



written by Lorcàn O'Cinnèide and Eoin Sweeney

Charlie Haughey and Marine Policy

From the time he became Taoiseach in 1979, Charlie had a strong sense of the need for Ireland to reverse its abandonment of the marine sphere. He was well ahead of his time in declaring Irish waters a sanctuary for marine wildlife such as Whales and Dolphins.

He also was very clear about the need for an island nation to have a proper marine research capability and he responded quickly and forcefully to the promptings of Eoin Sweeney when they met in 1990, as Eoin himself describes:
a world leading industry here where only a cottage industry existed before."

Some Reminiscences about Charlie Haughey - Eoin Sweeney SEAI

I have two specific memories of CJH that speak, tellingly, about his capacities for vision and decisive action.

Background

I had a long interest in the sea and the neglected position of the marine sector in the Irish economy, and our lack of sovereignty in respect to our surrounding seas. Having studied economics in college, and with no interest in pursuing a conventional career as an economist, I eventually ended up as a crewman on fishing vessels in Killybegs.

At the same time, the increasingly ugly and aimless conflict in the North, and the feelings of frustration and shame that it engendered in many Irish people, led me to look for ways in which I could meaningfully contribute to the ongoing process of building a mature and economically successful republic. In 1975, while working with the ITGWU, I was fortunate to be asked to contribute to the elaboration of a Marine Science and Technology programme for Ireland, a task initiated by the National Science Council. It was clear that, if Ireland was to actively address this underdeveloped sector, new institutions were needed, namely a Department of the Marine and a 'spearheading' Marine Institute.

CJH interventions

For some years, subsequently, I was a marine 'bore' and articulated the case for a marine development policy to all and sundry. One of those was Sean Sherwin, who I got to know on a couple of trips to Libya, negotiating co-operation agreements on Science and Technology for the National Board for Science and Technology, and

who subsequently became national organiser of Fianna Fail. He suggested that I should talk to CJH and arranged a meeting with him. This meeting took place at his office in Govt. buildings. He listened attentively until a telephone call, about an urgent matter, interrupted our meeting, which he apologetically terminated with an undertaking to resume at a future date. He lost office shortly afterwards. Some months later, I got a phone call from Martin Mansergh, saying that the leader of the opposition recalled our conversation and would like to meet again. I agreed and asked, when? "Could you come in to Leinster House now?" asked Martin? Always the good public servant, I agreed and went to Charlie's office in Leinster House. He was seated behind his desk and, waving his arm in a Napoleonic fashion, requested me to 'run over that marine scenario again'. I started my spiel and he stopped me after a few minutes and asked if I could 'write this as if I was delivering it as a policy announcement'.

Somewhat taken aback, I said I would try to and would get something to him in day or so. "No", he said, "could you sit over there and do it now". He handed me a pad of paper and a pen, sat me at a desk in the room and excused himself, saying he would be back shortly. Twenty minutes later, he came back and I assembled my



few bits of paper for him. He glanced at it, and asked if he could use it any way he saw fit, which I, naturally, agreed to, whereupon he thanked me and showed me out. The next day an envelope, with the draft of his speech to the next, imminent, Fianna Fail Ard Fheis landed on my desk. There was a note asking if PP 12/13, or whatever, looked ok. In it he had adopted much of the material prepared in his office and, shortly afterwards, delivered the speech, announcing that his next Govt. would address the historic anomaly of Ireland's neglect of its marine resources and would create institutions, a Marine institute etc, that would spearhead the building of a new relationship between Ireland, the sea and its development potential... And he did. The other item is based on second-hand information but was recounted to me by Prof. Pádraig O'Ceidigh, professor of Zoology in NUIG. The professor was an early advocate of developing marine research activity in Ireland. He wanted to establish a Shellfish Research Laboratory in Carna, Connemara, to galvanise marine research activity in the university, to lead the way for the development of aquaculture (which was just emerging as a potential industry) and to involve the local community in better utilisation and management of shellfish and fish resources. The professor had been engaged in a long and fruitless correspondence with the (then Department of

Agriculture and Fisheries), who were unsympathetic to the concept and particularly resistant to the request for funding to establish the laboratory. The Prof. eventually secured a meeting with CJH, who listened to the Prof's case, then showed him the large dog-eared file from his civil servants, full of notes emphasising the reasons why it was very difficult to proceed with his proposal. He then said, "You see my problem Professor. Now, I will demonstrate the art of government to you", and signed, on the topmost memo describing the difficulties, - ' Not so difficult - please implement immediately, by order, the Minister'

Lorcán Ó Cinnéide continues:

The Marine Institute was eventually established by legislation in 1992 and has since become one of the foremost institutions of its kind in the world, now with a fine headquarters in Oranmore, two top class research vessels and a staff of nearly two hundred who are at the forefront of marine research.

Charlie also established a dedicated Department of the Marine with a full cabinet ministry in which all the functions to do with fishing, offshore energy, vessel registration and licensing and aquaculture were brought together which represented a new prominence for the marine sector. He had a belief in the development of a necklace of marinas around the coast to cater for the growing interest in sailing tourism. He laid the seeds for improved facilities for many of the offshore island communities and visited most of them over the years. In later times his successors as Taoiseach did not, let's say charitably, share his vision and dismembered the Department over a number of years. Enough said!

Charlie's openness to Professor Ó Céidigh and to Eoin Sweeney and the ideas they were promulgating is as significant as were those interventions which led to Temple Bar or the International Financial Services Centre in Dublin, and have had a lasting effect. The fishing industry may not be in the best of shape and we may have a long way to go to fully address our marine resources in general, but they are far better for the intervention of Charlie Haughey.

I, like a lot of people who knew him I suppose, am not blind to Charlie's flaws and failings. His life and those flaws - like everything else about him - were, unlike those of rest of us, played out on the public stage and subject to the most minute scrutiny. It is fashionable - almost mandatory - to belittle him and his memory. But he was a unique, cultured, able and far-seeing man who did an awful lot of wonderful things for a lot of people and his country. I am proud to say I knew him.