumbered those of the Taoiseach and his prominence was acknowledged when *Newsweek* magazine named him Minister of the Year in 1970.<sup>136</sup> In the first quarter of 1972 Childers was the leading Fianna Fáil speaker in the Dáil. According to Childers daughter, Nessa Childers, the Taoiseach ‘owed much to the loyalty and support he received’ from her father.<sup>137</sup> However, Childers was ‘frustrated at Lynch’s decision to re-instate Charles Haughey within Fianna Fáil’.<sup>138</sup> He completely rejected Haughey after his re-instatement.

Childers’s opinions of Haughey were formulated long before the arms crisis, as far back as the 1950s. During an interview with the author, Garret Fitzgerald recalled a conversation with Childers’s wife, Rita, during the 1950s which highlights Childers’s awareness of the political corruption that was to emerge in the following decades. While out to dinner on one occasion, Childers remarked to Rita that those men dining there with Charles Haughey ‘would be corrupted’.<sup>139</sup> Childers’s rejection

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<sup>133</sup> Justin O’Brien, *The arms trial* (Dublin, 2000), p.xii.

<sup>134</sup> Taken from Seán Sherwin’s interview with the author, 2 Jun. 2005. Former TD and Fianna Fáil national organiser at date of interview.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> John N. Young, *Erskine H. Childers: President of Ireland, a biography* (Buckinghamshire, 1985), p.155.

<sup>137</sup> Taken from interview by the author with Nessa Childers, daughter of Erskine Hamilton Childers, 2 Sept. 2005.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Garret Fitzgerald’s interview with the author, 20 Dec. 2007.

of Haughey continued into his presidential campaign when according to Garret Fitzgerald, Childers refused to enter Dublin north during the campaign 'lest he have to meet Haughey'.<sup>140</sup>

The Irish electorate voted in favour of European Economic Community membership in May 1972 and there was speculation that Childers might be Ireland's first Commissioner in Brussels. Childers was, according to Young, approached by European officials to this end. However Jack Lynch was not willing, stated Young, 'to lose his right-hand man'.<sup>141</sup> Dr Patrick Hillery was appointed Commissioner in September 1972.<sup>142</sup> Childers missed the chance of going to Brussels as Irish Commissioner and being eleven years older than Jack Lynch he would not become Taoiseach. De Valera was due to retire as President in 1973 and although Childers name was mentioned as a possible candidate, the same applied to several others. Childers enjoyed the health portfolio and was not anxious to allow his name to go forward for the presidency.

On 5 February 1973 the Nineteenth Dáil was dissolved and a general election date of 28 February announced. Childers prepared to contest his Monaghan seat for the fourth time and was elected on the first count, his first and only time in his long political career. However, the result nationally brought about the first change of government in Ireland for sixteen years and Childers was out of a job overnight. How ironic and utterly cruel this was for Childers. Having found his true vocation in politics and in complete control of his portfolio, Childers was now in opposition. His performance in health and his contribution during the arms crisis to party and country had been rewarded by the electorate. Fianna Fáil won sixty-nine Dáil seats in the 1973 general election, a reduction of six seats on the 1969 result.<sup>143</sup> Fine Gael and Labour entered into an electoral pact and contested the election as an alternative coalition government. Before leaving the Department of Health, Childers prepared a letter and memoranda on the workings of the department for the incoming minister. The new Minister for Health was Brendan Corish and he responded to Childers as follows:

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<sup>140</sup> Garret Fitzgerald's interview with the author, 20 Dec. 2007.

<sup>141</sup> John N. Young, *Erskine H. Childers President of Ireland a biography* (Buckinghamshire, 1985), p.163.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>143</sup> Sean Donnelly, *Elections '97* (Dublin, 1998), p.6.

It is only now that I have had an opportunity of reading your letter of 14<sup>th</sup> instant and associated memoranda on the work of the department. It was most kind of you to go to the trouble of compiling these informative notes and I am sure that they will be of assistance to me over the coming few weeks.<sup>144</sup>

Childers was appointed opposition spokesman for health. In a letter to the incoming minister, once again demonstrating that he was a man of principles first and foremost, he stated that ‘if I am made shadow Minister for Health my criticism will be always constructive’.<sup>145</sup>

Childers had gained his first senior portfolio when he was appointed Minister for Health in July 1969. He was determined to make a positive contribution to the health of the nation and changed the fundamental structures on which the health system had been built. In doing so he used all his negotiating and administrative abilities to successfully navigate the passing of the health bill through the Oireachtas and successfully concluded the numerous negotiations with the medical professions and other relevant parties. Testimony to his efforts is provided by Patricia Brown who has stated that the 1970s was ‘an era of partnership between the Department of Health, the medical profession and the voluntary hospitals’.<sup>146</sup> Jerry O’Dwyer has suggested that the 1970 Health Act will be remembered primarily for ‘the introduction of the choice of doctor scheme and the establishment of the health boards’.<sup>147</sup> Further affirmation of Childers achievements during this period is provided by Pdraig O’Morain who contends that the 1970 Health Act ‘demonstrated a virtual alliance of interest between the doctors, the Minister for Health and the Department’.<sup>148</sup> Childers recalled that during his term in health he had learned ‘more about human nature in a year than I could learn in twenty years in any other occupation’.<sup>149</sup>

During his political career Childers made many speeches on economic issues and was always convincing in supporting government policy. Childers wanted to be a

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<sup>144</sup> Letter from Brendan Corish to Childers, Mar. 1973 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9947/29).

<sup>145</sup> Letter from Childers to Brendan Corish, Mar. 1973 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9947/32).

<sup>146</sup> Patricia Brown and Geoffrey Chadwick, ‘Management and the health professional’ in Joseph Robins (ed.), *Reflections on health* (Dublin, 1997), p.195.

<sup>147</sup> Jerry O’Dwyer, ‘Strategic planning in the Irish health services’ in Joseph Robins (ed.), *Reflections on health* (Dublin, 1997), p.251.

<sup>148</sup> Pdraig O’Morain, *The health of a nation, the Irish healthcare system 1957-2007* (Dublin, 2007), p.120.

