



# THE CLOSURE OF A HOSPITAL: AS SEEN BY THE PRESS

Shortly after lunch on Thursday, 10 December, 1987, two officials from the Department of Health entered Barrington's Hospital. Walking with the air of authority of powerful servants of the state, they proceeded along the ground floor corridor to the matron's office.

In the room, the chairman of the board of governors, Ald. Gus O'Driscoll, waited with hospital secretary, Tim Kennelly. Since early in the year, there had been inconclusive discussions between Barrington's, the other voluntary hospital, St. John's, and Department of Health officials. Gus O'Driscoll knew that the officials, assistant secretary Gerry O'Dwyer, and his colleague Tom Mooney, would talk about hospital funding. After all, on 29 October, 1987, Barrington's had received a letter from the Department saying that their overall non-capital grant for 1988 would be £1.6 million. This figure represented a 16% cutback in the Government allocation.

The news from the officials could not have been worse. After a soft preamble about the provision of acute hospital services by the two voluntary hospitals, the hard news came with a brutal clarity. 'It has now been determined that acute hospital services should be concentrated in St. John's Hospital and that acute services at Barrington's Hospital should cease early in 1988'.<sup>(1)</sup>

'I was shattered by the news; we never expected to be closed. We were not told why the hospital is to close', Ald. O'Driscoll told the *Limerick Leader*. Matron Anna Casey was devastated and said the announcement had come as a

by Frank Hamilton

great shock.

On Monday, 14 December, an emergency meeting of the board of governors was held in the hospital. A major all-party campaign to 'Save Barrington's' was launched. The Limerick City Council, meeting on the same night, passed a motion deploring the action of the Minister for Health.<sup>(2)</sup>

In a surprise development, the Mayor of Limerick, Ald. Tim Leddin, moved to distance himself from the growing tide of protest. 'It is an awful disaster that such a fine institution could be closed by a Ministerial edict. But it has happened all

over the country.'<sup>(3)</sup> 'I'm a Limerickman whose family have always benefitted from the great service of Barrington's, but I am an Irishman first and I know how hard the times are and the decisions that have to be made'.<sup>(4)</sup>

A week later, summing up the public reaction, a *Limerick Leader* editorial stated: 'The closure of Barrington's Hospital is not surgery. It is butchery ... Dr. O'Hanlon should urgently re-examine the case of Barrington's, whose death is not only flawed health policy but false economics'.<sup>(5)</sup>

Political reaction was also swift. Ald. Jim Kemmy T.D. declared that he would vote against the closure in the Dail, even if it meant bringing down the minority



Martyn Turner's 'Irish Times' cartoon was not one of his best, and did nothing to capture the deep sense of loss felt by the people of Limerick, when faced with the prospect of the hospital's closure.

DATE	NAME	ADDRESS
8/8/87	William C. Barrington	11 Tedworth Sq. Limerick SW3
11/1/88	Ann Spring T.D.	Limerick, D.P.P.
	Jim Kemmy	

Three signatures on the 'Save Barrington's' book at the hospital.

## Barrington's Hospital & City of Limerick Infirmary

GEORGE'S QUAY, LIMERICK

Established 1829

TELEPHONE 48222

Limerick 28th March, 1988.

SECRETARIES

TIM KENNELLY

SECRETARIES

SIR WILLIAM BARRINGTON, B.T.

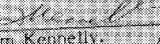
AND P. FARCSI

### IMPORTANT NOTICE

IN LINE WITH THE MINISTER FOR HEALTH'S DECISION THAT ALL ACUTE HOSPITAL SERVICES SHOULD CEASE IN BARRINGTON'S HOSPITAL WITH EFFECT FROM THURSDAY, MARCH, 31st 1988, BARRINGTON'S HOSPITAL'S CASUALTY DEPARTMENT WILL OPEN ON AN 8.00 a.m. - 8.00 p.m. BASIS ONLY WITH EFFECT FROM MONDAY, MARCH, 28th.

ALL CASUALTY ATTENDANCES AFTER 8.00 P.M. EACH NIGHT SHOULD GO TO THE CASUALTY DEPARTMENT OF LIMERICK REGIONAL HOSPITAL. THIS TIES IN WITH THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH'S VIEW THAT LIMERICK REGIONAL HOSPITAL SHOULD DEAL WITH ALL ACCIDENT AND EMERGENCY CASES AFTER 8.00 P.M. EACH NIGHT.

THE HOSPITAL SINCERELY REGRET ANY POSSIBLE INCONVENIENCE AND ARE VERY SAD THAT IT WILL NOT BE IN A POSITION TO CONTINUE ITS CASUALTY SERVICES TO THE PEOPLE OF LIMERICK AS IT HAS DONE FOR THE PAST ONE HUNDRED AND SIXTY EIGHT YEARS.

