

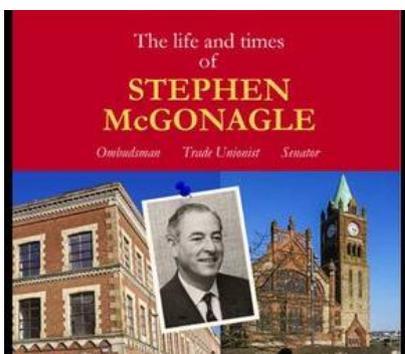
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Beggars Bush, Haddington Road, Dublin 4, Ireland.

**Irish
Labour
History
Society**



Book Review by Ruairi Quinn

The Life and Times of Stephen McGonagle Ombudsman, Trade Unionist, Senator

By Owen McGonagle

The first time I met Stephen McGonagle was when he entered the parliamentary room of the Labour Party in Leinster House in February 1983. Labour was in Government with Fine Gael after the General Election of November 1982. Dick Spring had become Labour's new leader when Michael O'Leary resigned and joined Fine Gael. His resignation prompted by the Labour Party's Annual Conference defeat of his motion to change political tactics and strategy.

The Workers Party, who were supporting, the minority Fianna Fáil Government of Taoiseach Charlie Haughey, seized the moment and announced they were no longer supporting Haughey. This prompted a snap General Election which saw Labour and Fine Gael win an overall majority. The new Seanad elections start immediately after the Dáil commences its work. Forty nine senators are elected by public representatives across the country. The Taoiseach then appoints eleven to bring the total to sixty. This system was designed to ensure that the Taoiseach of the day would have an automatic majority in the upper House. In the Garret Fitzgerald/Dick Spring coalition government Fine Gael appointed seven and Labour appointed four senators. Who would Spring choose? One of them was Stephen McGonagle.

By this stage, I was a Junior Minister in the Customs House, where the Department of the Environment was located and Dick was Minister. I introduced myself to Senator McGonagle and began to explain who I was. With his soft northern voice, he told me that he knew exactly who I was, I was pleased and flattered. The PLP held its weekly business meeting in the big first floor meeting room, in the 1932 extension, an additional wing to the Leinster building. It was also where Senator McGonagle would work, for the next five years.

The previous eighteen months, from June 1981 to November 1982 had witnessed political turmoil on a scale never seen before or, indeed, since. There were three General Elections, with government changes, resignation of party leaders as well as mi-

nority governments. But by the time Stephen joined the ranks of the PLP, the majority Fine Gael / Labour Government, at last, could get down to work. The Irish economy was in a very bad state and the political uncertainty had made a bad situation worse. The other issue, euphemistically called the Troubles, had been ongoing since the Summer of 1969, more than fifteen years of death and destruction with apparently no sense or prospect of a solution. For years, the Social Democratic and Labour Party, led now by John Hume, had been working with the Irish Government to find an alternative to the endless violence of the Provisional Sinn Fein/IRA and Loyalist Paramilitaries. The prospects for progress were bleak.

At the beginning of January 1983, I attended the SDLP annual conference as a fraternal delegate from the Labour Party. It was an effort, on my part, to renew relationships with the SDLP, which had weakened during Frank Cluskey's leadership for a variety of reasons, more to do with personality than ideology. By this time, Gerry Fitt and Paddy Devlin, both founder members of the SDLP had drifted away for various reasons. Dick Spring supported my efforts to renew relations. When John Hume gave his Leaders Address to the large group of delegates in Belfast, there was a strong sense of expectation. There was, he argued strongly the need for a new political initiative to break the endless cycle of violence, which was making life unbearable for all the people living in the North.

He proposed the establishment of a Council for a New Ireland which would involve all the political parties on the island. Their task would be to negotiate the shape and outline of an island upon which everyone could live peacefully, recognizing and respecting the different traditions of all. The New Ireland Forum, was brought into existence by the new government in Dublin. But not surprisingly, the Unionists, Provisional IRA/Sinn Fein and other smaller parties refused to engage and it started its work in Dublin Castle in the early spring, 1983. Fine Gael and Labour, with Fianna Fáil and the SDLP were the only parties to participate.