<sup>149</sup> Childers speech to election workers in Galway, 8 May 1973 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9967/1861).

doctor and his first choice of study at university was medicine. However, he subsequently changed to history to gain a better understanding of the issues within Ireland and between Ireland and England. As health minister, Childers was in charge of a social portfolio and this is where his true vocation and abilities lay. He was a calming influence in government during the crisis of the early 1970s and showed that he was more than an efficient administrator. His work had a considerable impact on the development of a modern national health service in Ireland. According to Martin Mansergh ‘the development of the health service under...Erskine Childers should be mentioned as among Fianna Fáil’s achievements’.<sup>150</sup> The changes to the health system under Childers’s term were significant and the structures he put in place during the early 1970s survived until recent years. The general recognition of his achievements in health is testimony in itself. The period of 1969-73 represented the culmination of experience and dedication amassed by Childers during his political career.

Childers longed to return to the department of health but it was not to be. He had an important decision to make, remain in opposition or leave politics and contest the presidential election. How would Childers, with his appetite for work and his constant striving to enhance the portfolio assigned to him, make the transition to President of Ireland? Still full of energy and wanting the daily complexities of the Department of Health, the role of president, with its controls and limited sphere of activity was a role that came too soon for Childers.

Before the result of the 1973 general election Childers published a statement disclaiming any intention to accept an invitation to contest the presidential election. He longed to continue as Minister for Health ‘to ensure that new policies were progressed...and above all to the development of community services’.<sup>151</sup> However, he accepted the Fianna Fáil invitation to stand for the presidential office and spent many days considering the role and position of the president. Outside of the clearly defined constitutional obligations and duties, Childers viewed the office as ‘representative of the people and when elected...must act for the whole people’.<sup>152</sup> Throughout his political career Childers emphasised the need for community self-help

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<sup>150</sup> Martin Mansergh, *The legacy of history* (Cork, 2003), p.382.

<sup>151</sup> Draft statement untitled, Apr. 1973 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9967/1853).

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*

and taking ownership of local issues. As president he would continue to encourage this spirit of community development and involvement.

The office of President of Ireland was established under the 1937 Constitution of Ireland, in operation from 29 December 1937. Articles twelve to fourteen detail the powers and duties of the president. The office holder performs important ceremonial duties such as the appointment of the Taoiseach nominated by Dáil Éireann and other members of the government nominated by the Taoiseach. The president is a non-executive head of state and does not participate in the day-to-day running of the government. The office holder may not be a member of either House of the Oireachtas. There are discretionary powers the president may use in specific circumstances. Among these is the power to refer a bill passed by the Oireachtas to the Supreme Court to verify its constitutionally. The president must however consult the Council of State before any such referral but need not be bound by its advice. However, the power of the president in relation to the dissolution of the Dáil does not require any consultation. The Taoiseach can request the president to dissolve Dáil Éireann but:

The President may in his absolute discretion refuse to dissolve Dáil Éireann on the advice of a Taoiseach who has ceased to retain the support of a majority in Dáil Éireann.<sup>153</sup>

No president has ever exercised this power. The office of president is generally defined and controlled. Travel outside the country during the president's term of office is only allowed with the consent of the government and communications on matters of national or public importance must also have the approval of the government.<sup>154</sup>

Since the inauguration of the 1937 Constitution of Ireland the role of the president had, according to Childers, remained unchanged. He had consented to be a candidate on the understanding that if elected: 'I will be able to expand the dimension and character of the Presidency'.<sup>155</sup> The three previous holders of the office, Douglas Hyde, Séan T. Ó Ceallaigh and Eamon de Valera had their own style of presidency. Despite the control exercised by the Irish Constitution the style, not the substance of the office, was affected by personality and individual circumstances. After his diverse

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<sup>153</sup> *Bunreacht na hÉireann*, 1937 (<http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/index.asp?docID=243>) (23 May 2008).

<sup>154</sup> For a more detailed analysis of presidential duties and responsibilities see ([www.nationalarchives.ie/topics/PRES/commentary.htm](http://www.nationalarchives.ie/topics/PRES/commentary.htm)) (12 Oct. 2007).

<sup>155</sup> Draft statement untitled, Aug. 1973 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9967/1853).

political career Childers believed that there should be a leader outside of the political field to give guidance ‘and reflect the most responsible aspirations of the people on matters where discussion and debate will not create division but encourage enlightened examination’.<sup>156</sup> The president would not dictate solutions but should encourage reasoned discussions of new policies. In shaping the future of the country Childers proposed that the president seek the views of organisations and societies engaged in constructive policy shaping. The presidency should ‘espouse the cause of all voluntary community organisations, including the religious orders and organisations’.<sup>157</sup> Childers emphasised that the president ‘could not often be a personal innovator, but he could reflect the most advanced and most patriotic views of those who elected him’.<sup>158</sup> Childers’s view of the presidency was unique for his time but before he could attempt to stamp his impression on the office he had to win the presidential election.

Childers decided on 5 April 1973 to accept the Fianna Fáil nomination to contest the Presidential election on 30 May 1973. His opposition was Mr T.F. O’Higgins who was defeated by de Valera in the 1966 election. There was a theory amongst political commentators that: ‘only one Fianna Fáil candidate for the Presidency could be expected to defeat Mr. Tom O’Higgins-and that was Mr. Lynch himself.’<sup>159</sup> Lynch had stated that he would not contest the presidential election and he believed that Childers would make a very good president. However, according to his daughter, Nessa Childers:

It was expected at the beginning of the campaign that my father would lose. Fianna Fáil expected him to lose. The reason being that they didn’t really see the possibility of somebody like my father winning the campaign.<sup>160</sup>

Childers in common with O’Higgins, was ‘in the tradition of dynastic politics which have characterised life in this State since 1922’.<sup>161</sup> Both candidates experienced the turmoil and tragedy of the past but did not carry any bitterness into political life. O’Higgins was favourite to win the contest due to the general euphoria of the

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<sup>156</sup> Draft statement untitled, Aug. 1973 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9967/1853).

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9967/1854).

<sup>159</sup> *Irish Times*, 5 Apr. 1973.

<sup>160</sup> *Uachtaráin*, TG4 documentary series, Wednesday 9 May 2007.

<sup>161</sup> *Irish Times*, 5 Apr. 1973.

coalition election success and also because of his remarkable fight against de Valera in 1966, and Childers was no de Valera. The air of optimism in the O'Higgins camp was expressed by Mrs. Terry O'Higgins when she stated that she was a 'pessimist by nature but....looking forward to the victory celebration....I wouldn't underestimate our opponent....they have agreed that their next move is to the Park'.<sup>162</sup> When questioned for her views of a potential move to *Áras an Uachtaráin* Mrs Childers replied: 'I haven't really thought about it....I would look forward to it – because I trust in my husband'.<sup>163</sup> This was a new style of presidential contest both from the type of campaigns undertaken by the candidates and the influence and contribution of their wives. Childers sense of aloofness was compensated for by the contribution of his wife. In his letter to the author, T.K. Whitaker suggested that: 'his relations with the native Irish were greatly eased by his wife Rita's friendly and buoyant personality. I suspect that she was a strong and constant source of guidance and support'.<sup>164</sup> Although Rita's guidance and opinions were no doubt sought by Childers during his political career she did not generally attend political rallies or travel with Childers during political campaigns, but that changed during the presidential campaign.