SIGNED:   
Tim Kennelly,  
Secretary/Manager

**The final notice of the closure of the hospital was displayed on this door of the outpatients' department.**

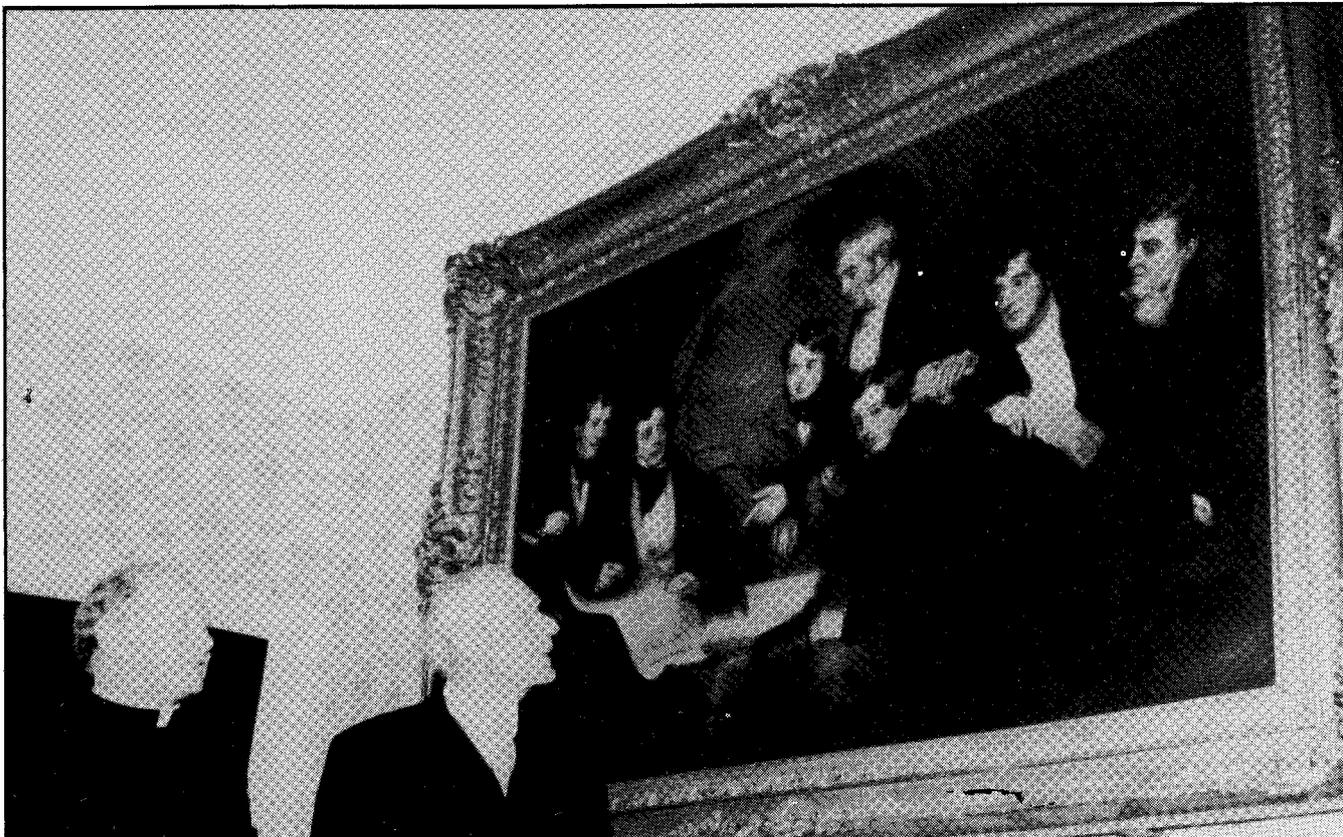
Fianna Fail government.

Fine Gael's Michael Noonan, T.D., in a holding comment, asked the Minister to delay his decision. The local Labour Party said that the closure was an attack on the poor of Limerick. Then Progressive Democrats leader Des O'Malley T.D. tabled a Dail motion on 17 December opposing the closure. Drawing together all the strands of advantage keeping Barrington's open, the motion clarified the main themes of the emerging action committee's campaign; treating 46,000 patients; open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week; the fact that eighty percent of 'in-patients' were public patients, and that it was a highly cost effective, efficient hospital with excellent facilities. The leader of the Progressive Democrats stated that closure was not justified 'on either financial, medical or social grounds'.<sup>(6)</sup>

O'Malley said he was prepared to talk with the other parties in the Dail to forge a united front against the closure. Health Minister O'Hanlon, however, insisted that there could be no change in the Government's decision.

