

Norma People



Norma Foley is lucky, over-confident, mediocre and visionless so she will be in running to succeed Micheál Martin

By Kevin Higgins

NORMA FOLEY appears to consider herself special. And sure why wouldn't she. She is one of those politicians for whom, should a slice of Kerry Golded bread topple from her plate, it would never land butter side down.

She became Minister for Education in June 2020, almost by mistake; mainly because of the stunning absence of talent in the Fianna Fáil parliamentary party but also because of temporary Taoiseach Micheál Martin's penchant for surrounding himself with yes-people who are no discernible threat to his own supremacy over the fifteen per-cent party Fianna Fáil has become. Having failed to secure a seat at every general election since 2002 or a place on the ticket in Kerry for the 2020 general election, Norma was imposed as a candidate by the Fianna Fáil national executive i.e. by the good graces of Micheál Martin and his wife, who is, one understands, quite ambitious on Micheál's behalf. Then, having scratched into the last seat, at the expense of her party colleague John Brassil, on her first day in the Dáil, Foley proposed her party leader Micheál Martin as Taoiseach, found herself elevated to cabinet – and the Education portfolio at that – a crucial one in this time of plague.

Ms Foley carries herself as if she believes that this is not some grotesque piece of luck on her part i.e. that she combined just the right amount of mediocrity with being in the required place at the required moment in history. No. Norma acts as if her becoming Minister for Education was as natural, and inevitable, an occurrence as Peter

Ill being crowned Emperor of Russia. Given she worked as a secondary school teacher before being elected to the Dáil, one could have hoped that Foley might have at least lent a sympathetic ear to the entirely valid safety concerns expressed by teachers, and all of their trade unions: the ASTI, TUI, the INTO, and FÓRSA. Not a bit of it. During the protracted negotiations about a return to school, Foley at times sounded like a pearl-necklaced version of Norman Tebbit. Always eager to bash the unions, Foley's interventions encouraged the worst of those Vichy/collaborationist 'parents' groups' who emerge on Twitter whenever teachers take any sort of industrial action. On a couple of occasions Foley clearly had to be muzzled by the temporary Taoiseach's handlers for fear her interventions might wreck the negotiations entirely. In one fractious outing in January she said claims by the INTO that it did not instruct its members to stay out of schools were "incredibly disingenuous".

While Foley's anti teachers' unions stance, and general inexplicable air of prim poshness, makes her the sort of Fianna Fáiler most likely to appeal to Fine Gael voters with the bluest of blouses, she is of the best Fianna Fáil pedigree.

Her dad, Denis Foley, having proved himself, during the latter part of his tenure as TD for the Kerry North constituency, to be a man whose neck contained sufficient meat to construct another Pádraig Flynn and still have plenty left over. Foley Snr was a member of the Dáil Public Accounts Committee, in which capacity he was involved in questioning an official of the now notorious Ansbacher Bank. He resigned from the committee and, eventually, from Fianna Fáil, when it was revealed that he himself held an undeclared deposit in the same bank for the purposes of avoiding tax. In May 2000, Denis Foley became the first TD to receive a penalty for breaching the Ethics in Public Office Act 1995 and was suspended from the Dáil for 14 days. Apart from its ignominious finish, Foley Snr's political career was featherweight and passed mostly without notice.

Norma has inherited the unshakeable conviction of her late father but her ambitions greatly outstrip his. Since her appointment to cabinet she has shown that she is, most definitely, ready for her close up, Mr DeMille. Foley shares with her Fine Gael colleague Hildegard Naughton the fact that a certain kind of Irish Independent reader tends to attribute to her a degree of substance of which, as of yet, there's absolutely no evidence.

On education she seems not to be an original thinker. Unsurprisingly she told the Catholic Primary Schools Management Association in a typically smile-some recorded performance in late May that there's new-found "positivity" to Education as we emerge from Covid. She believes there is a pressing need to bring the Leaving Certificate and senior cycle "forward into the 21st century". She considers "there is a huge body of work to be done in reimagining senior cycle going forward". It's that impressive word "forward" again.

This forward look creates an imperative - not one that will be alien to her civil servants – of more continuous assessment and a shift away from the current pre-college academic orientation to allow more vocational options. As to her vision of an ideal Education we have heard nothing.

If current polling is anywhere near right, she will be swept out of the Dáil in the next election. In the meantime, Norma no doubt harbours dreams of succeeding temporary Taoiseach Martin as leader of Fianna Fáil when he's finally flushed down the U-bend of history, as he soon must be.



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