In keeping with his attention to detail during his political career Childers's campaign tour adopted a similar approach. In what was then a unique feature, the presidential campaign party toured the country in a specially prepared coach, while the opposition relied on the traditional open top car. Facilities on board the coach included a low platform for speeches, a public address system, all the latest equipment found in a busy office, a music centre and an area to receive deputations. Actions to be undertaken by regional and local directors of elections were planned to coincide with Childers's visit to a particular location. Guidelines and notes were prepared for those speaking for Childers. The general approach was that 'speeches should be aimed at bringing out the merits of Erskine Childers rather than attacking his opponent'.<sup>165</sup> The headquarters tour coordinator was Brian Lenihan and the tour outline suggested a

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<sup>162</sup> *Irish Independent* dated 26 Apr. 1973.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>164</sup> Taken from T.K. Whitaker's letter to the author, 13 Dec. 2005.

<sup>165</sup> From notes prepared for presidential campaign team, 1973 (U.C.D.A., Fianna Fáil archives, MS P176/923).

start date of 1 May with a press conference at 11.30 and finishing on 29 May at a rally in Dublin.<sup>166</sup> His whistle-stop tour of the country covered some 3000 miles.

Demonstrating his desire to be innovative in the office of president, Childers stated in the *Sunday Press*, that ‘the role of the fourth President must surely change decisively from that of the first three holders of the office’.<sup>167</sup> The president represented all people including those who opposed him and ‘he cannot just open new institutions....nor can he remain aloof and isolated from the people’.<sup>168</sup> The office of president was not viewed by Childers as a reward for his political contribution, somewhere to retire gracefully while fulfilling the obligations of the office. His would be an active presidency, pushing the boundaries yet understanding the constraints of the office. Childers’s desire to interact meaningfully with the people was a sentiment which Childers would not have expressed or understood in his earlier political career. Getting on with the job was the principal aim of Childers and appealing to or interacting with people was more of a hindrance than a necessary function of political life. However, a more mature Childers emerged, particularly following his term as Minister for Health. In the health portfolio he realised that the curing of sickness and the care of the aged, while of vital importance, were not the:

Ultimate priority in establishing health services....I learned that the preservation of mental and physical health in our community was the most critical task of our time and I proceeded to highlight the necessity for establishing community services to advocate the coming together of people in a parish or movement.<sup>169</sup>

Provision of facilities for younger people with the development of civic centres and sports facilities would ‘finally create the character of our society in fifteen years from now’.<sup>170</sup> If elected, Childers would endeavour to provide ‘the right Christian social climate for our young people’.<sup>171</sup> Conscious of the fact that Fianna Fáil were in opposition, Childers made it clear that ‘there is much useful work to be done by the President where there is no area of controversy, so that the President would never involve himself by confrontation with the government, or the

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<sup>166</sup> From presidential campaign plan, 1973 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9949/1a).

<sup>167</sup> From *Sunday Press*, 27 May 1973 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9949/1b/1).

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9949/1b/3).

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., (IT.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9949/1b/4).



Opposition'.<sup>172</sup> Childers considered it appropriate to confront the government on the extent to which the president could speak publicly on national issues. Addressing Fianna Fáil election workers at a convention in Dublin, Childers stated that 'he was considering a "think tank" so that perhaps short and long term planning could be extended in the interests of the younger generation'.<sup>173</sup> This special group of advisors would be a voice for all organisations engaged in the development of the country's young minds. Childers wanted to help the younger generation and encouraged people to think of the future of Ireland in the 1990s.

The idea of the president surrounding himself with special advisers did not command any backing from the coalition parties. The president would get all the advice he wanted from the government, but according to Conor Cruise O'Brien he was 'not there to frame national policy, or to behave as if he were framing it'.<sup>174</sup> O'Brien considered Childers concept of the president as 'a Fianna Fáil government exile in the Park'.<sup>175</sup> Why, according to O'Brien was Childers 'so eager for confrontations with the government on whose advice he is bound, if elected, to act'.<sup>176</sup> Childers's concept of the presidency was according to O'Brien 'quite different from anything we have yet known and could lead to very dangerous developments very near to the brink of the Constitution'.<sup>177</sup> Childers did not plan to act outside the parameters of the presidential functions and duties. He did however propose to generate debate within communities and organisations who were engaged in the social and cultural development of the country. Yes, Childers's concept of the presidency was different. He advocated change, involvement, reaching out to voluntary organisations who contributed enormously to their communities. This was nothing new in Childers, he constantly promoted community self-help during his political career and saw in the presidency an outlet to further promote and reward such endeavours.

More than almost anything else he desired 'to bring about reconciliation in the North....but it should be remembered that in relation to matters of immediate live

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<sup>172</sup> From *Sunday Press*, 27 May 1973 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9949/1b/4).

<sup>173</sup> Speech to Fianna Fáil convention in Dublin, 3 May 1973 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9967/1856).

<sup>174</sup> *Irish Times*, 4 May 1973.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*

political interest, he could not participate without consulting the government'.<sup>178</sup> In defining the role of the president as he envisaged it, Childers was not advocating a threat to the government or that he would be a Fianna Fáil government in *Áras an Uachtaráin*.

The outcome of the election was interpreted as a test of the popularity of the coalition government and both Fine Gael and the Labour Party emphasised the importance of getting the voters out to support Tom O'Higgins. The successful candidate would be above politics, but the presidential election was political. Dr Conor Cruise O'Brien stated that 'the Presidency was a political contest and should be honestly seen and presented as such'.<sup>179</sup> A letter to each Fine Gael branch secretary on the presidential election from the party chairman emphasised that 'it is extremely important that we win the Presidential election and the best way of ensuring this is to canvass every voter thoroughly'.<sup>180</sup> The coalition government were confident of winning the election but did have a draft statement prepared in the event of a Childers success. Even though the coalition government went out of their way to make this a political election they were prepared to ignore Fianna Fáil's contribution in the event of a Childers victory. The draft statement prepared for the Taoiseach stated:

Mr Childers will have the good wishes of the Government on entry into his high Office....Naturally we, in the National Coalition, were disappointed that the strenuous efforts of Mr Tom O'Higgins....were not crowned with the success for which we hoped.

