



MARTIN'S FEMALE FAVOURITES

ONE ASPECT of Fianna Fáil leader Micheál Martin's new way has been the electoral emphasis on young, middle-class females and prominent among these has been senator Lisa Chambers, former TD for Mayo. Another aspect has been Martin's stranglehold over party decisions and policies but last week he over-extended himself. This resulted in grassroots members in the Midlands-North-West EU constituency refusing to implement a potentially disastrous candidate selection demanded by the Tánaiste and party leader.

Despite Martin's well-known patronage of Lisa, the convention for the EU constituency had seen Barry Cowen (not a mutual Martin favourite) come first with 894 votes on the first count, Donegal-based senator Niall Blaney second with 803 and Chambers trailing well behind on 570. Despite these numbers, Martin let it be known that he wanted to add Chambers to the ticket and, furthermore, that he did not want to add a third candidate, ie Blaney.

The normally supine members, or at least those on the constituencies committee, realised that this was electoral suicide and rejected the leader's wishes, insisting instead that Blaney be added to the ticket as well as Chambers, a compromise that Martin had to accept.

Blaney gave a sense of the acrimony that had gripped members in the Midlands-

North-West area – and also of the members' weariness of Martin's favouritism – by telling the *Donegal News* that party members and TDs were "sick of seeing Lisa Chambers hogging the media limelight" and that it did her no good at the convention in a most unusual show of impertinence to the media's favourite FF leader since Jack Lynch.

The committee members pointed out that leaving Blaney off the ticket would have ceded no less than five counties to the reviled Shinnners at the election. These are the three Ulster counties – Donegal, Cavan and Monaghan – as well as Sligo and Leitrim (Cowen is Offaly based and Chambers is from Mayo). If Martin could not see this, it was argued, he must not have noticed that Sinn Féin is running northern MP for Fermanagh-South Tyrone, Michelle Gildernew, along with MEP Chris McManus.

A formidable campaigner, Gildernew could expect to Hoover up votes in these counties, especially if effectively unopposed by an FF candidate.

Martin's patronage of Lisa explains Blaney's exasperation with the former TD, who was promoted from spokesperson on defence (she was a member of the Army Reserve for some years) to the plum post of Brexit spokesperson in

2018. Her electoral record now consists of one success at the 2016 general election and two defeats – 2011 and 2020. The latter defeat went hand-in-hand with the election success of constituency rival Dara Calleary, but who was excluded from Martin's list of FF Cabinet members at the time, a move designed to assist in the electoral rehabilitation of Lisa.

Martin has mentored more than one female candidate in the past, with the most prominent being Averil Power. But after much leadership preferential treatment (she was put on the front bench despite being elected to no political body), Power bombed at local and general election level before posturing as a female victim of backwoods FF members in 2015.

Coincidentally, more recently Martin abandoned another female candidate – this time north of the border – who might have expected some consideration from the Tánaiste. For several years Martin gave the

distinct impression, publicly and in private, that FF was to create a partnership – there was even talk of a merger – with the SDLP. However, after several snubs and hints from Martin, SDLP leader Colum Eastwood threw his ring back at Martin in November 2022.

Despite this rupture, SDLP members, as well as the *Irish News*, were gobsmacked when Martin addressed an Alliance Party conference last weekend in Belfast, where he was introduced by Kate Nicholl, the party's candidate in South Belfast and Mid Down. That seat is to be defended at this year's UK general election by sitting MP Claire Hanna of the SDLP.

Not only did Martin's behaviour appear as an endorsement of the Alliance effort to displace the SDLP woman but he went on to spell out his support for the Alliance position that smaller parties in the Assembly should by right share power with the larger ones. Martin even claimed this to be the meaning of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA), a bizarre interpretation of the GFA that was never spelled out by anybody at the time.

VARADKAR'S EU JOB ENDANGERED

WHEN THE support of Fine Gael MEPs ensured the passage of a key stage of the Nature Restoration Law (NLA) in the European Parliament last December – in defiance of their European People's Party (EPP) whip – it seemed like the only punishment for the wet Blueshirt MEPs would be a slap on the wrist

for their leader, Seán Kelly. But just two months into 2024, it has already meant that Ireland was unceremoniously removed from consideration as a location for the HQ of a prestigious EU banking body and it could cost Taoiseach Leo Varadkar a top EU job.

The NLA will legally enforce the "restoration" of wetlands, forests and grasslands that are currently drained and used to produce food by farmers, including those in Ireland. Kelly, the 'cute hoor' who used to head up the GAA and is the current MEP for Ireland South, worked closely with Green MEP for Dublin Ciarán Cuffe to ensure it squeaked through on the vote. Despite criticism from the Irish Farmers' Association, Sinn Féin and others, he was jubilant.

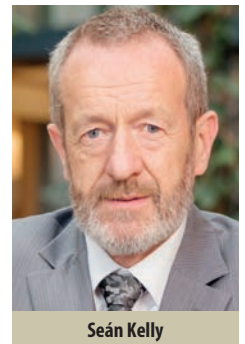
His own EPP leadership was not so happy, however. The Munster man had originally been told by the EPP that he would be part of the European Parliament delegation to the COP28 eco-jamboree, a gruelling 10-day visit to Dubai, that well-known shopping and winter sun destination – average temperature at the beach 27 degrees – to discuss climate change with other world leaders. But no sooner had he packed his swimming togs than he was booted off the trip and had to trudge home to rainy Ireland.