As plans for a massive protest march early in the New Year were being formulated, Fianna Fail's sole East Limerick T.D., Willie O'Dea, admitted that he was upset because he had not been consulted by the Government. 'I absolutely deplore what the Government has done. It has abandoned Fianna Fail in Limerick and the people of Limerick city', he said.<sup>(7)</sup>

As Christmas approached, the 'Save



**Sir Fitzwilliam Barrington and Fr. Mark Tierney take a last look at the painting of the hospital's founding fathers, on the day before Barrington's closed. (Picture by Kieran Clancy, 'Cork Examiner').**



**A final farewell: Matron Anna Casey and the nursing staff, pictured outside the hospital on 31 March, 1988. (Picture by Kieran Clancy, 'Cork Examiner'.)**

Barrington's' Committee, under the chairmanship of Ald. O'Driscoll planned a campaign to prevent the closure. Fine Gael strategist Tony Brazil was elected PRO to highlight the case against closure. Utilising his proven PR talents, Brazil rallied the press corps, organised publicity opportunities and a series of photo-calls for the media. 'The campaign will be conducted on a non-political basis and in a dignified manner', said Ald. O'Driscoll.<sup>(8)</sup>

Away from the glare of publicity, the press people were privately talking about the 'real reasons' why the hospital was to be closed. 'The hospital chosen to stay open is run by nuns – and the Catholic Bishop of Limerick is Chairman of the Board of Governors – so put it together', said one reporter.<sup>(9)</sup>

One of the first publicity successes was the drive to collect 70,000 signatures from people opposed to the closure. 12,000 were collected in the first four days. Just before Christmas at the hospital, people were signing at the rate of one thousand an hour.<sup>(10)</sup>

By 31 December, over 20,000 had signed. On Tuesday, 22 December, 1987, the Mid-Western Health Board met

in Newcastle West, County Limerick. During a debate on the controversy, Cllr. Michael Collins, Fianna Fail, said many people had expected St. John's to be affected. The chairman, Cllr. Jack Bourke, Fianna Fail, was then heard to remark: 'The power of the crozier'.<sup>(11)</sup>

On Wednesday, 23 December, the affair took a dramatic turn when a group of consultants made a bid of £1 million for St. John's, with the aim of establishing a private hospital there. With this bid, the Catholic Bishop of Limerick, Dr. Jeremiah Newman was finally drawn into the controversy. He had received the consultants' bid through the Ennis solicitor, I.M. Houlihan, in his capacity as chairman of the St. John's board of governors. The Bishop was trapped in a difficult dilemma. A member of the Barrington's Hospital board of governors, he had maintained a discreet silence as the debate raged in political, social and clerical circles.

On the final day of December, Fine Gael's Cllr. Kevin Kiely finally broke cover and called on the Bishop to convene a special meeting of St. John's governors to discuss the £1 million offer.<sup>(12)</sup>

Labour's Frank Prendergast, also a

member of the action committee, raised the morality of private hospitals, where 'pay and get the best' was the guiding philosophy. 'I would not like to see St. John's become a private hospital at the expense of the poor and PAYE sector'.<sup>(13)</sup>

As the year ended, the *Cork Examiner* editorialised on the difficult situation: 'Rarely before in the history of Limerick has there been such total political opposition to a Government decision as on this major issue'.<sup>(14)</sup>

The facade of political unity however was beginning to suffer some strain. Although Fianna Fail members were on the action committee, and Deputy O'Dea had signed the petition, there was a widening gulf between the local party and the two Government Ministers in West Limerick. Defence Minister Noonan T.D. and the Minister for Justice Gerry Collins T.D. had declined to sign the petition, despite the efforts of the action committee.

'I believe the two West Limerick Ministers will support us because the people of West Limerick will also suffer because of the increased pressure on the Regional Hospital', Ald. O'Driscoll had stated at the outset of the campaign.



**Matron Anna Casey in the boardroom on the day the hospital closed.**

His belief was not to be realised.

In early January, 1988, two local politicians, governors of St. John's, called upon Bishop Newman to convene a special meeting of the board of that hospital. Joining Cllr. Kevin Kiely was P.D. Cllr. Tim O'Driscoll. He stated: 'In view of the public interest and the current situation, I feel an urgent meeting should be held'.

'As Chairman of the hospital board of management (Dr. Newman) was centrally involved in the negotiations with the Department of Health which led to the current crisis. Neither Cllr. O'Driscoll nor Cllr. Kiely were made aware of the talks. They confirmed to the *Limerick Post* that they were left out of the discussions'.<sup>(15)</sup>

As the action committee planned a massive protest march for Saturday, 9 January, the Bishop came under even more pressure to break his silence. Deputy Kemmy called on Dr. Newman to state publicly that he supported the Barrington's campaign. He urged Dr. Newman to follow the lead of the Church

of Ireland Bishop Edward Darling and back the campaign.