The result of this election, with its remarkably low poll, cannot be taken as indicative of how the country would vote if the issue before it was a choice of Government.<sup>181</sup>

A hand-written note at the bottom of the statement conveys the threat posed by Childers. It stated that Childers's success: 'should be regarded as a victory for Mr Childers rather than for the F.F. party, of which Mr Childers is by no means a typical member'.<sup>182</sup> Though political in nature, it never the less conveys the qualities of the man and the genuine appeal Childers had with the electorate. Even though O'Higgins

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<sup>178</sup> Presidential candidate address in Kerry, 6 May 1973 MS 9967/1858).

<sup>179</sup> *Irish Times*, 30 May 1973.

<sup>180</sup> Letter from party chairman to each Fine Gael branch, 24 Apr.1973 (N.A.I., Dept. of the Taoiseach, MS 2004/22/52).

<sup>181</sup> Coalition draft statement in the event of Childers victory, undated (N.A.I., Dept. of the Taoiseach, MS 2004/22/52).

<sup>182</sup> Hand written note on statement, undated (N.A.I., Dept. of the Taoiseach, MS 2004/22/52).

had only narrowly lost to de Valera in 1966 the coalition government were right in fearing the qualities that Childers personally possessed.

Mr. O'Higgins refusal to engage in open debates on television is testimony to the skills of Childers. His eloquent speech and his previous television performances were there for all to see. The fact that O'Higgins's party was in government was one of the issues that made him favourite to win the election. It can also be argued that this also worked against him. The coalition government urged the electorate to show their support for government policies by voting for O'Higgins. However, the budget introduced by the coalition government imposed additional taxation on the electorate and this was highlighted by Fianna Fáil. It appeared throughout the campaign that the Labour party organisation did not have its heart entirely in the election. Fine Gael on the other hand perhaps overdid it. Although the overall tone by both sides was worthy of the campaign 'there were several forays into semi-scurrility, which probably earned Erskine Childers a lot of votes'.<sup>183</sup> The role of back-slapping politician which O'Higgins' colleagues portrayed on him was not 'natural to him'.<sup>184</sup> O'Higgins was a more serious and reserved man than projected during his campaign.

Childers used the considerable experience he amassed over his lengthy political career during his presidential campaign. He had always exhorted farmers to modernise methods of farming and if elected he claimed that he would encourage all organisations with constructive ideas. He would do 'everything in his power to highlight the need for expanding and developing the advisory services, and the co-operative societies'.<sup>185</sup> Forestry and the establishment of parks and trails were of particular interest to Childers. He proposed to open *Áras an Uachtaráin* on certain days and wondered whether part of the large presidential estate 'might one day be used for a National Youth Centre where organisations concerned with the advancement of young people could have their headquarters and certain facilities'.<sup>186</sup> This would however need government support and consent. He would continue to encourage the arts and favoured the development of national agencies aiding cultural

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<sup>183</sup> *Irish Times*, 1 Jun. 1973.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>185</sup> Childers presidential candidate address in Cork, 7 May 1973 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9967/1859).

<sup>186</sup> Childers presidential candidate address in Roscommon, 12 May 1973 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9967/1864).

activities. Throughout his campaign Childers addressed a wide range of issues. He was particularly interested in the social and community undertakings that came from the second Vatican council and urged the formation of parish councils to work with all denominations in the creation of community councils.

The 1973 presidential campaign was unique given the historical backgrounds of both candidates' families. It is testament to the character of both candidates that these historic events were not raised by either during the campaign. This was nothing new for Childers; his political career was conducted in the same tone. However, as regards campaigns, Childers's flamboyant tour bus was something new to the campaign trail and caused much comment and excitement. In an interview conducted on his bus during the campaign Childers stated that:

I've had so many promises of support from independent people who never cease telephoning, never cease writing letters, people who come up and talk to me, that I think to a very considerable degree it is a question of personality. I maybe wrong about that, we'll have to wait and see.<sup>187</sup>

Speaking from his blue and gold coloured bus, Childers was sincere in his sentiments. His term in health had thrust him into the public limelight and he coped admirably. He was now much more comfortably greeting the electorate though he still had, on occasions, to be reminded to wave as he journeyed through the electorate. While Childers travelled in his eye catching bus, O'Higgins travelled in the traditional car, making use of the sun roof to wave to the crowds.<sup>188</sup>

As the first results came through on 31 May 1973 it was clear that Childers's opinion had been correct. Childers received fifty-two percent of the valid poll and was 48,584 votes ahead of his opponent at the end of the count.<sup>189</sup> It is significant that de Valera's winning margin over O'Higgins in the 1966 presidential election was 10,568 votes.<sup>190</sup> The success had, according to Childers, left him 'like a humble clerk who found himself in a palace after having a wand waved over him'.<sup>191</sup> He also remarked that the result was announced on the anniversary of the final end of the civil war in 1923.

Following Childers's success, Seán MacEntee wrote to him and congratulated him:

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<sup>187</sup> *Reeling in the Years 1973*, RTE documentary series 28 Aug. 2007.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>189</sup> *Irish Times*, 1 Jun. 1973.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*

On a clean fight and an unchallengeable victory. How proud your gallant, noble father and your good mother would have been, could they have foreseen that one day their son would be President of Ireland and would have attained that high office by his own devoted service to their teachings.<sup>192</sup>

Childers showed a particular welcome for this letter from a man who had:

For so long served the National Movement and given dedicated service to this country. I need hardly tell you that any service I have been able to render to this country has been due to the wonderful education which I had from my father and mother, but I should say that the grounding which you gave me in administrative work....was absolutely vital to me and I am afraid I never thanked you for it.<sup>193</sup>

Messages of congratulations to Childers poured in far home and abroad. An extract from the letter of the parish priest of Castletownbere, County Cork represented the thoughts and sympathies of many on Childers election as President of Ireland:

It is a long cry back to a night during the civil war when I and some more young priests hoped & prayed for a reprieve for your honoured father. We were terribly disappointed but at long last the Irish nation has made some recompense to his memory & to his family....I am delighted too that the country has recognised your own patriotic & sterling work & has paid you this glorious tribute.<sup>194</sup>

Throughout his political career Childers benefited from the well organised Fianna Fáil organisation and the presidential campaign was no different. In a letter to all constituencies, George Colley, National Director of Elections wrote 'I would like to congratulate you on the magnificent work done....we lost the general election....in the Presidential election we have served notice to the Coalition that we are on the road back'.<sup>195</sup>

International coverage of Childers's election was widespread with particular attention to the fact that he was a Protestant.<sup>196</sup> The defeat for Mr O'Higgins was a shock for the government which had promoted his candidacy. The tide had turned for Childers with the religious factor playing an important role in his election success. No doubt he had a genuine appeal to the general electorate, but this electorate used the

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<sup>192</sup> Letter from Seán MacEntee to Childers, 31 May 1973 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9949/8).

