

AFFAIRS OF THE NATION



McDOWELL PLOTS NEW DÁIL FORCE

REGARDLESS OF the referendum results this week, the stand-out personality in an otherwise boring campaign was senator Michael McDowell, former justice minister and attorney general, who is determined to return to the Dáil and government, via a new political force.



Michael McDowell

McDowell did not raise Cain in the referendums merely for its own sake and he stands poised to create a new alliance or even a party to run at the next general election and thus provide an alternative in the post-election coalition negotiations.

While there has been much media focus on the Independent Ireland group led by Michael Collins TD and other rural independents recently, McDowell has been having his own talks with Independent TDs Marian Harkin and Michael McNamara in the last few weeks.

These talks ground to a halt in the last fortnight for reasons that are as much personality based as political, but the view of those close to the main players is that they will likely resume as the general election nears. Whatever about Harkin and McNamara – whose ambition for a government role has been palpable since the 2020 election – McDowell is most unlikely to throw in the towel after striving so manfully and creating much political kudos in the referendum debates.

The real impetus and political opportunity for a right-of-centre parliamentary party – as opposed to the more right-wing demagogues

that organise and flock to protests at refugee centres – arises from what McDowell and his supporters regard as the degeneration of Fine Gael. They believe the once right-wing Leo Varadkar, Paschal Donohoe and others have brought the Grand Old Irish Party of the Cosgraves and other founding families from upright Christian democracy to a pale brand of social democracy.

On social issues such as gay marriage and now the family referendums, Vlad has changed the face of the party with a raft of policies that have rendered FG unrecognisable to middle Ireland.

On economics, FG has been “throwing money” (as Blueshirts used to call it) at housing, with little success, while also subsidising the cost of living with significant tranches of money. Banning evictions, however temporarily, would have been unthinkable for most FG Dáil members some years ago, while the Greens have reduced some of the same FG TDs to the status of tree-hugging vegans.

NGO groups, meanwhile, have usurped

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THE SINDO'S Liam Collins was waxing lyrical last month in an article headlined, “Fingers Fingleton rode to my rescue: 40 years later I’m finally free”. The piece recalled how Irish Nationwide Building Society (INBS) boss Michael Fingleton had greenlighted a mortgage for Collins back in the early 1980s. Fans of Goldhawk are aware of the close ties that existed between Fingers and the Sindo, with the two entities even combining to host an annual property awards dinner.

More interestingly, the paper was often a supporter of Fingleton as he came under fire in the media in the wake of the economic collapse and the part played by INBS. There were also earlier reports about Fingers apparently being ready to donate to charity his “disputed bonus” of €1m, received during his final year in charge of the lender.

It is hardly surprising that Fingleton often received soft treatment in the paper, given that the former long-serving editor, Aengus Fanning, was also an enthusiastic customer of INBS, taking out a mortgage on his Dún Laoghaire home in 1985. He also got mortgages against his home in 2001, '03 and '07.

On top of this, Fanning’s wife, Anne Harris, was also an INBS customer and came to Fingleton’s defence in the Sindo on occasion, even managing to commend him in 2009 on giving back his bonus, which he had not actually done.

BILL McCABE'S BREAST IMPLANTS

IT HAS been a rough few months for veteran investor Bill McCabe, who had pumped big bucks into the listed Irish medtech business, HealthBeacon, which collapsed from a market capitalisation of around €100m a couple of years ago to effectively zilch when it ran out of cash before Christmas. Now the holding company behind another of his big bets, an Irish-backed breast implant maker, is being wound up as part of a restructuring. The company had previously accumulated eye-watering losses.



Bill McCabe

Foxrock-based McCabe made his millions from his e-learning company CBT, which floated on the Nasdaq in the 1990s. His Oyster investment group is a big investor in tech-based Irish businesses and one of the more significant bets was on a Dublin-headquartered company called Global Consolidated Aesthetics (GCA), owner of GC Aesthetics, which manufactures breast implants around the world. Other backers of GCA include the Barry’s Tea family and Michael Moriarty (ex-Goodbody’s and Nama), while the chairman is Florida-based Daniel K Turner III.

According to GCA’s website, the company has been responsible for more than three million “best in class” breast implants over the last 10 years. But this has come at quite a cost and the last accounts filed for the holding company revealed a loss recorded in 2022 of \$72m, leaving accumulated losses at a whopping \$560m!

