BRIAN COWEN

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About the Book

Meet Ireland's new Taoiseach, Brian Cowen

Despite a high profile at the centre of Irish political life for more than twenty years, relatively little is known about our new leader. Just who *is* Brian Cowen?

The story begins in the village of Clara, Co. Offaly, where family, local life and the GAA were formative influences. The sudden and unexpected death of his father, Ber Cowen, Fianna Fáil TD for Laois Offaly, thrust a twenty-four year-old Cowen into the heart of Irish politics.

After a ten-year apprenticeship on the back benches, Cowen was appointed to his first ministerial position by Albert Reynolds and later went on to hold the senior cabinet positions of Health, Foreign Affairs and Finance. By the time of Bertie Ahern's resignation, Cowen's standing in the party was such that his election to the leadership of Fianna Fáil seemed inevitable. On 7 May 2008, Brian Cowen became Ireland's eleventh Taoiseach.

Here, for the first time, is a portrait of Brian Cowen which follows his remarkable life story, tracing the road to power from early childhood right up to his eventful early months in the office of An Taoiseach.

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PROLOGUE

The Homecoming

May 2008

‘Our memory is about loss, grievance and exile and lost opportunities. Now we’ve a totally transformed country. Not one that will be guaranteed success in the future but one that should be facing the challenges that confront it now with a far greater degree of confidence, a far greater degree of self-belief than some would have us believe.’

So spoke Brian Cowen in his homecoming speech as Taoiseach in Tullamore, County Offaly.

As he stood on the platform in O’Connor Square on that warm spring day, he looked out over several thousand well-wishers who had come to celebrate the historic homecoming of Offaly’s first ever Taoiseach and felt honoured that so many people had turned out to share his day in the sun. It was an emotionally charged moment for Cowen: the last time he had stood in this very spot to give a speech was back in the 1984 by-election prompted by the untimely demise of his father Ber Cowen. Cowen told the crowd how back then, in the mid-1980s, when he was starting out on his path to power, there was a sense of defeatism in the country. ‘A sense that we’d never achieve the possibilities that the founders of our state had set for ourselves, a sense we’d gone in the wrong direction and that we might not be able to retrieve things. Politicians put themselves in front of the people to do two things. First, to tell the people as they see it how it is, and secondly to

believe in the people, because it is the Irish people over the last twenty-five years who have transformed this country.'

Cowen spoke, without notes, for almost twenty minutes. He told the crowd that the only reason he was standing in front of them as Taoiseach was because of the confidence the electorate in Laois–Offaly had placed in him over the past twenty-four years. 'As I make that journey further, as a leader of a government that will forge a new future for our people, I ask you to stick with me. I ask you to believe in me. You will get from me everything I can do to make this a better country, not only at home but abroad as well. And I ask our own people to take up our responsibilities as citizens and not to look to government to solve every problem,' he declared.

'I will work with you day and night, hour and day, to make sure this is a better country for all. A country for my children and your children. A country that will be environmentally sustainable. A country that pursues excellence in providing public services. A country that will put the citizens at the centre of our concerns. Be part of what we can build now. And let's make sure that everything we've achieved is not dissipated and wasted on a "me generation" or a selfishness or a materialism that takes away what has made us what we are in the first place – decent, honourable and hard-working people who have a love of their country. That's what I'm about.'

Cheered on by the crowd, Cowen sang a bit of Frank Sinatra's 'My Way' before launching into 'The Offaly Rover', telling his audience: 'One of the requirements when you get into politics is that you have to be able to sing!' The audience loved seeing the Taoiseach sing; and Cowen was giving his supporters a clear signal that his rise to high office would not change him.

Recalling the event later, Cowen reflected: 'I've always enjoyed public speaking and I liked that part of the homecoming because I liked the idea of going back to that

natural level of communication, which isn't through a PR company or a press statement or a soundbite or a clever phrase. It's a natural empathy – an empathy that one should have between the public representative and the public.'

Cowen's day had begun with the press on his doorstep. He knew that the media scrutiny would intensify dramatically now that he was Taoiseach, but even so he was surprised when a Garda knocked on his door to explain that a journalist and photographer from a national newspaper were sitting in a car outside the family home in the hope of carrying out an impromptu interview. 'Mr Cowen politely turned down the request. We were also informed that he did not take kindly to his home being photographed, but, well, the people like to know where their Taoiseach lives,' wrote Jody Corcoran in the next day's *Sunday Independent*.