<sup>193</sup> Letter from Childers to MacEntee, 14 Jun. 1973 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9949/10).

<sup>194</sup> Letter from parish priest to Childers, 1973 (N.A.I., Uachtaráin na hÉireann papers, MS 2004/25/33).

<sup>195</sup> Letter from George Colley to all Fianna Fáil constituencies, 1973 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9949/9).

<sup>196</sup> For international coverage of election see, 1973 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9951/1-112).

chance to show militant Protestants in Northern Ireland that there was no religious discrimination in the Irish Republic; a view proclaimed by Childers during his political career. Whatever the circumstances, this was a remarkable victory for Childers. The *Irish Times* reflected that ‘many Catholics, uncommitted as to party did think it the fitting thing....to give the vote to the Protestant’.<sup>197</sup> If this was sectarian discrimination, then it was of a kind that Northern Ireland could have done with. Childers’s personality and grace earned him personal votes that would not have gone to Fianna Fáil in a general election.

Childers’s presidential victory has also to be viewed in relation to his last political success. Throughout his political career Childers was successful at every general election he contested, but was never elected on the first count until his final election in Monaghan in 1973. On occasions he took the final seat without reaching the quota. However, Childers’s constant condemnation of violence and his stance on the arms crisis appeared to have finally connected with the electorate. It is not unreasonable to suggest that this connection was repeated country-wide in the presidential election.

With the usual pomp and splendour Childers was inaugurated as the fourth President of Ireland in Dublin Castle on 25 June 1973. After the ceremony Childers stated that:

This has been for me a most moving ceremony, particularly in that June 25 is my father’s birthday anniversary. I am humbly aware of the great honour conferred on me. I know I shall need the prayers of the people for God’s guidance in performing my duties and in making a meaningful contribution to harmony among Irish men and women.<sup>198</sup>

Throughout his political career Childers never sought any tribute for the death of his father. It is ironic that Childers was inaugurated as President of Ireland on 25 June, his father’s birthday. If the country was to make retribution to Childers this was indeed a fitting occasion.

As president, Childers travelled the country to perform official openings of community and social centres, school extensions, garden shows and many other social and cultural events. He addressed many functions and societies and the preparations

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<sup>197</sup> *Irish Times*, 1 Jun. 1973.

<sup>198</sup> *Evening Press*, 25 Jun. 1973.

for such visits were very detailed and methodical.<sup>199</sup> A constant theme in his speeches was that of youth and the fostering of community consciousness. His first public function was the opening of the Leisureland sports and recreation complex at Salthill in County Galway. The future environment for young people was of particular interest to Childers and he stated that ‘the work of organisations involved in youth projects is as important as the work of government agencies and no one has ever contradicted my declamations on this vital subject’.<sup>200</sup>

Addressing the annual dinner of Carlow Chamber of Commerce on 1 November 1974 he said that ‘his principal objective for the next five and a half years was to encourage community consciousness in every parish’.<sup>201</sup> Back in Monaghan to address the opening of community week Childers emphasised the duties of the lay community arising out of the second Vatican council and the importance of community councils. Addressing post-primary students in Mullingar, County Westmeath on 8 November 1974 he spoke on the problem of alcoholism in Ireland. Having provided statistics on teenage drinking he advised parents who consented to teenagers drinking to ‘teach them to drink moderately’.<sup>202</sup>

Rita Childers was an important asset during Childers political career but particularly during the presidential campaign and his term in office. After the presidential result, the *Woman’s Way* magazine published an interview with Rita conducted in Áras an Uachtaráin.<sup>203</sup> The campaign made her feel welcome and everyone wanted to see the Childers’s wife. Rita was a person who reached out to people and was comfortable talking to people. The presidential campaign was her first campaign. Political campaigns were political but the presidential was according to Rita ‘very different. It’s a personality contest’.<sup>204</sup> It is obvious from the interview that Rita was an enormous asset to Childers. Commenting on the fact that 54% of the electorate were women, Rita believed that ‘a great deal of his vote came from

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<sup>199</sup> Examples of the detailed presidential plans, 1973/4 (N.A.I., Uachtaráin na hÉireann papers, MS 2004/25/47).

<sup>200</sup> Press cutting, unidentified, Jun. 1973 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9977/793).

<sup>201</sup> Childers speech to Carlow Chamber of Commerce, 1 Nov. 1974 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9968/2183).

<sup>202</sup> Childers speech at Mullingar, Co. Westmeath, 8 Nov. 1974 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9968/2202).

<sup>203</sup> Rita Childers interview for *Woman’s Way* magazine, 6 Jly. 1973 (N.A.I., Uachtaráin na hÉireann papers, 2004/25/24).

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

women....during the campaign I was besieged everywhere by women telling me to look after him'.<sup>205</sup>

Childers concept of a 'think tank' never materialised. Cosgrave completely dismissed the concept and Childers told Garret FitzGerald that he had 'no alternative but to resign'.<sup>206</sup> FitzGerald convinced Childers not to resign but he felt that 'Childers continued to chafe at the restrictions on his actions imposed by his role as non-executive president'.<sup>207</sup> Nevertheless, Childers set himself a demanding schedule during his presidency and his health suffered as a consequence. Garret FitzGerald stated that: 'while he was always very correct in the way he accepted the advice tendered to him....his frustration was intense, and I believe almost certainly contributed to his sudden tragic death'.<sup>208</sup> After a distinguished term in health and in total control of his department, Childers no doubt found the presidential constraints hard to adjust to. He was not helped in creating his vision for the presidency due to the fact that Cosgrave and those closest to him 'were essentially conservative in their outlook'.<sup>209</sup> Aware of the constraints of his office he was clearly ahead of his time in his vision for the presidency.