Ald. O'Driscoll said he was disappointed that as a life governor Dr. Newman had not expressed concern for Barrington's on behalf of the great mass of people he represented'.<sup>(16)</sup>

Three days before the protest, over 50,000 signatures had been collected. The Church of Ireland Bishop Edward Darling described the decision as 'horrifying' and said it could only produce a very violent reaction from an already angry public'.<sup>(18)</sup>

On the morning of the march, Fine Gael's Michael Noonan warned that attempts by 'outside interests' to introduce a sectarian element into the Barrington's/St. John's issue would reduce the effectiveness of the campaign to save Barrington's'.<sup>(19)</sup> The increasing public perception of the role of Bishop Newman led to a significant denial of the alleged sectarian intervention, and published on the morning of the protest march: 'The Health Minister Dr. O'Hanlon

last night insisted that the decision to close Barrington's Hospital in Limerick had not been influenced by the Bishop of Limerick, Dr. Jeremiah Newman. Dr. O'Hanlon said he had not spoken to Dr. Newman on the subject, and he would be interested to know at what level any alleged intervention by the Bishop had been made. The decision to close Barrington's had been taken because of the nature of the site and the buildings'. The report continued:

'One T.D. who did not want to be named said: "Barrington's Hospital is being closed because of the direct intervention of Bishop Newman". The *Irish Press* was unable to contact Bishop Newman for his comment on the allegations last night'.<sup>(20)</sup> The story, written from the Dublin newsroom by an ex-BBC journalist who had recently joined the newspaper, was largely dismissed by local journalists, who failed to identify the unnamed T.D. quoted as the source.

A more direct political influence was identified by the *Irish Times* analysis, also published on that Saturday morning: 'The suggestion has also been made that the present Government is not worried too much about closing down any hospital in East Limerick where Fianna Fail has received a political rebuff following the defection of Mr. Dessie O'Malley and the emergence of the Progressive Democrats'.<sup>(21)</sup>

While the action committee endeavoured to meet Dr. Newman to urge him to take part in the march, the Bishop finally broke his silence when he told RTE that St. John's Hospital was not for sale. 'It would be inappropriate on the part of St. John's to get involved in matters concerning Barrington's, he said'.<sup>(22)</sup>

So the demonstration went ahead as planned. 'Crowds estimated at about 20,000 turned out yesterday afternoon in the biggest demonstration seen in Limerick this century, to show their support for the campaign to save Barrington's Hospital'.<sup>(23)</sup> 'The people of the Mid-West said a massive "NO" on Saturday to the Government's proposals to stop funding Barrington's Hospital'.<sup>(24)</sup> 'The vast majority of the people of Limerick are disappointed that Bishop Newman has not come out and made a statement in support of Barrington's Hospital', said Cllr. Larry Cross who is a governor of St. John's'.<sup>(25)</sup>

On Monday, 11 January, P.D. leader Desmond O'Malley signed the 'Save Barrington's' petition. 'The two Government Ministers from Limerick, Mr. Gerry Collins and Mr. Michael Noonan were criticised by Mr. O'Malley for their disappointing "lack of activity"'.<sup>(26)</sup> At a press conference, held on the same day, O'Malley said: 'There has, perhaps been too much concentration on Bishop Newman and not enough on those who made the decision to shut down Barrington's hospital in March. The



Minister for Health must have been badly briefed when he made that decision'.<sup>(27)</sup>

During the first two weeks in January, the political forces gathered. The Labour Party and the Progressive Democrats were against the closure; the Fine Gael party tried to formulate a policy; while in Fianna Fail, the attention turned to Deputy O'Dea. January 13 had forebodings of ill-fortune for the Government when O'Dea announced that he could not vote for the closure of Barrington's. He said that the Government would have to take account of the political repercussions of the move.<sup>(28)</sup>

By this time, the main newspapers had begun to treat the story as a national one and not as a provincial political squabble. The danger to the Government was increasing. 'The minority Government faces its first potential Dail defeat this year over the controversial decision to close Barrington's Hospital', wrote Chris Glennon, political correspondent *Irish Independent*. Labour plans to call for the rescinding of the decision in a private members' time motion. A Dail vote on the hospital will be particularly difficult for Limerick East's only Fianna Fail Deputy Willie O'Dea. He has said that he could not vote for the closure of Barrington's'.<sup>(29)</sup>

The weekend of 16 January saw a hardening of political wills, with the Minister saying that his decision would not be changed; Dessie O'Malley calling on Collins and Noonan to oppose the closure, and Fine Gael's Michael Noonan edging off the fence to warn that 'it is very unlikely that we will support the Government on any Dail vote on this one'.<sup>(30)</sup> All the political activity culminated in a speculative piece on 19 January in the *Irish Times*, which stated: 'A Dail vote on the future of Barrington's Hospital could be taken by February 10th following the tabling yesterday by the Progressive Democrats of a motion calling for the retention of the hospital. The PDs, the Labour Party and the Workers Party, together with three Independent Deputies Jim Kemmy, Tony Gregory and Neil Blaney, have already indicated that they will support the Dail move. Fine Gael have not made any official comment on the issue'.

The Fine Gael dilemma was revealed on 21 January in a *Cork Examiner* piece: 'Political sources have been suggesting over the past few days that the Fine Gael front bench is split on the issue, with one group headed by Deputy Michael Noonan pressing a case for supporting the motion, and another, including Party Leader Alan Dukes, expressing the view that it was not an issue that should be used to defeat the Government'.

On 22 January, Labour leader Dick Spring visited Barrington's and revealed that 'in principle' his party would support the P.D. Dail motion. 'The case for Barrington's stands on its own, a defeat for the Government on the issue is

imminent – and I think they should be man enough to say: We have made a mistake; we are changing our minds' he told the *Limerick Leader*.