Signed off last July, the directors stated that they considered the going-concern basis “appropriate” but a creditors’ meeting has now been scheduled for next Tuesday. According to the company, the operating entity, GC Aesthetics, is unaffected by the liquidation.

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“I suppose it wasn’t what you’d call a Durable Relationship...”

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the role of government legislators and policy makers and have done so at taxpayers' expense due to government funding on a grand scale.

That's the view of McDowell and comrades, and they see a big space to the right of the Blueshirts that the populist right cannot reach with their crude ideas and even cruder tactics. McDowell *et al* cannot hope to match FG or FF for size at any foreseeable election but, if they get an organisation and an agreed political programme together, they could pick up half-a-dozen seats or so that would change arithmetic calculations for the next government.

McDowell has effectively warned the public on multiple occasions since he lost his seat and ostensibly retired from politics in 2007 that he was gagging to return to the Dáil, preferably – most preferably – in government.

In October 2021, he posed to readers of his *Irish Times* column whether there was “room for another political party”, answering that “Middle Ireland may want such an alternative rather than have a choice between the current coalition and Sinn Féin”. Hint, hint.

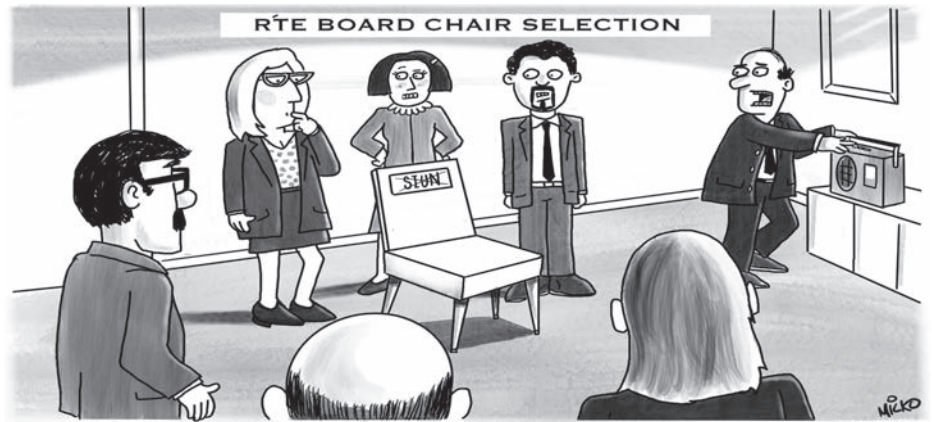
McDowell's middle-class Ireland is likely more urban and urbane than the various rural Independent formations being spoken of and, despite their constituencies of Clare and Sligo-Leitrim, both McNamara and Harkin, respectively, would lean towards Ranelagh's McDowell rather than Skibbereen's Collins. But other TDs such as Verona Murphy and McDowell's old PD comrade, Noel Grealish, would likely be approached should the new political vehicle get off the ground.

The play book for all of this is more Finian McGrath and Shane Ross 2020 than Des O'Malley and Mary Harney 1985. In the meantime, McDowell will not have forgotten that he was sidelined by Ross's outfit in 2019 because the latter did not want a leadership rival in his Independent Alliance.

RTÉ NALLY FIASCO: EPISODE 37

TIRED JOKES about RTÉ repeats have been enlivened by the two-year sitcom based on the rise and exit of RTÉ's former head of current affairs, David Nally, whose career was chronicled by *The Phoenix* over time.

The *Irish Mail on Sunday* reported last weekend, for the second time in a fortnight, that Nally had been transferred to a new job as advisor on RTÉ content in 2022. This followed a complaint being upheld against him by *Prime Time* journalist Fran McNulty, although the *Mail* did not refer to this complaint. It did, however, describe how the ‘advisor’ job was created for Nally on a



“Okay, when the music stops whoever's seated loses, er, I mean wins!”

salary of €150,000. Meanwhile, Nally's old job was also filled, meaning that an extra post and the same salary of €150,000 was created because McNulty's complaint against Nally was upheld.

What the *Mail* did add to the story was that Nally received an exit package, the details of which are as yet undefined.

Justine McCarthy had also written about Nally's career curve in her *Irish Times* column last July and in the *Sunday Times* in 2022, although this earlier article did not identify Nally.

