

160th Anniversary. 1980s - a time of change



Jobs featured on many front pages from the 1980s.

The 1980s saw a change in economic conditions from boom to recession.

Politically, the Northern Troubles were still causing deaths but not at the same rate as the early seventies.

Political instability in the South saw a number of elections.

Elections were often good for newspapers with advertising by political parties and a public eager for local news on the campaign.

People were more political then and less apathetic than today.

The Munster Express political scene by Pierce Dower was widely read. The 1980s was a decade of many elections.

The year 1980 opened with concern over the future of Tramore Racecourse,

which was up for sale and was applying for planning permission for housing.

Cllr. Tom Healy and Con Casey opposed the planning change, but it was later granted.

The housing slump in the eighties would mean little demand for development land. Racing would continue until a takeover a decade later by a local group acquiring the Fleming family interests.

Economy

On a further positive note, Des O Malley, FF Minister for Industry, came to Waterford to announce the opening of a great new industry in Waterford.

Bausch and Lomb of Rochester New York, State in the USA, were going to get an advance factory of 45,000 square feet from the IDA on their industrial estate in Waterford.

An initial £5m investment creating 53 jobs would rise to 300 and then 1000 after 5 years in the manufacture of contact lenses.

The company had pioneered the soft contact lens in 1971, with Research and Development a big part of the company. Bausch and Lomb remains still the largest employer in Waterford in 2020.

2,300 were employed in 1980 at the IDA Industrial Estate with over 3000 in Waterford Crystal. The city was a magnet for industrial employment.

That year was a declining one for glass profits which saw the first one drop in many years.

On another positive note, there was a commencement of construction on

the new airport runway at Killowen.

Ryanair started flights in July 1985 to Gatwick and later to Luton

and Stansted. They would move to Dublin and be a roaring aviation success from the 1990s. Planes to London were frequently full from Waterford.

Politics and Industry

The H Block hunger strikes and ongoing troubles at Clover Meats would have a large bearing on elections. Austin Deasy topped the poll in Waterford in June 1981, with 8,625, Jackie Fahy, FF second at 8,314, 6,022 Eddie Collins, FG, and Billy Kenneally of FF would all take seats.

A Northern Ireland H Block hunger striker, Kevin Lynch was selected to stand in Waterford and get a surprising 3,333 votes, upsetting the Labour vote and that of Sinn Fein the Workers Party, where local candidate, Alderman Paddy

Gallagher, was tipped to win a seat, but many factory workers voted for the H Block. A number of demonstrations were held in the months running up to the election supporting the 5 demands, with workers taking time off work to demonstrate. Ald Gallagher got 3453 votes, Billy Kyne of Labour 1532, Swift of FF 3456 and Bulbulia of FG, 3691. Katharine Bulbulia was a large gatherer of the growing women's vote.

Election workers at the time recall some level of intimidation at the time and a tense election.

The following year would see Paddy Gallagher win a seat. JJ Walsh had a special celebration in the Munster Express, a day after the count for Alderman Gallagher as a Dail seat beckoned. He would go onto become a full time TD, as per party policy.

One of the issues that came to the fore and where he was seen to work hard was the claim for social welfare. Ex Staff of Clover were not allowed to claim and needed a change in legislation for staff to claim when a factory had closed.

Minister of State, Eddie Collins did intervene on the matter.

Clover workers picketed all candidates during the election in a campaign to get their claim. The great debate on the election was called a bore by the editor, when for the first time the two party leaders argued in front of RTE cameras.

Another animal story related to cattle leaving Waterford port that were exported live and were slaughtered en route to the Egyptian port of Alexandria.

70 cattle died on the ship which was a converted banana boat from Wales.

More stringent regulations on the transport of cattle would follow.

The autumn of 1982 would see another election with Deputy Gallagher losing his seat back to Fianna Fail and Billy Kenneally, Fianna Fail's minority Administration would lose power to a Labour/ Fine Gael Coalition.

Waterford would see a Senior Cabinet Minister, Austin Deasy, play a major Leadership role.

Austin Deasy was a great negotiator for the Irish farmer interest in Brussels, which stopped Ireland going into major recession in the 1980s.

He would also manage to secure a major re vamp of Ardkeen Hospital and get it upgraded to Regional Hospital status.

This was despite much local county opposition, where local county hospital treatments would be cut back and centralised at Waterford Regional Hospital.

Health cuts and Minister for Health, Barry Desmond, would be harshly criticised.

The Health board meetings would be of major controversy and feature strongly in the Munster Express.

The mid eighties would see Waterford Crystal expand its profits under the strong dollar.

Workers would get more shares in a progressive profit sharing scheme.

The McGrath family who were long term strategic shareholders would sell over half of their holding to the London based investment group Globe Investments.

They would bring in the well known Paddy Hayes from the Ford Ireland group.

This would cause some worry that he might rationalise the Glass as he did at Ford.