Towards the end of January, the Defence Minister Michael Noonan T.D. addressed the Fianna Fail Raheen cumann. He spoke about the value of true leadership and real government. He omitted, however, a section of his speech aimed at those campaigning against the Barrington's closure: 'It is the duty of every member of Fianna Fail to follow the example of our leader and the

strategy and rejected it'.<sup>(32)</sup>

By the end of January, both Fianna Fail and the board of governors had arranged deputations to the Minister primarily as PR exercises and with little real hope of getting him to change his mind. The Mayor of Limerick now said that he was 100 percent behind the campaign to save the hospital.<sup>(33)</sup>

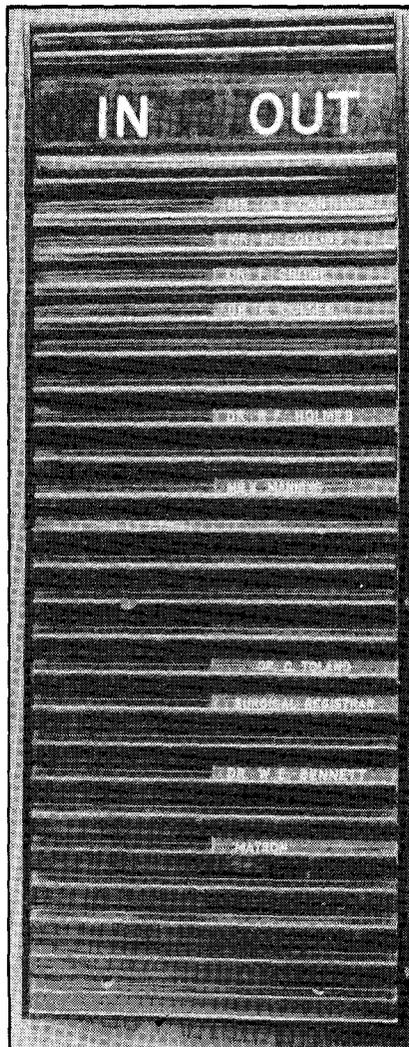
On 1 February, after suffering a political battering, the Government finally seized the political initiative. Dr. O'Hanlon went on RTE, defended his decision, and said that the hospital would close. Meanwhile, a series of inspired leaks to national newspapers made it appear that a compromise could be reached. 'The controversial decision to close Limerick's Barrington's hospital is being re-considered by the Government. Talks are going on and there is optimism that a solution which will meet with Fine Gael's so far unstated position will emerge before the Dail's private members' motion is taken. One government source said that a proposal to close Barrington's has not been finally agreed'.<sup>(34)</sup>

The P.D. motion was scheduled for debate on 17 February, 1988.

The hospital delegation met with the Minister on 3 February, but he stood by his closure decision. Three days later, amid considerable political shuffling, a row broke out between P.D. Leader Des O'Malley and Fine Gael's Michael Noonan. The row centred on what Noonan called O'Malley's 'ill-judged intervention', which made it more difficult for the Health Minister to give concessions to the Limerick delegation. Noonan said that everyone knew that behind the scenes discussions had been going on between some people in Government and Fine Gael. 'The reality of the situation was that there was a grudge between the Taoiseach and Mr. O'Malley ... By implying that it was the P.D.s who had brought the matter to a head and that the Government was going to yield to P.D. pressure there had been a setback and the P.D. move was not helpful'.<sup>(35)</sup>

Mr. O'Malley, however, hit back by saying that it was regrettable that 'cynical decoys' were being created to cover other people's political difficulties. It would be 'far more appropriate' for Deputy Noonan to concentrate his energies on getting his own party to support the P.D. motion. He accused Fine Gael of failing to put down any motion in the Dail on the issue. It was up to the Dail to reverse the Government's 'erroneous' policy. It could be carried if Fine Gael came out and supported it (the P.D. motion).<sup>(36)</sup>

'Minister O'Hanlon must have been laughing listening to Des O'Malley and Michael Noonan locked in argument while the Limerick deputation was in Dublin in their effort to get the Minister to change his mind', said Deputy Kemmy.<sup>(37)</sup> 'There has been a very angry reaction in



All out!