That task fell to Goldhawk (see *The Phoenix* 20/5/22) to explain that McNulty had complained of bullying by Nally and had won his case. Following this, Nally's new post was created, which caused a stir for several reasons.

One was the bungling manner in which RTÉ handled disputes between high-powered staff; two was that the new ‘job’, with a salary of €150,000, was handed to Nally without any advertising or job application procedures, contrary to RTÉ's employment policy; and three was that someone else was given his old job, with an extra €150,000 being added to the RTÉ wage bill at a time when the then director Dee Forbes was accused of coming the poor mouth in terms of the licence fee.

As Goldhawk and more recently the *Mail* pointed out, Nally's transfer sideways was preceded by a negative report from Resolve Ireland into the culture and atmosphere at the national broadcaster.

Now it emerges that Nally got an exit package but RTÉ – would you believe it – is unable to divulge details for “legal reasons”.

NUI CHANCELLOR CONTEST

THE CONTEST to succeed that most magisterial of political and academic mandarins, Maurice Manning, as National University of Ireland (NUI) chancellor could well see a woman take this post for the first time in its 116-years old history. But which candidate might that be?

One woman whose hunger for the position is regarded as boundless and who has much of

the self-confidence required for the acquisition of this prestigious post is NUI convocation chair Linda Farren-O'Shea. The convocation is a sort of academic assembly that includes academics, NUI Senate members and hundreds of thousands of graduates, whose vote the successful chancellor must secure.

The papal-like process of choosing a chancellor involves inviting expressions of interest via advertisements, which will likely be published in May, and whose names the convocation then presents to the electorate.

Farren-O'Shea's position as chair of the convocation would seem to place her in pole position and her connections in domestic and US politics are also impressive, if a little dated. In 1995 the former corporate lawyer was appointed to, or rather imposed on, former justice minister Nora Owen as programme manager by taoiseach John Bruton.

However, Linda and hubby Brian Farren possess even greater global connections, Bill and Hillary Clinton, whose gratitude for Linda's fundraising efforts for Hillary's presidential ambitions was significant. The US power couple's visit to the O'Shea-Farren's Raglan Road pad attracted much media attention in 2008.

However, the big question mark over O'Shea-Farren's aspiration is that, despite her glittering CV and stellar list of political connections, she has not won any election. Despite no less than four attempts at securing a Seanad seat on the NUI panel between 1997 and 2011, Linda failed to gain entry to that body as an Independent candidate.

Her effort to win a Dublin City Council seat with Fine Gael in 2014 in the Pembroke area – as a stepping stone to a challenge for a Dáil seat in Dublin Bay South – also failed; she came 10th on the first count. She crashed and burned again in 2019 in the new Pembroke area, getting just 844 first-preference votes, 530 votes behind the fifth and last successful candidate in the five-seater.

Linda might have put these electoral defeats behind her if it were not for the mooted candidacy of Catherine Day as the next chancellor. Day has had an impressive career as an EU technocrat serving as the EU Commission's secretary general for 10 years and, if she wants the post, she will likely get it.



David Nally



Catherine Day

BAKHURST DOWNPLAYS RTÉ STAFF RALLY



AFFAIRS OF THE NATION

CATHERINE MARTIN'S
NEW CAST

WITH FORMER chief KPMG number-cruncher Terence O'Rourke preparing to take charge of the RTÉ board, one of the first big tasks will be to examine the external review on corporate governance at Montrose. Catherine Martin's arts and media department told Goldhawk that the report will be delivered this month and, coincidentally, it is being prepared by one of those who had been touted as the possible new chair, Niamh Brennan.

Fans of Goldhawk will recall (see *The Phoenix* 14/7/23) that Brennan (aka Mrs Michael McDowell) was given the job of carrying out "an independent root and branch examination of RTÉ", the main strand of which is the review of governance and culture. Fraulein Brennan was installed as chair of a three-person expert committee, even though she works out of UCD's Centre for Corporate Governance at the Michael Smurfit Graduate Business School, where one Dee Forbes was a member of the advisory board.

Although it was stated that interim reports would be delivered to Martin, the department confirmed that the minister will only get her very first look when the "comprehensive" finished review is delivered, as no interim reports were submitted. Apparently, this was due to the "breadth and complexity of the work undertaken".