The homecoming proper began at midday in Edenderry, where five hundred people – a sizeable crowd in this small town – had turned up to celebrate the occasion. From there Cowen moved on to Tullamore, where over five thousand people had gathered in the square to greet the local hero. The atmosphere was electric, almost carnival-like, the town saturated with bunting, tricolours and the white and gold flags of Offaly waving from many of the shops and pubs. People wandered around in 'Cowenista' T-shirts on which Cowen's face was superimposed on the iconic image of Che Guevara. The T-shirts were being sold at €10 a go in aid of charity. 'I'm not suggesting that their policies are the same,' explained Tim Quinlan, who designed the T-shirt, to an *Irish Independent* journalist. Here Barry Cowen gave a moving speech to the crowd about how Brian had wept when his father died and promised never to let him down. The Taoiseach and his younger brother then embraced on the stage, both siblings shedding a few tears. It was a poignant moment.

Finally, at six o'clock that Saturday evening, Cowen drove into his home town of Clara. 'Welcome to Cowen Country' read a sign hanging among the vast amount of bunting; 'The Cowen We Love So Well' ran another, in a pun on a well-known traditional song.

The homecoming event was filled with emotion, but also with gaiety and songs. The following day in Ferbane, when Cowen was addressing the audience, a barman ran out of Hiney's public house and across the road with a pint of Guinness on a tray and offered it to the Taoiseach, who duly took a swig of the creamy pint before handing it back. Later, a very noisy gyrocopter buzzed over when he was giving a speech outside a community centre. Quickly the Taoiseach declared: 'Noel Dempsey's going to be checking that out on Monday. He's my Minister for Transport—' he paused: '—so far.'

The crowd roared with laughter.

But perhaps the most memorable moment was in Clara, when Cowen sang a song that had been written about his father. Taking three attempts to hit the right note to launch the song, he explained his hesitation by saying he wanted to make sure he sang it properly as he feared it might end up on television. How right he was. The performance was captured by mobile phone and was later to be found on the YouTube website. Eventually he launched into his passionate rendition – and, as he must have done all weekend, no doubt wished his father was standing beside him on the stage as he belted out the lyrics:

It was in the year of sixty-nine, Ber Cowen he did get in.
He was always fond of politics and the seat we knew he'd win.
And the neighbours from the country round, the farmers, big and small,
All voted for Ber Cowen, now he's a member of the Dáil.

Oh, Ber Cowen, he is a TD me boys, Ber Cowen, he is a TD.
And he got Clara a swimming pool 'cause it wasn't near the sea.
And he built a brand new pub, me boys, and let the old one fall
'Cause it wasn't up-to-date enough for a member of the Dáil.

Now, on one night in Mullingar, the greyhound won a race,
And you'd know it was a butcher's dog, the way he showed his pace.
And he wrapped around the tracks so fast and never once did stall;
Sure the people get the best of meat and the greyhound gets the fall.

Now, the wife, May, charms the people when she's serving in the bar,
And she listens to all their troubles no matter what they are,
And they ask her about her politics, she can answer one and all.
Sometimes we don't know which of them is a member of the Dáil!

Oh, Ber Cowen, he is a TD, me boys, an undertaker too,
With the biggest bloody hearse in town, when you're dead you'll know it's true.
And he'll fit you for a coffin, whether you are big or small.
Isn't it nice to know you'll be buried by a member of the Dáil?

1

The Early Years

Brian Cowen's return to his native Clara for his rapturous homecoming celebration as Taoiseach was a particularly remarkable occasion for his mother May, who knew more than anybody else in the square that day how much this moment really meant to him. As she stood in the crowd watching her son up on the podium, speaking fervently about his bond with his home town, May nostalgically reflected that her late husband would have been the proudest man in Clara to have witnessed this momentous achievement.

Growing up, May Weir had very little interest in politics. When she was a teenager, she left Clara and went to stay with relatives in America, where she stayed to work for seven years; but she never settled over there – her heart was still back in her home town and, more particularly, with Bernard Cowen, with whom she kept up a correspondence during this period abroad. Interestingly, May's own mother had made the very same journey some decades earlier and, just as she had done, May eventually returned to marry her local sweetheart, and settle down and raise a family in the town of her birth.