In 1986, they would buy the famous Wedgwood Group in England.

They already owned Aynsley China and knew this part of the market.

This would enlarge the group in what was deemed a merger.

The share price would climb but eventually cost savings would be needed.

This would be the largest table ware company in the world as under Paddy Hayes, the company's ambitions soared. Redmond O Donoghue of Ford Spain would be brought back to his native Waterford for marketing the expanded Group.

In 1987 in the autumn of that year a major redundancy announcement was made in what was the end of an era at the Glass, where there was always employment growing.

Bank debt was high and cost savings were needed the US \$ was also falling

These two factors hit the company.

Almost 1000 workers would take the package against union wishes who did not

want redundancies and opposed compulsory ones.

They were still the largest employers with over 2350 employees across their factories in Dungarvan, Butlerstown, where they made lighting ware and the main factory in Kilbarry in the mid 1980s.

Taosieach Garret Fitzgerald would open the Waterford Crystal Gallery in 1986 in Kilbarry, a brainchild of Redmond O Donoghue a future chief executive.

Sport

Waterford soccer team would eventually win the FAI cup after victory over St. Patricks' Athletic in Dalymount Park with a score line of 1-0,

Brian Gardiner would get the all important goal. A native of Preston in England, he had played with famous Preston North End.

Tommy Jackson, ex Manchester United, Everton and Nottingham Forest

would be the player manager to achieve this elusive cup that eluded Waterford all through the glorious sixties and seventies, when the Waterford team

won five League titles in seven seasons.

There were great celebrations when the cup was eventually brought over the Redmond Bridge.

In 1984, John Treacy won an Olympic silver medal at the marathon in Los Angeles.

John, a native of Villierstown, would be a worthy winner.

Social reform

Other major events of the eighties were social reform.

The abortion referendum was one, where its ban would be inserted into the Constitution, this would get a 2-1 vote in favour in Waterford. The church would be vocal on this one and on divorce, where a referendum would be defeated and thus undermine the Coalition Government.

The opposition Fianna Fail would play a cute role on this point.

The Munster Express would adopt a liberal policy on both issues, not necessarily supporting the church's conservative view but going for social reform.

The voters however in the referendum still held to the conservative viewpoint.

Mass attendances were still strong in this period but would wane within a decade and a half as Church scandals broke.

Media

The Munster Express was always high on the schedule.

This was also a time when the debate on local radio being legalised would be a big issue.

The Coalition of Fine Gael and Labour could not agree, RTE unions wanted local public sector broadcasting and this was a matter of big debate.

The incoming Fianna Fail minority Government wanted a private sector solution but would limit newspaper involvement to 35 per cent and more private investors.

Ray Burke was Communications Minister at the time.

In the end the station WLR would be a popular choice locally, with a number of local shareholders investing in the new company and would secure the licence. Three in total applied for Waterford license, including Munster Express.

WLR would make it a success. The local shareholders would eventually cash in and sell their shares to the Cork based newspaper group, Thomas Crosbie Holdings, with founder Des Whelan holding onto his significant stake. The Irish Times are currently shareholders in the station, taking up the share that was held by TCH and a subsequent Crosbie company.

The Munster Express would have a positive relationship with WLR from the nineties onwards doing a joint Fun Run, various competitions like car giveaways and other mutual promotions.

Waterford's influence

The 1987 saw a Progressive Democrat TD Martin Cullen elected in which there would be a shift to the Right in Irish politics and Martin Cullen would be the local standard bearer.

In the 1989, election, he would lose his seat, but be appointed Senator by Des O Malley, The party leader in a new Fianna Fail- PD Coalition under Charles Haughey, long time enemies would share power together.

The economy would eventually recover at the end of the decade, the Munster Express would see advertising rise and the finances improve enough to purchase more colour units for the press at the end of the decade.

From a tough start to the decade again under the infamous Taoiseach, Charles Haughey it would finish more positively under him.

The campaigning Munster Express would push for Ministerial I representation.

Austin Deasy would lose his Cabinet seat in 1987, eventually a Minister of State would get appointed in the nineties, when Martin Cullen was head hunted by Fianna Fail as local lobby groups saw him as a rising star.

He would top the poll as Waterford wanted attention and investment at a time when Galway had outpaced Waterford in population, industry and influence.

Limerick would get a university even with Galway so close.

The University campaign would see Waterford strive to play catch up with the other provincial cities.

Cullen would ensure that motorways would be delivered and the Waterford Regional College upgraded to Institute of Technology status, but rivalries would ensure that other RTCs would get similar treatment.

Enhancements to the college and Institute would follow but the goal of University would not be reached.

Despite industry and business groups demanding it for the south east and giving equality for the region as industry migrated to the university cities for High tech students and workers.

The educational elite in Dublin would frustrate Waterford's ambition, as they sought to control funds for their institutional benefit.