Government. We cannot say we are Fianna Fail and committed to restoring the nation's finances and at the same time criticise or campaign against the local or sectoral effects of the commitment'.<sup>(31)</sup>

The Fine Gael party, meanwhile, was wrestling with its conscience. In another holding statement, the party decided to reserve its position until the day of the vote – putting maximum pressure on Fianna Fail in the meantime. The party also put forward the idea of keeping Barrington's open, while operating St. John's as a private hospital, but both the P.D.s and Labour saw through the



*... the Catholic Bishop of Limerick, Dr. Jeremiah Newman (second left), was finally drawn into the controversy'.*

said, addressing the Fianna Fail and Fine Gael benches.<sup>(46)</sup> Cheers went up in pubs, clubs and in hundreds of homes in Limerick last night when news of the Government defeat was announced.<sup>(47)</sup>

Media attention then focused on the Fianna Fail Limerick East deputy who had defied and defeated the party. Leaving the Dail, Willie O'Dea refused to talk to newsmen. Instead, he returned to Barrington's early on the following morning, and held a news conference. He made it clear that he had no other option but to vote to save the hospital when he had found the voting was 79 each way. 'Barrington's is a hospital catering for the poor of Limerick, who are my primary concern, and there is no other way I could vote but to save the hospital'.<sup>(48)</sup>

The Fianna Fail party moved quickly to expel O'Dea, dismissed speculation about a general election and tried to reduce the defeat to a 'purely local issue'. 'The expulsion motion was proposed by the Chief Whip Mr. Vincent Brady and passed unanimously. The Taoiseach Mr. Haughey expressed regret at what had happened'.<sup>(49)</sup>

For his part, O'Dea rejected suggestions of becoming an Independent and insisted that he would continue to support the Government. 'I have been a faithful party supporter'. And there was further political fall-out. 'Justice Minister Gerry Collins today accused P.D. leader Des O'Malley of playing local backyard politics to make things difficult for the

Government'.<sup>(50)</sup>

In the wake of the Dail vote, the solicitor acting for the group of consultants wishing to purchase St. John's for £1 million said he was optimistic of concluding a takeover deal. 'An offer of £1 million submitted by Ennis solicitor Mr. Desmond Houlihan was turned down previously by the chairman of the board of management of St. John's, the Most Rev. Jeremiah Newman. The group of consultants have kept clear of the hospitals' controversy, but this week's Dail vote has re-activated their plans for St. John's. Bishop Newman was not available for comment this Friday. Nor would anyone at St. John's say anything'.<sup>(51)</sup>

The party reaction to O'Dea's defection was mixed. While most sympathised with him and understood his position, one of the cardinal rules of the Fianna Fail Party had been breached, and some members were out for his scalp. 'A Limerick member of the Fianna Fail national executive Mr. Michael Parkes this Thursday called on Deputy O'Dea to resign from Fianna Fail. He fell into O'Malley's trap last night'.<sup>(52)</sup>

After the Dail vote, the jubilant action committee celebrated at Dublin's Westbury Hotel. Said Ald. Gus O'Driscoll: 'We are vindicated, and Dr. O'Hanlon as a democrat will now have to tear up his decision to close Barrington's'.<sup>(53)</sup>

In the aftermath of the celebration and jubilation, the analysis and political explanation, it became clear that the

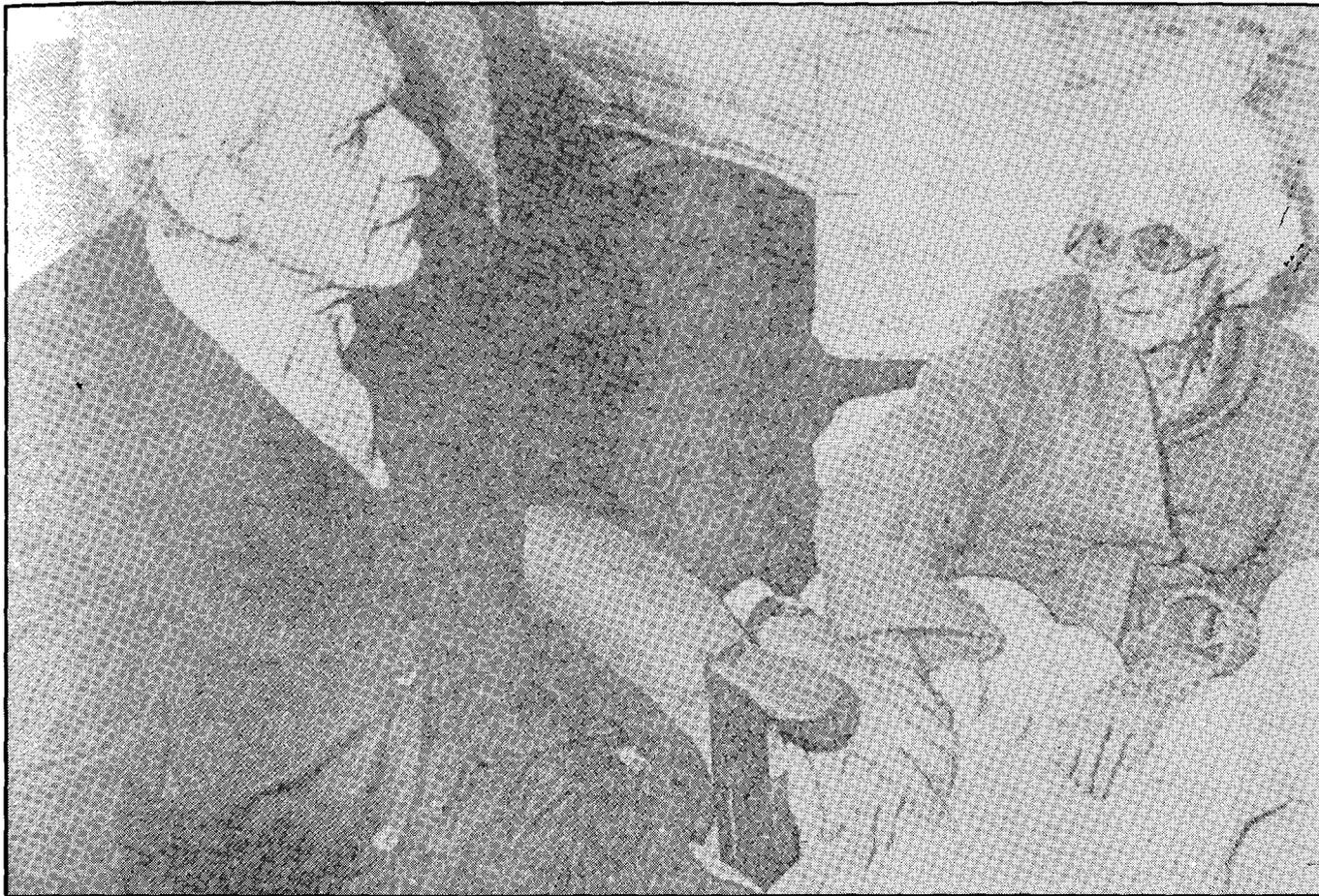
Taoiseach was going ahead with the closure. 'P.D. leader Des O'Malley said that the Government might as well suspend the Dail for the next three years if they are not interested in accepting decisions democratically arrived at by the people's representatives'.<sup>(54)</sup>