In January 1960 the second of May and Bernard's three boys, Brian, was born in Tullamore hospital. He spent his formative years in the family's modest home in Clara, next door to his father's public house on River Street, Cowen's Bar. Here a portrait of Bernard, known affectionately as

Ber, hung at the exit door as a reminder of the Cowen clan's political legacy and as a proud acknowledgement of the first Cowen to win a seat in Dáil Éireann.

Brian grew up in a strongly nationalist environment, his political ideology moulded by his father and grandfather. His grandfather, Christopher, known locally as Christy, a cattle dealer by trade, had been a founding member of the Fianna Fáil party and a staunch republican; he served as a local councillor from 1945 until his death in 1967, after which his son Ber took up his seat on the council. Those in Clara who can remember Christy say Brian is a throwback to his grandfather, both men being described as fiery and passionate about their politics. 'My father was calmer,' acknowledges Brian Cowen. 'He had very good judgement – of character and of situations. I had a fiery temperament, just like my grandfather, when I was growing up, but I have mellowed a bit since then.'

The Cowens were prominent, respected members of the community in Clara. They had originally got involved in the publican trade when Christy Cowen married Rosanna Dowling, whose family had a public house which dated back to the eighteenth century. In 1966 they had the pub knocked down and replaced it with Cowen's Bar. Ber Cowen started out working in his father's butcher's shop before going on to operate the family's undertaking business and even start up a small auction establishment. Even when he got involved in full-time politics, Ber continued to work in the family businesses. 'Ber Cowen never stopped working,' says Andrew Dignam, the secretary of the local Fianna Fáil organization. But despite a seemingly impressive business portfolio – one Brian describes as nothing more than 'the usual stuff in a small town' – the family background was more comfortable than privileged. 'You had to have your finger in every pie to make a living at that time,' explains Cowen. 'There was no such thing as twopence looking down on a penny-ha'penny.

There was no reason to be elitist; everyone went to the same school, the Franciscans, the school of hard knocks . . .'

In 1969, when Brian was just nine years old, Ber won a seat in the Dáil. It was a remarkable achievement in the fourth most marginal seat in the country. Ger Connolly, another Offaly man elected as a TD in the same poll, recalls Ber as a 'relaxed, courteous man, easy to get on with'. The Cowens, says Connolly, were a 'highly respected family, true to Fianna Fáil and easy to work with'. Ber himself was a popular man with a very simple and straightforward approach to politics. He had a deep respect for the Fianna Fáil party – and more importantly, as his son points out, for the people who worked within the organization.

It was during this period that the future Taoiseach recalls becoming acutely aware of politics, talk of which was, he says, 'as natural around our table as the dinner we were eating. It was the natural topic of conversation.' During Brian Cowen's formative years, the family household was a constant hub of activity for the local Fianna Fáil organization, and Brian was the most politically active and interested of the three boys. He would enjoy sitting in front of the fire and listening intently to his father discussing current affairs and local issues with constituents or the party supporters who would regularly drop by. Brian was fascinated by the 'whole interaction of the public and constituents in our household', but particularly by the organization of political activism in the constituency.

'There's no doubt that the way he was as a politician has influenced me a lot,' says Brian of his father. 'You are born into a tradition – for me that was the case, though it is not the case for everyone, obviously, certainly not nowadays.' But even though Brian was born into a strongly party political background, he maintains that it didn't take away his independence of thought.

Politics to the Cowen clan was always about public service. It was about representing the people and doing a job for them. So the family were bitterly disappointed when Ber lost his Dáil seat in the 1973 general election, despite increasing his first preference vote – he had been beaten by just twenty-three votes, a narrow margin resulting from a pre-election transfer of votes pact made between Fine Gael and Labour. 'But, at the end of the day,' as Cowen remarks, 'there was always an understanding that the people decide who their representatives are. This is not in your own gift.'