It is interesting from a governance perspective that the "emergency" appointment of O'Rourke (€31,500 a year) as chair and two new ordinary board members, Neasa Hardiman and Terri Moloney (€15,750 a year), did not go through the Public Appointments Service, as recommended by the guidelines (although exceptions are provided for).

It is unclear, therefore, exactly what qualities Martin was looking for and the department did not tell Goldhawk if candidates had been selected from a list of applicants for the RTÉ board seats that were advertised in 2022, when Siún Ní Raghallaigh got the nod. Nor did the department say on what basis the three amigos have now been selected.

When the board seats were last advertised



Terence O'Rourke



"Yeah. the wording in the constitution is outdated. A lot has changed since 1937."

a year and a half ago, it was stipulated that the chair would need to "ensure the ongoing maintenance of constructive relationships" with the minister. Moreover, the chair would be responsible for "leading communication with the minister and ensuring there is appropriate and timely communication".

How did that work out then?

HELEN McENTEE'S
MANOEUVRE

IT IS highly unlikely that the Sex Workers Alliance Ireland (SWAI) is banking on a positive outcome from the long-delayed review of the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 2017, following a slick move by the mandarins to take the external process inside the justice department.

The 2017 legislation introduced by Frances Fitzgerald, commonly referred to as the 'Nordic model', criminalised the purchase of sex. While the move had plenty of support, it was notable that many of those in the prostitution business were rather less convinced and the SWAI pointed to the experience in Sweden, where, it claimed, sex workers were at greater risk.

Last year, the organisation issued a press release in which co-ordinator Mardi Kennedy said: "The tide is turning against sex workers and it is alarming to see."

Significantly, however, the 2017 legislation included a clause stipulating that a review of the act had to be carried out "not later than three years after its commencement" (March 2017). This was to include an assessment of "the impact of the act on the safety and well-being of persons who engage in sexual activity for payment". Seven years later, however, there is no sign of any report but there has been some movement in recent weeks.

Originally, the gig for the review had been awarded to Maura Butler SC but huge delays were encountered, notably as a result of the legal eagle's involvement with another review (into familicide). On October 10, the department sought expressions of interest from other parties to conclude the process.

Although an applicant was identified and a submission made to justice minister Helen McEntee, it turns out that the mandarins also presented "an alternative option" of bringing the independent review in-house "using the findings already undertaken and the analysis of the submissions made". McEntee duly opted for option two.

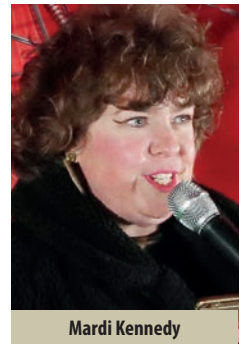
For the SWAI, this is not good news. In the past, the organisation has claimed that the views of sex workers have not been sufficiently taken into account.

A significant report published in 2020 by UCD's Sexual Exploitation Research Programme was very positive about the 2017 legislation, which had, apparently, made "a very promising" start. Although funded to the tune of €75,000 by the justice department, the report did not contain any interviews with SWAI representatives or sex workers generally.

In contrast, a 2019 report from Queen's University, Belfast, on the similar (2015) legislation introduced in northern Ireland, included online surveys of sex workers as well as clients. That report found the legislation had "little effect on the supply or demand for sexual services" but that there had been "an increase in the number of reports in relation to assaults, sexual assaults and threatening behaviour".

With SWAI having stated that the review of the 2017 act "must centre on the experiences of current sex workers and how the Nordic model of client criminalisation has made sex workers more vulnerable to violence", it is unclear to what extent this has happened.

The tender document published last October noted that the work that had taken place up to that date "has involved consultation with An Garda Síochána, other relevant statutory agencies and civil society organisations". But, in relation to "people who are engaged in prostitution", it was simply stated that their participation "has also been sought".



Mardi Kennedy



GLOBAL WARMING: 'NO BIG DEAL'

A RELATIVELY new farmers' lobby group, styling itself Beef Plan Movement (BPM), is pushing for full official recognition this year as a stakeholder organisation and to have a say in negotiating with Government on behalf of beef farmers.

Like many other farming groups, it takes an *à la carte* approach to science. Its website includes some novel statements about what it calls "the true nature of biogenic methane".

Recently, it enlisted the help of a heavy-hitter from the US climate sceptic circuit, Prof Richard Lindzen, a retired atmospheric physicist who rejects mainstream climate science.