On 1 March, the Health Minister announced that Barrington's would close at the end of the month. He considered that a vote on a Private Members' motion was not legally binding.

Legal moves were now being considered by the Action Committee. 'The governors will seek an order compelling the Minister to continue funding the hospital in accordance with its charter as passed by the Parliament ... in 1830'.<sup>(55)</sup>

In a news analysis on Thursday, 3 March, the *Irish Independent* looked in detail at the hospital issue and said the Taoiseach had delivered a tacit challenge to the opposition when he cast aside the majority Dail decision. 'He was operating on the assumption that the issue would remain localised and that the parties on the opposition benches would not combine in a "confidence" debate that might catapult his minority administration into a general election. He may be right on both counts, judging from the early responses from the Opposition. No opposition party would relish a general election just now'.<sup>(56)</sup>

On 4 March, a High Court action commenced in which the trustees of Barrington's sought an injunction against



*Fitzwilliam Barrington speaks to Delia McGovern, one of the last patients to leave the hospital, ('Irish Press' picture).*

the city to the carry-on. We must put an end to this sort of thing immediately if we are to go on from here in the campaign'.<sup>(38)</sup>

Fine Gael again tried to float the idea of keeping the Barrington's casualty unit open. 'The Government would be prepared to accept this amendment. It would stave off a Dail defeat for them and would also suit Fine Gael, who are in a political corner over the issue at present. The concession to Fine Gael by the Government comes after the direct rebuff to the P.D. leader Mr. O'Malley, who forecast at the beginning of last week that the hospital would be kept open. Since then Mr. O'Malley and Mr. Noonan of Fine Gael have been at logger-heads with each accusing the other of being responsible for the failure of the campaign to keep Barrington's open'.<sup>(39)</sup>

On February 10, just six days before the crucial Dail vote on the closure of the hospital, the Fine Gael party put down an amendment to the P.D. and Labour motions which called for the retention of the hospital and recommended that if the Minister for Health went ahead with the closure of a voluntary hospital in Limerick that it should be St. John's.<sup>(40)</sup>

The situation then was that while all the main opposition parties agreed that the closure decision should be reversed, they were far apart on the wording of Dail amendments. Fine Gael's decision to

include the privatisation of St. John's angered Labour, while the P.D.s felt it was 'tactically incorrect' because the wording of the amendment caused unnecessary divisions.

Fine Gael in Limerick called on all parties interested in saving Barrington's to support them.<sup>(41)</sup>

Analysing the gulf between the parties over the motion, the *Sunday Press* of 14 February concluded: 'The totally different approach to opposition by Fine Gael and the P.D.s makes an eventual agreement between them all that more difficult and promotes continuing bad relations. The chief beneficiaries are the Government who can govern without too much pressure and look forward with confidence to the next election'.