During his absence from the Dáil, Ber spent almost four years in the Seanad after being elected to the Agricultural panel. Then in 1977 he won back his Dáil seat, and never lost it again; in fact, he always managed thereafter to increase his personal vote, regardless of what the national trends were at the time. Today, Cowen is proud of the fact that he has managed to continue his father's work by helping to make the Laois–Offaly Fianna Fáil organization arguably one of the strongest political units in the party's setup. Offaly was traditionally known as the 'faithful' or 'loyal' county, which is a reference to the locals' passion for the GAA. Today the epithet underlies the ethos that was ingrained into the local Fianna Fáil organization by the likes of TDs such as Ber Cowen, Kieran Egan, Nicholas Egan, Peadar Meagher, Gerald Connolly, Paddy Lalor, Patrick Boland (the first ever Fianna Fáil TD in the Laois–Offaly constituency) and Liam Hyland – and ultimately into Brian Cowen's own mindset. 'There are no factions. There's no disunity. There's no organization within an organization here. There's none of that messing. It wouldn't be tolerated. It's not a question that it wouldn't be tolerated by me – it wouldn't be tolerated by the local party full stop,' says Cowen. But Cowen does not take his party's popularity for granted; he is known for his dedication to constituency work, which he sees as a team effort with him leading from the front as the local TD. He was taught by his father that

the grassroots members of the organization work as a ‘buffer’ between a public representative and the people. ‘What I mean by that,’ he says, ‘is that I would regard the membership of the party organization as being there to serve the party’s interests – not to be manipulated by strong individuals within the organization, who sometimes fashion it to their own particular electoral purposes.’

‘He found the local party in a good state and is anxious that when he departs it be in as good if not a better state,’ says his brother Barry.

Clara, which had a strong Quaker influence, was a settled and quietly prosperous town. Unusually for rural Ireland, it was an industrial town in the middle of an agricultural area, and enjoyed full employment in the 1960s and 1970s – largely thanks to the Goodbody family, whose jute factory, set up in the nineteenth century, still employed around eight hundred people. ‘The social history of the place is unique because it was a factory town. It was a town where everyone knew everyone,’ Cowen recalls. From the 1930s to the 1960s, many of the boys and girls would leave school at the age of fourteen and start working at the factory; but eventually its output was reduced and operations scaled down, and the majority of Brian’s generation managed to finish their secondary school education. For Brian himself, there was never a question that he would work there – he was always destined for other things. Ber and May Cowen were determined that their three sons would have the best possible education.

Up to the age of eleven, Brian attended the Clara National School. Neighbours recall the young Brian having good manners; he would never fail to greet the locals with a cheery but respectful ‘hello’ as he walked to school each morning. ‘Brian was a very courteous, very nice country boy. He was a typical Offaly lad, very mannerly, very helpful,’ recalls Ger Connelly. After primary school, Brian

spent a year at the local secondary school, Ard Scoil Naomh Chiaráin. From here he would go to the Cistercian College of Mount St Joseph in Roscrea, County Tipperary, where Ber's brother, Father Andrew, was a monk and a teacher.

Brian and his brothers enjoyed a happy childhood. After school had finished for the day – from the age of ten upwards – Brian and his brothers would have chores to carry out in the family businesses. 'We were never bored,' recalls Barry Cowen. 'Whenever there was an election on there was a new fever and we grasped that. Growing up in a pub you meet all sorts and that helped form us into what we are.' Brian was an avid reader (by his late teens he had a passion for historical and political biographies) and had a great interest in music; he loved listening to traditional Irish and folk music and learned songs from his father, having inherited Ber's love of singing. He remembers that 'there was a strong tradition of music, and some amateur dramatics and musical societies in Clara and Tullamore at that time. Clara also had a strong showband scene. So, there were a lot of guys who could play music, and there were even some rock bands.'

But it was sport, particularly Gaelic sport, that was Cowen's first love in these years. As a young boy, he loved swimming and would spend the warm summer days splashing about in the pond at the back of the factory or around the mill – this was before the local swimming pool was built in the town in the early 1970s as part of a voluntary effort by locals, including Ber Cowen, who raised funds to get it built. At school, he developed a passion for sports, giving much of the credit to the Franciscan Brothers who ran the primary school: 'They were very much involved in our education and our development as footballers, hurlers and sportspeople generally,' he recalls. 'You mucked around and you played football and hurling with all these guys.'

