Stevie insults ‘The Chief’

OF all the local politicians mentioned in the Leader and Chronicle files of the century past, Stevie Coughlan stands out as the most outspoken and controversial. From his early days as a local councillor, agitation was his middle name. One of the first major controversies in which he was involved came in 1952, when the Leader, in large headlines proclaimed: “City Council Repudiates Mayor’s Letter To Sunday Newspapers.”

Stevie was Mayor at the time, and in his anxiety to land the famous chocolate crumb factory for the city, he wrote a letter to the Sunday newspapers making disparaging references to An Taoiseach, Mr. de Valera.

In a very conservative era, the letter caused a sensation and at the following Monday night’s City Council meeting “the public gallery was crowded to capacity, but hundreds more were unable to gain admittance” said the Council were incensed.

“If you were behind the Iron Curtain you would tremble in your skin before you would dare address the head of the Government as you have,” thundered Ald Dan Bourke, Fianna Fáil T.D. and former Mayor himself.

Stevie, well able to defend himself, riposted: “Are you comparing this country to the Iron Curtain. Thank God we have our freedom here.”

The debate got highly personal when Ald. Bourke accused Stevie thus: “We have watched you pitifully since you scammed into the Corporation. You were elected under very shady circumstances.”

Stevie: “You are making a most serious charge.”

Ald. Bourke was the Mayor’s chief protagonist, defending the honour of “The Chief” at all costs and even going so far as to quote the Provincial of the Holy Ghost Fathers as describing Mr. de Valera “as eminently suitable for...”

THE debate raged hot and heavy with all the councillors, no matter what their affiliations, condemning the letter, and some calling for the Mayor’s resignation.

One of the senior councillors, P. J. Donnellan, said: “You may have been over enthusiastic in trying to do your best for Limerick but I and all my associates condemn you.”

Ald. G. E. Russell was one of the few sympathetic voices and while admitting that the letter was not above criticism, he made an appeal for the motion of censuring the Mayor to be withdrawn.

“Of any of the Mayors I have served under, Mr. Coughlan has done more than any to bring about more employment and to bring a little happiness into the lives of the poor people.”

The Mayor, defending his action, said it had been said that in insulting Mr. de Valera he had committed an unpardonable sin, but he (Mayor) said when he saw the way he had about, in his fight for the factory and the unemployed, he decided to fight or die.

“I do not regret what letter,” he added. “I fired that shot and have another up the breach if necessary. I owe no apology to anybody for trying to get employment in Limerick.”

When a proposition was made that the Mayor should resign, the law agent intervened and said it was out of order. The meeting eventually decided unanimously to repudiate the letter.

During the course of the meeting, the Mayor had requested the Town Clerk (Mr. McHugh) to hand out samples of the chocolate crumb to the councillors, some of whom sampled same.

Also, this was the nearest anyone ever got to partake in Stevie’s dream of a chocolate crumb factory: his valiant efforts, which were to make headlines in the Leader for several issues afterwards, coming to naught...