The weekend before the crucial Dail vote saw a two-hour meeting of the deputies from the Limerick East constituency but no agreement was reached on a common voting strategy. Neither was there support for the Fine Gael amendment, and Jim Kemmy called on the Fine Gael party to support the P.D. motion. 'The Fine Gael amendment is seen as being divisive and one designed to split the opposition parties', he stated.<sup>(42)</sup>

Minutes before the debate began, a delegation from the action committee ended their meeting with the Fine Gael leader in the Dail, Alan Dukes. For 45 minutes, they argued the case, but

chairman Ald. Gus O'Driscoll admitted that Mr. Dukes would not give a firm commitment to unite behind the P.D. motion.<sup>(43)</sup>

As the debate began, the Health Minister went on the attack saying he had given serious consideration to closing both Barrington's and St. John's hospitals. He said the P.D.s had 'foresaken national politics for parochial politics'.<sup>(44)</sup> When the vote on the motion came, it was a major shock for the Government. Instead of trying to lure Fine Gael to back the P.D. motion, the combined opposition reversed course and instead backed the Fine Gael amendment in a dramatic example of seizing the initiative. 'The uniting of the entire opposition behind the Fine Gael amendment was completely unexpected, as vociferous objections had been voiced to it by other opposition parties during the debate. When the vote was taken the Progressive Democrats, the Labour Party, the Workers Party and the three Independents combined to follow Fine Gael into the "TA" lobby. They were followed there by Mr. O'Dea ...<sup>(45)</sup> The Labour Party only decided on its voting tactics after the Fine Gael amendment had been incorporated into the motion, and the switch in voting patterns helped to defeat the Government by a single vote. The P.D. leader Mr. O'Malley was jubilant on the floor of the house after the vote. "We called both your bluffs", he



**Ald. Gus O'Driscoll, chairman, and the members of the hospital's last management committee.**

the Minister for Health to prevent the closure. 'The trustees of the hospital want the court to order the Minister to continue funding for this year'. They also claimed the 1830 Act would have to be repealed in order for the hospital to be closed'.<sup>(57)</sup>

As all the avenues of appeal for the continuation of the hospital were closed gradually, the *Limerick Leader*, in an editorial, looked at the fate of the campaign: 'Closure seems inevitable. But is it? Any lobby which can come from nowhere in a matter of weeks to win a Dail majority must be greatly respected. Moreover whatever happens to Barrington's the campaign can never be dismissed as a lost cause'.<sup>(58)</sup>

During the hearing of the court case, on Friday, 11 March, evidence was heard from Mr. Jeremiah O'Dwyer, assistant secretary, Department of Health. 'He said there was no intention by the Minister to expressly close down Barrington's or to frustrate that hospital's authorities in discharging their statutory obligations under the 1830 Act. By its letter of December 10th, 1987, the Department wanted to convey that the hospital would no longer be funded from Exchequer

resources for acute services and that discussions would be held with Barrington's as to its future role'.<sup>(59)</sup> The closure of Barrington's Hospital now seems inevitable after the failure on Monday's High Court bid to prevent the Government cutting off financial support on March 31st. And the Board of Management will be recommending to the Board of Governors next Monday night that the closure go ahead as ordered by the Minister because of lack of funds'.<sup>(60)</sup>

'It became clear in Limerick last night that the long battle to save the hospital has finally ended and that it is not possible to run the institution without State assistance, no matter how much the people of Limerick would be prepared to contribute to a fund'.<sup>(61)</sup>

'The news that it is "the end of the line" for the famous 86 bed voluntary hospital was conveyed to the staff by the chairman of the board of management Ald. Gus O'Driscoll. "The silence of the staff when I addressed them gave testimony to the significance of it all"'.<sup>(62)</sup>

The day before the hospital finally closed, a direct descendant of the Barrington family, Sir Fitzwilliam

Barrington (78) arrived from London 'to be with his friends at the hospital'. Sir Fitzwilliam was met at Shannon Airport by Ald. Gus O'Driscoll. He toured the wards and spoke to a dozen remaining patients, who were shortly afterwards transferred to the Regional and St. John's hospitals. 'Sir Fitzwilliam's own memories go back to when he lived in Glenstal, County Limerick as a child and his father used to bring him to visit the hospital, where he remembered wounded troops from the First World War. His former home is now Glenstal Abbey, home of the Benedictine monks'.<sup>(63)</sup>

'Meanwhile, arrangements have been completed for the redeployment of the vast majority of the 165 staff in other hospitals in the Limerick area. It is understood that 24 employees accepted voluntary redundancy. The closure will mark the end of one of the most controversial hospital closures in the country'.<sup>(64)</sup>

As the hospital closed, and the patients and staff dispersed to other places and jobs, the memories were sad and the comments bitter, as the darkness enveloped the "hospital for the poor".



**Hospital for sale!**

'The cry "Remember Limerick!" is part of our folk memory', said Fine Gael's Michael Noonan. 'I want to warn the Government that the cry "Remember Barrington's," will be heard ...<sup>(65)</sup>

In the reflective aftermath of a traumatic closure, it was the *Cork Examiner* which clinically analysed the tragedy: 'The closure of Barrington's should be remembered as an act which ignored the democratic process and the wishes of the Irish people, as expressed by their representatives in Dail Eireann who voted, no matter how haphazardly, to keep the hospital open. The blame for letting this happen rests as much with those in opposition, who saw the reversal of the Dail decision, not so much as a negation of the democratic process, but as just another local issue'.<sup>(66)</sup>

Remember Limerick. Remember Barrington's.

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