Labour was to have four full members and three alternate members at the Forum sessions, proportionate to the overall size of the Oireachtas. Who would the Labour members be? This was now a real challenge to the new Labour leader and deputy prime minister of Ireland he had more knowledge of Ulster rugby than he had of northern national politics. The Labour links had been closer to the trade unions, but both Fitt and Devlin were gone. It was obvious that Fine Gael would pick a northerner, probably from the SDLP and Dick wanted his own person, and not someone who Garrett Fitzgerald would try to impose on him. So Dick turned to his inner circle at that time, to people he knew and trusted. Joe Revington was a close friend, from Kerry and fellow student in Trinity. Joe was now working directly with Dick as political adviser. He was also married to Finola, a Derry woman. Joe knew that her father, Dr. James J O'Donnell, a local medical doctor was a close friend,

of Stephen McGonagle. Politics in Derry, on the nationalist side had been dominated by Eddie McAteer.

The Labour flag had been carried with great distinction by Stephen McGonagle. His leadership of the garment workers in to the Irish Transport and General Workers Union was a major moment in the union's development. By this stage, he had become very much involved in Trade Union affairs, both locally and nationally. He was now, through Joe Revington, invited to Dublin to meet Dick Spring. There were other connections for the new Labour leader and Tánaiste. His own father Dan, like Stephen had been an Irish Transport Union official. Stephen and Dick got on well from the very beginning. The Labour Leader formally asked would he join the Labour Party, accept a nomination to Seanad Éireann Stephen took up the invitation. He was one of Labour's four members in the Seanad, as well as on Labour's team in the New Ireland Forum. His talents and insights were a powerful addition to the Labour Party.

Stephen McGonagle's skill and experience was recognized in appointments, not only within the trade union movement, when he became Chairman of the Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions in 1968 and President of

the Irish Congress in 1972-1973, but also by both British and Irish governments. He was – Vice-chair of the Londonderry Development Commission, Ombudsman (Commissioner for Complaints and Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration), Chairman of the Police Complaints Board, Senator in the Republic of Ireland, and an Irish Labour Party representative on the New Ireland Forum. The proceedings of the Forum, in 1984, were to resonate with policies and principles of peace, non-violence and democracy, which Stephen had consistently upheld since the 1940s.

The book outlines the life of Stephen McGonagle, sketching the origins of the family into which he was born, the influences that shaped the individual person, his views, attitudes, instincts and motivations. From the very particular Irish context of his birth in Derry, his education and upbringing, in Donegal and Derry, he energetically engaged in a fundamental and principled interest in humanity. From trade unionist to politician, to human rights activist, he faced any opposition, in the pursuit of improved human conditions and peaceful, non-violent solutions to our more recalcitrant problems. Many issues he dealt with might seem to have belonged to the past, yet they are still with us.

Review by Ruairi Quinn

The launch of

**“Stephen McGonagle
Ombudsman, Trade Unionist, Senator”
by Owen McGonagle**

will take place

Wednesday 11th April, at 7.30pm in the City Hotel, Derry.

AND ALSO

The General Officers, NEC of SIPTU, and

Umiskin Press

invite you to the launch of

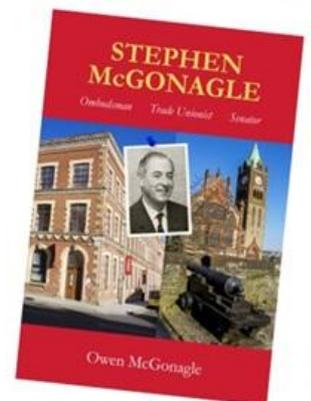
Owen McGonagle's

Stephen McGonagle: Ombudsman, Trade Unionist, Senator

on Thursday 19th April 2018 at 5:30 for 6pm

Connolly Room, Cois Life Bar, Liberty Hall Theatre, Dublin 1

Regrets only to kmcginly@tcd.ie



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