While addressing a function in the Royal College of Physicians, Kildare Street, Dublin on 16 November 1974 Childers became ill and died of a heart attack on the 17 November 1974. The *Irish Independent* commented on a 'Nation bereft...the President of all the people...the man who brought the highest office in the land into the homes of its citizens'.<sup>210</sup> Previous holders of the office had the time and opportunity to make their mark on the office. Douglas Hyde completed one full term of seven years and Seán T. Ó Ceallaigh and Eamon de Valera both completed two terms in office. Childers had only entered his seventeenth month as president. It was fitting that Childers last speech as president concerned health. He was addressing the issue of mental health, better use of leisure time to combat the stresses of modern life and the need for research by experts in that field. He emphasised the problem of job

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<sup>205</sup> Rita Childers interview for *Woman's Way* magazine, 6 Jly. 1973 (N.A.I., Uachtaráin na hÉireann papers, 2004/25/24).

<sup>206</sup> J.R. Hill, (ed.), *A new history of Ireland VII Ireland, 1921-84* (OUP, 2003), p.365.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

<sup>208</sup> J.R. Hill, (ed.), *A new history of Ireland VII Ireland, 1921-84* (OUP, 2003), pp 365-6.

<sup>209</sup> Bruce Arnold, *Jack Lynch: hero in crisis*, (Dublin, 2001), p.177.

<sup>210</sup> *Irish Independent*, 18 Nov. 1974.



boredom and the 'ever-growing intake of the milder psychotropic drugs, tranquillisers, stimulants and sleeping pills'.<sup>211</sup>

In the Dáil, Jack Lynch was among those who paid tribute to Childers:

He made no secret that he got the greatest feeling of achievement from his time as Tánaiste and Minister for Health because...his work there was concerned with the whole behaviour of human beings. He remained an idealist to his last heartbeat...with charity towards all, and with malice towards none.<sup>212</sup>

Tributes were also paid to Childers in Seanad Éireann. Among those who spoke was Senator Robinson, a future President of Ireland, who joined with colleagues 'in paying tribute to Erskine Childers. I think the words most frequently used in relation to the late President refer to his dedication and his capacity for hard work. His greatest achievement as President was to carve out a new role for the Presidency in Irish life'.<sup>213</sup> Testament from a future president on the innovation Childers brought to the presidency even after such a very short time.

At the memorial service for Childers in Saint Patrick's Cathedral on 21 of November 1974 many of his qualities were alluded to:

He had that first requisite of a public man: integrity. He could not be corrupted. He was sincere....totally committed to peace. It is surprising in one....whose family were so involved in our island story, that he made so few references to the past. It is the Ireland of the future that concerned him most of all. He was a patriot to his finger-tips....recognised that patriotism was not enough. After this service we shall bear him out of Dublin southwards....to the cemetery at Derralossary...near a field where Parnell once played cricket....among the sturdy people of Wicklow, in the place he loved most in all the world.<sup>214</sup>

Tributes and sympathy were paid by many distinguished people at home and abroad. However, it was the thousands of ordinary people who filed through Saint Patrick's Hall in Dublin Castle and who lined the streets of Dublin that truly represented the feelings of the Irish people for Childers. More than 11,000 people filed through Saint Patrick's Hall in Dublin Castle paying their last respects to Childers.<sup>215</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> Childers speech to the Royal College of Physicians, Dublin, 16 Nov. 1974 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9968/2208).

<sup>212</sup> *Dáil Éireann debates*, vol.276, 19 Nov. 1974.

<sup>213</sup> *Seanad Éireann debates*, vol.79, 19 Nov. 1974.

<sup>214</sup> Address at memorial service for Childers, 21 Nov. 1974 (U.C.D.A., Eamon de Valera papers, MS P150/3620).

<sup>215</sup> *Irish Times*, 19 Nov. 1974.

In his campaign Childers had committed to use the office of the president to try and build a bridge across partition and lay the foundations for a new Ireland based on a policy of reconciliation. He believed that the presidency could play a more positive role and be a focal point of cultural and environmental issues. Childers was not able to fulfil the many goals he set himself as president and this no doubt led to a sense of frustration. During his very short time as president, Childers had, according to Garret Fitzgerald, to deal with ‘a very strong political figure in Cosgrave and Childers was not as tactful as his female successors’.<sup>216</sup> Commenting on Childers and on his presidential objectives Whitaker remarked that:

His broad sense of Presidential responsibilities, including social and political rapprochement, probably helped to give him a sense of fulfilment. He was an honourable man – an idealist with a strong personal commitment to the improvement of economic and social conditions in Ireland and he did what he could to discharge this commitment.<sup>217</sup>

Childers was a protégé of de Valera’s, ‘holding high office, before eventually becoming president in 1973, an office which he developed, a forerunner of the modern presidency’.<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> Garret Fitzgerald interview with the author, 20 Dec. 2007.

<sup>217</sup> Taken from T.K. Whitaker’s letter to the author, 13 Dec. 2005.

<sup>218</sup> Martin Mansergh, *The legacy of history*, (Cork, 2003), p.297.

## Conclusion

From his entry into political life in 1938 up to the retirement of Lemass, Erskine Hamilton Childers worked with those most prominent in the formation of the Fianna Fáil party and the Irish State. While Childers' circumstances and family connections with those individuals aided his early political career he nevertheless had to work hard and be patient. Arguably in his early political career Childers could be considered a relic from the civil war era, a reminder of former comrades, and this perhaps may have blinded some to Childers's true strengths. De Valera's letter to Lemass of 15 January 1960 is significant in establishing Childers's position in political circles during this period. In the letter, de Valera thanked Lemass for his visit to Áras an Uachtaráin and for the gifts he presented to him. This presentation was of particular value to de Valera 'because they are the gifts of the grand comrades with whom I was privileged to work'.<sup>1</sup> Childers's father was one of those comrades and this prompted de Valera to take Childers under his wing. Terry de Valera recalled that his father, Eamon de Valera, seldom mentioned the civil war and when he did it was with great sorrow. When speaking of Robert Erskine Childers, de Valera 'did so with particular sorrow and the deepest sense of loss'.<sup>2</sup> Childers owed his political career, or at least the beginning of it, to the legacy of his father, Robert Erskine Childers. De Valera and Fianna Fáil 'adopted' Childers on his return to Ireland in 1931 and according to Barry Desmond he 'would not have survived in Cabinet were it not for Dev....and his name'.<sup>3</sup> During his teenage years Childers showed some of the anti-British sentiment associated with his father but the matured Childers was at the opposite end of the political spectrum when compared to his father. Childers was of moderate political opinion and according to Barry Desmond 'was in sympathy with the position of MI [Michael] Collins, Treaty wise'.<sup>4</sup> Other than rare instances Childers avoided public comment on the treaty or his father's execution. Barry Desmond's recollections of conversations with Childers reveal that Childers was bitter as a result of the execution of his father, 'but decided to adhere to the wishes of his father at all times'.<sup>5</sup> It is impossible to deduce what effect his silence had on his relationships with

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from de Valera to Lemass, 15 Jan. 1960 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9955/2).