Soccer was also popular in the town, and Cowen would occasionally join in a kickabout with the local factory team. In fact, he was offered the chance to play competitive matches with the team, but turned down the offer because he felt it was not his sport. For, as far as he was concerned, no other sport could match Gaelic football or hurling. The Cowens were fervent GAA supporters and a young Brian went to many of the big games in Croke Park, irrespective of whether Offaly were playing or not. He was determined to follow in the footsteps of his uncle Father Andrew, who had been a goalkeeper with the first Offaly team to win a Leinster championship back in 1947. From the age of seventeen, Cowen played eight consecutive seasons for the Clara Senior football side. He is remembered as having been a formidable club player and was selected for the Offaly Minor Under 21 teams. Former teammates describe Cowen as a ‘committed, wholehearted player’.

2

The Roscrea Connection

In 1972, at twelve years of age, Cowen was sent to boarding school and quickly came to realize that Clara, the focus of his life up to this point, was not the centre of the world. He was to spend the next five years studying at the Cistercian College of Mount St Joseph in Roscrea – formative years that, he acknowledges, played an important part in his development and, ultimately, helped to groom him for a life in politics.

Cowen was not the only future politician of prominence to enter the cloistered precincts of Mount St Joseph around this time; indeed, the school's alumni from this period are almost a *Who's Who* of Irish political life. Former pupils include two of Cowen's predecessors as foreign minister – Labour Party leader Dick Spring and David Andrews – along with a number of members of influential political families, including the Reynoldses, Nolans, Mulcahys, Crottys, Springs, Gibbons and Enrights.

Ber and May Cowen had decided to send all three of their boys to Roscrea because Ber's brother, Father Andrew, taught there. This connection made it less painful for young Brian to leave his family behind as he set out for boarding school. Father Andrew had attended Cistercian College himself and had been elected house captain by his fellow students. Now, as a monk in the adjoining monastery, in the early 1960s he served as dean of games and as a teacher, primarily of Irish and English; later, he became the

master of novices in the abbey. He was a forceful personality. ‘He radiated energy and restlessness and he would have been something of a beacon for the young Brian,’ recalls former *Irish Times* editor Conor Brady, once a student at the college and now a member of its board of governors. Cowen himself remembers his uncle as a larger-than-life character who had a great influence on him as a boy.

The Cistercians are traditionally not a teaching but rather a contemplative order; in fact, after the closure of Mount Melleray in the mid-1970s, the monastery in Roscrea became the only Cistercian house in the world that had a school attached to it. The school at Mount St Joseph was opened in 1905, the land having been acquired some twenty-five years earlier by Count Arthur Moore, MP for Tipperary, who invited the Cistercians to build a monastery there in memory of his son, who had died tragically in his teens. ‘The abbey is built in the classic tradition, set down at Cîteaux and Clairvaux in France in the eleventh century. It is said that a monk who knew the plan of Cîteaux could find his way today, blindfolded, with perfect certainty, through the cloisters and principal rooms of Mount St Joseph,’ explains Conor Brady.

The Cistercian philosophy is spiritual yet down-to-earth, and Cowen recalls the students having a ‘respectful observance’, influenced by the routine and simplicity of monastery life. The boys would be aware, for example, of the monks rising each morning at precisely three forty-five for the first of the seven daily prayer gatherings. ‘The presence of the monks has always had a very stabilizing influence on the boys,’ says the dean of students, Seamus Hennessy. ‘It’s a very calm place to be, but we also have a coordinated regime 24/7. It’s lights out at ten-thirty every night in dorms. Even though the boys can hear the first bell of the morning and go straight back to sleep, they are

living in a spiritual, contemplative place which helps to form who they are as adults.'

Here the students were being prepared for the modern world, as well as having a strong Christian philosophy and adherence to a certain moral code instilled into them by the monks. The current President of Cistercian College, Dan Smyth, a brother of the former Fianna Fáil minister Michael Smyth, remembers teaching all three of the Cowen brothers. He particularly recalls Brian, whom he describes as having 'a wonderful heart. He was bright, bright, bright – a very able fella who was a pleasure to teach,' with a great aptitude for learning and for debating. Cowen relished the broad, holistic educational ethos at Roscrea, which was distinctly different from the narrower and more exam-focused approach pursued at that time in other schools. Acknowledging that the Cistercians sought and got outstanding results from the 'excellent teaching staff', Cowen felt there was a genuine commitment to a wider approach to education. 'It wasn't all about academic achievement. There had to be a certain rigour to the way you think, and also to the way you act. And, I suppose, basically trying to instil the Christian ethic,' he recalls.