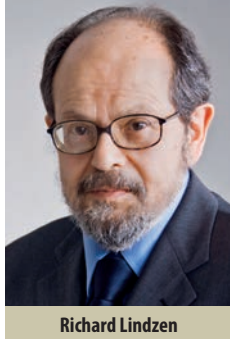
Lindzen, who has done extensive consulting for both oil and coal companies, treated Irish beef farmers to a masterclass in misinformation in a series of short videos understood to have been widely circulated via WhatsApp groups.

The powerful heat-trapping greenhouse gases – carbon dioxide (CO2) and methane – are, Lindzen said, "not a big deal, because frankly, a few degrees, the temperature difference between breakfast and lunch, is not something we don't know how to deal with".

This is, to put it as politely as possible, nonsense that would fail on a Junior Cert science exam.

When asked by BPM vice-chair John Maloney why there was such focus in Ireland on agricultural emissions, Lindzen explained: "It's malice; politicians love power, they love pushing people around. I have often thought there is a pathology associated with politics."

While accepting that 100% of climate scientists agree that CO2 causes warming, according to Lindzen: "Probably 1% agree that it is an existential threat." This too is



Richard Lindzen

patent nonsense and underlines that he is speaking as a lobbyist.

When asked by BPM chair Eamon Corley that if no action whatever is taken on climate change, would it make any difference, Lindzen replied: "The difference it will make is probably benign and beneficial, because CO2 is free plant food."

This is not his first Irish rodeo. Back in 2021, Lindzen delivered a remote lecture to the Irish Climate Science Forum, a Dublin-based climate sceptic group on the 'Imaginary climate crisis'.

Corley and his BPM colleagues will presumably be seeking to meet with agriculture minister Charlie McConalogue to convince him of the merits of formally recognising their group. Will they take the opportunity to ask McConalogue if he's really in the job because of his love of power and of pushing people around?

IS THE SAS IN GAZA?

LAST OCTOBER there was a flurry of articles in the British media about the deployment of the SAS to Cyprus. The regiment was reported as being on standby in case it was needed to rescue British hostages in Gaza. Then, suddenly, there was complete silence. This was because the British government issued a D-Notice to muzzle the press.

Reports that the SAS was preparing for a possible hostage rescue would not have resulted in the issue of a D-Notice and security observers believe something else is afoot. Israeli special forces would be able to perform a rescue mission just as well, if not better, than the SAS.

The SAS is the elite of Britain's special forces and has access to the most cutting-edge equipment developed for modern warfare. Gaza is an opportunity to test some of it in a real underworld scenario.

The SAS may have infiltrated the Gaza's labyrinthine tunnel complex, a world of narrow passageways with booby traps and ambush points, in the company of the Israeli Defence Force's (IDF) Samur or 'Weasel' unit, which specialises in underground combat.

The tunnels present opportunities to test the latest subterranean military drones and robots

in real combat conditions. Such drones are fitted with anti-collision sensors and rotator blades enclosed in protective cages. While normal drones rely on GPS or other satnav for navigation, radio waves do not travel through rocks, dirt and concrete. These obstacles can be overcome by Simultaneous Location and Mapping (Slam) software. A Slam drone can build a 3D model of its environment and track its position without an external navigation reference such as GPS, or a human operator.

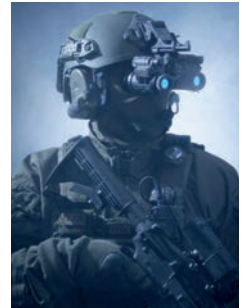
In the commercial world, Slam-enabled drones have been able to map out disused mines. In 2020 a company called Exyn demonstrated that one of its vehicles could carry out a complete self-directed exploration of an underground environment and return safely.

The IDF's Weasels have access to the Legion-X system manufactured by Elbit Systems. Lanius drones – small quadcopters – which have search and destroy capabilities, are the core components here. A large octocopter drone acts as a mothership to small, sensor-carrying Lanius drones, which are ideal to explore the tunnels underneath Gaza. Lanius drones can also carry deadly grenade-sized explosive charges.

After suffering multiple casualties in Afghanistan, US special forces developed the Nova drone, which can also map and search multi-story indoor buildings and underground complexes without a human operator.

Whitehall does not seem to have pondered what will happen if an SAS soldier is killed or, even worse, captured. D-Notices are voluntary and only operate within the UK.