<sup>2</sup> Terry de Valera, *A memoir* (Dublin, 2004), p.140.

<sup>3</sup> Letter from Barry Desmond to the author, 17 Oct. 2007.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

his party colleagues and his political progress. Following de Valera's retirement Childers's career stagnated until Lemass retired and was succeeded by Jack Lynch. This was the beginning of a new era in Irish politics. Jack Lynch was the first Taoiseach to have no direct involvement in the civil war and there is no denying that Childers's political career was boosted by Lynch's appointment as Taoiseach.

During his political career Childers was totally committed to his portfolios and set about understanding each one in great detail. His dedication and attention to detail marked Childers out as an efficient administrator, but he also showed leadership qualities when the occasion arose during the arms crisis. During the twenty-two years in which he held government posts, Childers had responsibility for post-war road development, tourism, the development of the state broadcasting system, and health services. It was as Minister for Health that he made his greatest contribution to the nation, his greatest legacy. Despite his many portfolios Childers never held the ministry he wanted most of all, that of agriculture. His success as a parliamentary secretary and government minister can be gauged from his record over his career.

In local government he overhauled the local authority audit system, planned new road systems, initiated amenity schemes to improve urban areas and improved methods of administration. His first term as minister for Posts and Telegraphs, from 1951-4, was significant for his contribution to the development of the broadcasting system. Childers recognised that control of the broadcasting service needed to be removed from the civil service. To this end he established a five member council to run the broadcasting service on a daily basis. His appointment of Maurice Gorham as Director of Radio Éireann was hugely significant, not alone because of his broadcasting experience, but also because it was the first such appointment made outside of the civil service. Childers could not be generally considered other than a conservative politician but his liberal views on the introduction of new radio programming led to the Minister for Finance, Seán MacEntee, making the first series of political broadcasts from Radio Éireann in April 1954.

During his term in lands, from 1957-9, Childers conducted studies into land allocations and a thorough examination of Land Commission policies. Although he promised change to Land Commission policies, no real changes emerged. Childers

desperately wanted to do something for those who were qualified to work the land but who had no land. Childers realised too late that there was not enough land available to satisfy the demands and was forced to reverse his promise. This setback rightly brought criticism of Childers but it should not be seen solely as failure on his part. The real failure would have been for Childers to have accepted the situation as he first perceived it and done nothing. He did however have more success in relation to forestry and fisheries. Childers loved the countryside and initiated plans for forest parks, increased forestry planting by the state and campaigned for private forest planting. In the fisheries section he increased grants for trawler purchase and developed courses for skippers and deck hands.

As Minister for Transport and Power from 1959-69 he had little control over the daily workings of the semi-state companies. The transfer of responsibility for tourism in 1961 to Childers gave him the opportunity to work in an environment he understood and could contribute to. He campaigned for additional funding to develop tourism in general and promoted the island of Ireland as one tourist destination. This was significant in that it was one of the few occasions when he and Lemass were singing from the same hymn sheet.

It was however as Minister for Health from 1969-73 that Childers made his greatest impact and contribution. The advances in the health services during his term were considerable and long lasting. Among the highlights were the establishment of the health boards, the introduction of the choice-of-doctor scheme and the promotion of community care for the aged. Throughout his political career Childers encouraged community development, self-help and local ownership of projects. This was a constant theme in all his ministerial portfolios and during his very short term as president. Childers also devoted much time to child care services and to the causes of mental illness. Diarmaid Ferriter stated that Childers was one of the 'more capable ministers that Fianna Fáil had produced...he had vision...he did think in the long term about things...marked him out as being somewhat different'.<sup>6</sup> Childers was somewhat of a visionary and considered the long term view but he can stand accused of being blinded solely by short-term economic considerations in dealing with the issue of uneconomic railways. He was aware of the necessity to upgrade the

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<sup>6</sup> *Uachtaráin*, TG4 documentary series, Wed. 9 May 2007.

transportation system and maximise its potential locally and benefit to tourism in general. The 1958 Transport Act gave Coras Iompair Éireann the authority to close uneconomic railways but Childers never once argued for their retention on the grounds of future potential. In relation to the closing of uneconomic railways, Childers's spirit of community development and his vision for the future sadly abandoned him.

Despite his efforts to do his best in his various ministries there is always a sense that Childers was never a politician at heart, that he never fully understood the Irish political system and the relationship in Irish politics that exists between politician and electorate. He did not play politics with the public but had a relationship and trust based on his sincerity and sense of honour. During most of Childers's political career memories and emotions of the civil war were still fresh. The execution of his father 'even in the extremity of the anti Treaty campaign, outrageous at that time' coupled with his veil of silence on the issue cemented a relationship with the electorate.<sup>7</sup> His early political success was of course down to the fact that Fianna Fáil was very well organised at local level. Childers name was also of considerable benefit during his career and de Valera ensured the political career of the son of his former colleague, whom he greatly admired. However despite all of this the electorate would not have returned Childers to Dáil Éireann election after election were it not for his own personal attributes. He came from a privileged background and education system. He was proud of his upbringing, yet his sense of modesty and humility endeared him to the Irish public. Paradoxically, the fact that he was different from most other politicians worked in his favour. His electoral success in the constituency of Athlone-Longford and Longford-Westmeath from 1938 to 1961 is more remarkable given that he never lived in the constituency and he was a Protestant with an English upbringing. His goal was to serve and the people rewarded his efforts.

Childers's attachment to Ireland and his exposure to Irish politics from an early age prompted his return to Ireland in 1931. From letters to his family and letters from individuals to Childers it is clear that he always wanted to return to Ireland and commence a political career. The influence of his parents, in particular his father, was

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<sup>7</sup> Letter from Barry Desmond to the author dated 17 Oct. 2007.

immense and this further strengthened his desire to return to Ireland and serve what he considered his country as best he could.

The dominance of the Catholic Church in Ireland right through Childers's political career did have a negative effect on his career prospects at ministerial level. It is no coincidence that Childers received his first senior portfolio some four years after the Second Vatican Council. Childers did assert that Protestants were not discriminated against in southern Ireland but Childers's case must be viewed at an entirely different level. When it came to the position of high ministerial office in the state Childers did feel that his Protestantism worked against him. The negative impact his Protestantism had at ministerial level was certainly not reflected at the polling stations throughout his political career or the presidential election; in fact it helped him in the presidential election. His desire for peace and reconciliation was constantly rewarded by his constituents and admired by his political colleagues.