Also, participation in sports was strongly encouraged, with athletics featuring prominently. Cowen played in the school teams at rugby and hurling, in which half-back was his best position. At a Leinster Schools rugby trial at Donnybrook he played full-back opposite Hugo McNeill, who was already school's captain from the previous year. 'Obviously, Hugo got the job!' recalls Cowen of the boy who went on to become a member of Ireland's Triple Crown-winning team.

Each morning on his way to prayers, the young Cowen would pass by the school's motto, inscribed in Latin on the mosaic floor at the front entrance to the College: *Insideat coelis animo sed corpore terris*. In English, this translates as: 'While conscious of earthly needs, we seek the things of

heaven' – or, to turn it around: 'While our minds soar to the heavens, we keep our feet firmly planted on the ground.' Those who know Cowen say this is a motto which informs his personal and political outlook. 'It's the first thing that greets students every morning. If you reflect back on past political students like Dick Spring, David Andrews and Brian Cowen, you get that sense of level-headedness from them. They all had a great sense of humour and a high value system. They were happy young men but they kept their feet on the ground,' says Seamus Hennessy. 'The goal here is the pursuit of excellence; for each boy to be the best he can be, not only to take their place in the Ireland of today but to make a difference and help to transform the country. That has been the philosophy of the school since it was founded in 1905.'

But while the school imbued the boys with a sense of discipline and a sense of the need for balance between the practical and the ideal, the Cistercians could also be flexible and open in many ways, and encouraged the expression of individuality. 'You have to remember [Cowen] was part of a very questioning generation in the sixties and seventies, who were not prepared to blindly accept what they were told by the adult world,' recalled Dom Kevin Daly, the current Abbot of Mount St Joseph and dean of discipline at the College during Cowen's school years. 'Even their long hairstyles, as evidenced by the class photos back then, became more challenging to parents and school authorities at the time. On the whole we are pretty casual in school on dress. We encourage our boys to get muck on their boots. As a boy, he was very principled, and continues to be so today. He doesn't buy into the "anything goes" philosophy and has always stuck to what he believes in. He could take off all the staff but never in front of them or in a way that was hurtful. But he was by far the best mimic in the school. Boys here have always been allowed

that freedom to be themselves. They are given the space to do that.'

In political circles today, Cowen is widely renowned for his public speaking skills. Many commentators have remarked on his ability to present complex and very detailed arguments without the usual support of notes clutched in hand. For this Roscrea must take a good deal of credit. The school has a long tradition of fostering public speaking and has tended to do exceptionally well in inter-school debating competitions, in both Irish and English. Former Taoiseach Albert Reynolds believes that part of Cowen's brilliance as a politician is the direct result of skills honed in the cut and thrust of competitive school debates while at Roscrea. 'He probably didn't think it at the time, but debating prepared him well for his introduction into national politics with the sudden death of his father,' he points out.

Not long after arriving at Roscrea, Cowen discovered that he had a gift for public speaking – both in English and in Irish – and within a couple of years was captain of the school debating team. Through debating, he was able to overcome a natural shyness and gain the confidence to become more assertive. He also found it taught him a great deal about how to structure arguments, focus his mind on listening to the other point of view, and counter a point made by an opponent. 'I think it's good in your formative years to apply that sort of rigour to your thinking. It disciplines your approach to analysis of a problem or how you approach persuading people on a certain point of view. If you take the more difficult side of the argument, it tests you. It adds to your vocabulary and your articulation of ideas. I would like to see more and more of it throughout the curriculum, throughout schools,' he explains.

Cowen won many awards for debating, most notably – some years after leaving Roscrea – the prestigious Eamon de Valera Centenary Debate in 1982, held at the Burlington

Hotel in Dublin in honour of Ireland's first Taoiseach. That night, he was crowned one of the main public speaking winners in English, alongside future fellow TD Mary Hanafin, who won in the Irish category. Dom Daly remembers being impressed with how Cowen could 'whip out a killer line to demolish his opponent just at the exact moment it was needed'. Expanding on this point, he recalled one particular evening when the government of the day was put on trial and its fitness for office was being challenged: 'Brian excelled that night but the poor chairman was frightened that things were getting so hot, he thought he would have to call security. He had a terrible time trying to call order. Brian always had his facts ready but he spoke from the heart. Usually one of the team would be the researcher, but he always went off and did his own research.'