If this scenario is accurate, Whitehall appears to be willing to gamble the safety of the British public for the opportunity to secretly deploy the SAS in Gaza. Meanwhile, senior MI5 and GCHQ officials are issuing chilling security alerts to the British government as threat levels reach their highest peaks in 20 years. The UK's threat level is set by the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre, which sits inside MI5 headquarters in London.

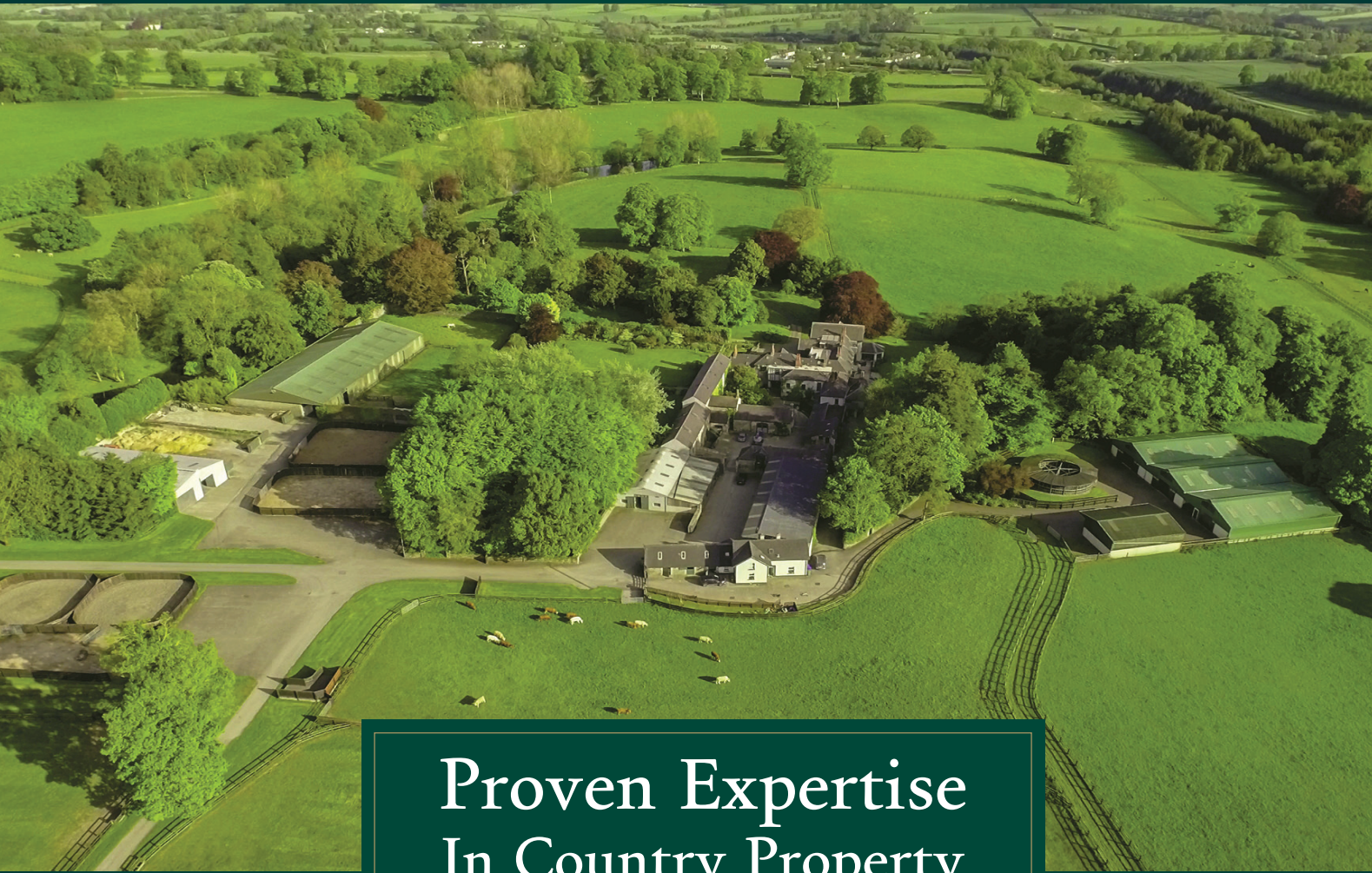


An SAS soldier



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