However, it must also be noted that the resignation of Lemass also occurred during this period. The varying work styles of Lemass and Childers meant that generally they could not work effectively together, their work on issues relating to Northern Ireland being a notable exception. While Childers was aware that Lemass paid little attention to his ideas, he never the less continued to do his best and his reward arrived when Jack Lynch became Taoiseach in 1966.

The influence and prominence of many of Childers's political colleagues must be considered when reviewing his political achievements. Leadership style was an important factor in communications with Childers. De Valera resolved to convince his colleagues through argument and discussion until they agreed with his position. Lemass was not as patient as de Valera and Lynch recognised the potential and loyalty in Childers, and made allowance for his elaborate memoranda to government. Childers repaid Lynch for his confidence in him with his contribution to the government through a very difficult period in the early 1970s. This was an occasion when Childers's broader views on life, and his exposure to many cultures, helped him to remain outside the many factions within the Fianna Fáil party and assist Lynch in maintaining control within the government. Childers played a key role in Fianna Fáil seeing off the extreme elements within the party during this period.

By nature Childers was somewhat of a loner and did not have many political friends. Boarding school and the degree to which his father was absent in his early life no doubt made Childers more independent but he still remained very close to his family. He would not be found socialising with fellow deputies after Dáil proceedings and this would certainly have contributed to the image of him as being distant. It was paradoxical, or perhaps an indication of a broader mind, that his father sent Childers to England for his education, while he himself was doing what he could to rid Ireland of English influence. Childers was aware that he was regarded as ‘an aloof sort of person’.<sup>8</sup> Whereas people would address the Taoiseach as Jack, the Tánaiste was invariably addressed as Mr Childers. In contrasting both men, the vote pulling appeal of Lynch and his ability to identify with all sections of society is a gift which cannot be easily developed. Although Childers did not have this particular asset, he was respected for his principles and his work ethic. Childers said of himself ‘I have neither the charisma of Jack Lynch nor the mystique of de Valera’.<sup>9</sup> Reflecting on his career Childers stated that:

The Irish people will have to decide whether I’ve ever contributed anything in my own right at all. I’ve been very privileged by having such parents. I had the most marvellous education. I was brought up in a family in which belief in public service, in the service of others, was a kind of hallmark of their own whole existence. It’s been quite impossible for me to live up to what I believe would be my father’s and mother’s expectations. I’ve just done my best.<sup>10</sup>

Testament to his modesty and humility and the enormous expectations placed on Childers by his parents. Childers lived his life fulfilling what he considered the expectations of his parents. The enormous influence of his father and the promises he made to his father prior to his execution dominated Childers’s political life. He stated ‘for the whole of my political life I did do my utmost to carry out his promises in every way possible’.<sup>11</sup> This burden placed on Childers meant silence on many issues of public interest and meant that he could not share his feelings on many issues that

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<sup>8</sup> *Irish Independent*, 22 Feb. 1973 (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9977/681).

<sup>9</sup> From speech at University of Limerick during presentation ceremony of Doctor of Laws to Jack Lynch (<http://www.ul.ie/vpacad/HonDocs/Cit-Jack%20Lynch.htm>) (16 May 2007).

<sup>10</sup> Copy of interview entitled ‘Interview with Mr Childers’, undated (T.C.D., Childers papers, MS 9999/79).

<sup>11</sup> *Uachtaráin*, TG4 documentary series, Wed. 9 May 2007.



caused him great hurt. His daughter Nessa Childers gave her thoughts on her father's dilemma:

What happens to somebody when all those other feelings they have, have to go underground. I have a lot of speculation about that and I have some problems about him being asked to do that. Death bed promises are dangerous things because they completely imprison somebody in a particular way of thinking and feeling.<sup>12</sup>

After dedicating most of his adult life to the service of the Irish people Childers found fulfilment and personal reward in the health ministry. He was so engrossed in the health portfolio that he initially refused to consider running for the presidency. Reflecting on his life during the presidential campaign in 1973, Childers stated that:

The one great mistake I made in my life was asking the Taoiseach's, Prime Ministers for economic ministries because when I became Minister for Health I realised I should have always sought social ministries. The ministry of health was the most rewarding experience of my whole life.<sup>13</sup>

His public life can be summed up in the words of Maurice Manning:

In retrospect Erskine Childers will be seen as a man who made a very significant and individual contribution to our public life over the past 35 years-as a dedicated public servant in the fullest sense of these words, as a politician whose integrity was always beyond question, as an open-minded and innovating administrator, as a reforming Minister, especially in Health and Posts and Telegraphs, as a Parliamentarian whose devotion to the institution of parliament was total, and as a President whose short period in office was characterised by qualities of dignity and nobility.<sup>14</sup>

Whatever can be said about his contributions during his political career he always did his best. Childers did not achieve his ambitions for the presidency even allowing for his short term in office. It would have been possible, indeed almost expected, for Childers to develop his career outside of politics and indeed outside of Ireland. However, that option was never one that Childers seriously considered. Coupled with the fact that he devoted his life to public service in Ireland it is not too remarkable to say that he attached no blame to Ireland for the death of his father. It is a difficult task to sum up the contribution of a man who gave his life to public service. It is possible to accumulate the positives and the negatives and come to a reasonable conclusion. But that methodology is not appropriate or sufficient on this occasion.

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<sup>12</sup> *Uachtaráin*, TG4 documentary series, Wed. 9 May 2007.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Newspaper article, no title, undated (N.A.I., Department of the Taoiseach, MS 2005/7/570).

What is really worthwhile and lasting is the fact that Erskine Hamilton Childers set out to repair whatever hurt and violence was caused to Ireland by the Childers name. He did this by extending the hand of friendship to all and living a life of peace and reconciliation. Having sown the seeds of the modern day presidency, he also contributed to the path of reconciliation on the island of Ireland. There is a danger of eulogising Childers but the historical record speaks for itself. Childers was not perfect but he does indeed deserve credit for dedicating his life to the service of the state.

At a lunch with Jack Lynch not long before his death, Childers expressed his own ambitions for the after-life. He stated that: ‘when I die I must be able to meet my Father, who will ask me what I did for my country, Ireland. I want to be able to meet him face to face and to answer: I did my very, very best, Father’.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *Irish Times*, 20 Nov. 1974.

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