After five years at Roscrea, Cowen decided to read for a law degree at University College Dublin (UCD) – his choice of subject influenced, according to a later humorous recollection, by the fact that he would have to attend only a mere eight hours of lectures a week during the first year of study, which he found attractive because it 'did not over-exercise' his mind. Although Cowen's Roscrea years were now behind him, he regularly returned to visit his uncle and to walk the grounds – as he still does today, though Father Andrew is no longer alive. According to Conor Brady, Cowen considers himself part of Roscrea's 'extended family' and retains close emotional ties with the College and the monastery. Soon after becoming Taoiseach, Cowen made a very personal journey back to Roscrea, taking the time to reflect on his life's journey. Tragically, Father Andrew had passed away only days before Cowen was appointed Taoiseach. As he strolled through the grounds, he recalled how his uncle had predicted that he would one day become, as Cowen likes to describe the Taoiseach's job,

first among equals. Speaking at the time, Cowen told Ger Scully, editor of the *Tullamore Tribune*, that his return to Mount St Joseph Abbey had given him 'a feeling of quietness and solace. I had forgotten how refreshing it can be.'

There is a very strong past pupils' network at Roscrea, and Cowen always does his best to attend any reunions organized, relishing the opportunity to catch up with former classmates – even though now the gatherings are sometimes tinged with sadness. 'It is only in recent years that we've lost some guys that I went to school with – who have died – and that brings people back together as well, when you start meeting up. So, having had the good times as we went through college we are into a phase now, unfortunately, where some of our people are going and that makes you reflective too,' says Cowen.

But the memories of his schooldays themselves are good ones. 'I had a very enjoyable time there. I often say that I got two great things in Roscrea – I got a great education and a great appetite. That's because you'd eat anything when you came out of it. You know yourself, it's not your mother's home bacon, but . . . and that's good too, because you develop a sort of independence. It hardens you up a bit, you know? It's part of growing up. I enjoyed it there and it gave me the opportunity to meet guys from other backgrounds and parts of the country.'

Outside the school regimen, Cowen delighted in the new freedom which student life in Dublin offered him. When he wasn't studying, he played rugby and Gaelic football; he was also frequently to be found enjoying the banter in the UCD bar. But family ties remained strong. While Cowen had always been close to his father, his bond with Ber strengthened considerably during his student years in Dublin. 'There was a natural inclination to call into the Dáil pretty regularly, anyway, if only to get a decent bit of grub! The food in the flat wouldn't have been great. One had

other uses for disposable income at that time as a young fellow – more liquid lunches than anything else!' he recalls, light-heartedly.

Perhaps surprisingly, given his enthusiasm and flair for public speaking at Roscrea, Cowen didn't take part in the UCD debates. He puts this down largely to the other attractions on offer: 'I went through a phase at that time of concentrating on sport and life and having fun.' But he also points out that the student debates were held on Friday nights, which 'didn't really suit' him as he used to go home most weekends to help out his elder brother Christy, who was by now running the family pub. He did occasionally attend a debate in UCD, and once put his name down to speak on the issue of Northern Ireland. 'But they didn't reach me. Lucky enough they didn't, because I was so appalled at some of the stuff I was listening to – what some of the more established speakers of my time had to say on the subject. I thought they were quite naïve. Regarding Britain as an honest broker in the late seventies, I thought, showed an astonishing blindness to the reality of what was happening,' says Cowen.

Back in Clara at the weekends, Cowen would roll up his sleeves and settle down to work in the bar and lounge – work which, he feels, taught him more about human nature than he ever learned at school or university. Working in a pub environment, Cowen believes, can make you streetwise, give you a practical intelligence that a college education itself cannot guarantee. Many of the people he met while serving in the bar influenced his thinking about life. In particular, he got a sense from these people that contentment is far more important than mere success or material wealth.

Cowen took real pleasure in serving the 'great characters' who frequented the bar and listening to their stories, particularly the older men, one or two of whom had served in the British army and fought in the First World

War. ‘I got very interested in their times,’ Cowen recalls. ‘I think this might be down to the fact that my mother’s father, Tommy Weir, had served in the war and was actually injured. He died in 1964 and I have very few memories of him.’ He became fascinated with Clara’s connection with the war and would happily sit and chat with the customers as they reminisced about their great adventures and also about some locals who tragically died on the battlefields of France and further afield. The few veterans of the First World War would tell him about their experiences of fighting on the continent. Others would talk to him about working in aviation factories in Coventry during the Second World War. ‘He loves a good yarn. A real life story. He’s not into jokes as such. He loves characters,’ points out Michael Duignan, a sports panellist on RTÉ’s *The Sunday Game*.

Cowen believes that the insight into the human condition and human character he gained working in the family businesses has stood him in good stead in political life. ‘What I regard as one of my best advantages as a politician is that I’m a good judge of character. I’m a good judge of what makes people tick. That is an important part of my repertoire because it’s important to be able to understand how a person is thinking, why they’re thinking it, where they are coming from. We might never end up bosom buddies but at least we should deal with things professionally and in a way that meets with the seriousness of the substantive issues.’

Like his father, Cowen enjoyed the *craic* in a bar environment – and he still does. For him, a bar is a place where he can unwind, escape the daily routine of politics and have light-hearted conversation, listening to the lads telling yarns. ‘It is good to talk about other things and not to have your life dominated by politics. It takes up enough of our time as it is. I enjoy the *craic* and other things, local issues, local chat, sport,’ he explains.

Cowen is known for having a dry sense of humour and a sharp mind that is always quick with a retort, both attributes developed during his time working in the family bar – as was his skill as a raconteur, one of the traits that has made him popular among constituents and fellow politicians alike. Cowen is an accomplished mimic, a talent which he inherited from his father. When he was working behind the bar, Cowen would enjoy going home and retelling stories or describing encounters with the many characters he served. ‘The real wit and humour I enjoy is recounting actual things that happened. You know, the innocence of people and the way they’d look at something,’ he says.

Cowen recalls his family home during these years of his growing up as one that was filled with ‘wit and mimicry and a sense of humour, a sense of life and gaiety and an interest in music and games and sport – and mixing that with work and trying to get ahead’. This jovial but practical ethos in the family home, he believes, was an enriching one that shaped the type of person he is today.

After completing his second year of study at UCD in 1979, Cowen decided to travel to New York and stay with relatives on Long Island. As a child, he had a fascination with America, derived from the stories his mother and grandmother would tell him about their experiences of living and working there. So, while Cowen could never envisage himself emigrating, he decided to go over for a few months. To support himself, he picked up some of the ‘usual student work’ – occasional cleaning jobs, demolition work on apartment blocks: it was exhausting, but Cowen relished it. ‘It toughened me up,’ he says. It also gave him more insight into human experience. He was working with a hard bunch of men, and he found them fascinating. He struck up a friendship with a Vietnam veteran named Al who had come back home intending to study, but instead – finding himself plagued by a depression derived from his

hellish combat experiences – was spending his days doing manual work; Cowen observed that the experience of war had transformed some of the vets he met into ‘disturbed people’. He also worked on the demolition sites with some Italian Americans who were living in Little Italy and didn’t know much English even after twenty years in New York.

As far as Cowen was concerned, working on the sites was a good lead-up to pre-season training, getting him into physical shape for when he returned to Ireland to play football the next spring. On his days off, he would head out on the subway into Manhattan or catch a ride from his relatives to Gaelic Park in the Bronx, where he could play football with the other expats; in the evenings, he would socialize back on Long Island. Gaelic Park had been bought by the GAA in 1926; by 1979, when Cowen was playing there, the sports facilities were experiencing a slump in popularity, dispelled a few years later when a new influx of Irish migrants hit the city. Cowen still likes to revisit Gaelic Park when he is in New York but, as he points out, ‘it is a totally different place’ today: taken over by Manhattan College in 1991, it now puts on soccer, lacrosse and softball as well as Gaelic sports, all played now on artificial turf that recently replaced the natural pitch on which Cowen was used to running around during that summer of ’79.

Throughout his student years Cowen remained very much involved in local politics. On his visits to the Dáil to pick up a few bob from his father, he would often sit and chat with Ber about constituency issues. ‘I had a great interest in politics and a great interest in my father’s career,’ says Cowen. ‘I was always very supportive and very much involved in the organization [in Offaly] in terms of assisting him and the work that he was doing.’ But he would not participate in a ‘front line way’ because he didn’t want accusations of nepotism from within the local party structure. ‘I was very conscious that I didn’t want it to be suggested that you were too prominent ahead of your time.