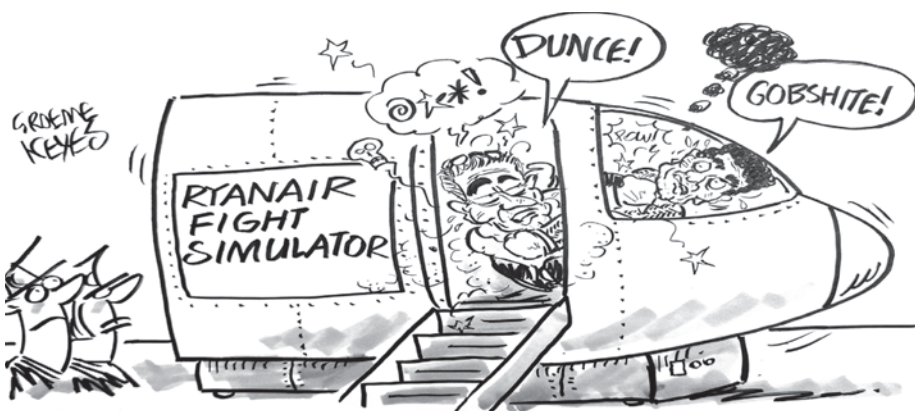
Lisa Chambers



Claire Hanna



Seán Kelly



AFFAIRS OF THE NATION

If this had been the end of the matter, Varadkar and the FG leadership could no doubt have lived with it. But fast-forward to last week, when the final NLA vote went through the European Parliament, again with the support of the rebel Fine Gael MEPs. Within 48 hours, the *Irish Times's* Brussels correspondent, Naomi O'Leary, reported that the EPP was still furious with FG and regarded its MEPs behaviour as "a betrayal". She reported that Dublin's hopes of hosting the HQ of the new EU anti money-laundering institution had been dealt "a fatal blow in the days before the vote when the EPP declined to include it on its preferred shortlist of four cities".

This must have been particularly sickening for junior minister for financial services Jennifer Carroll MacNeill, who mounted a vigorous campaign over many weeks, touring European capitals and meeting decision-makers from more than a dozen countries in person, all with the hope of Ireland landing the prestigious agency – and the 400 good jobs that came with it.

Now, the prospect of Ireland being excluded from an even better job arises. European Council president Charles Michel has said he will leave by the end of the year and there has been much speculation – a tad fanciful perhaps – that Varadkar would be an ideal replacement for the Belgian.

Assuming a November election, the timing would suit Vlad. If his party is not returned to government, FG rules dictate that there is an automatic leadership contest, so he could resign gracefully on his way to the airport.

But the question he must now be asking himself is whether he can still rely on the powerful EPP to back him in the inevitable horse-trading for the job?

RTÉ'S SENIOR HURLEY DIRECTOR

VERY LITTLE attention has been paid to the political affiliation of Mari Hurley, RTÉ's new chief financial officer appointed last week, although her financial and corporate pedigree – including positions at Sherry FitzGerald and Nama – were widely disseminated. But Mari's most interesting position was as a committed trustee, among other positions, for the Fine Gael party for several years during Enda Kenny's time as leader and taoiseach.

Mari, along with another formidable female trustee, legal eagle Mary Hayes (aka Mrs Maurice Manning), became thorns in the side of the party establishment with their assiduous attention to detail, rigorous governance and demands for financial information when they thought it necessary. Hmm. Mari sounds like a good fit for the RTÉ board's senior financial officer.

Unsurprisingly then, Hurley and Hayes



Mari Hurley



"What do you mean I should be more engaged in activism? I've already re-posted two Navalny quotes today."

made it into the pages of *The Phoenix* back in 2016 after party TD and former junior minister John Perry brought FG to the High Court as he had been dropped from the general election ticket in Sligo-Leitrim. The High Court action saw Perry reinstated on the ticket in December 2015 after an expensive week for FG in the Four Goldmines – expensive, that is, to the tune of €300,000-plus, as Goldhawk reported (see *The Phoenix* 9/9/16).

Then FG general secretary Tom Curran had to carry the can for the disastrous decision to accept Perry's High Court pistols-at-dawn challenge but he also had to answer to Mari and Mary. The two trustees were unaware of the developing confrontation with Perry and, in particular, were not informed or consulted about the expensive refusal to settle with Perry before the High Court action proceeded.

Hurley had also served, if that's the term, as a former FG youth officer and progressed to the senior post of chair of the party's national executive council before working on the party's policy commission. She also worked full time on national election campaigns.

Mari's combo as a vastly experienced political functionary and financial watchdog surely made her an appropriate fit for the job of keeping an eye on any profligate behaviour that RTÉ senior management members might be tempted to indulge in.

IRELAND'S EU LEFT-OVERS

WITH THE elections for the European Parliament to take place in early June, much speculation has focused on the prospects of the far right, with headlines predicting big gains for such parties. But while there are a plethora of Irish parties chasing that right-wing surge, from Independent Ireland to the National Party, the biggest change in the European Parliament from an Irish perspective may come about for Irish MEPs aligned to the parliament's left grouping, the GUE/NGL.

Four of Ireland's 13 MEPs are aligned with the GUE/NGL – Chris McManus, Sinn Féin; Clare Daly and Mick Wallace, Independents 4 Change; and Luke 'Ming' Flanagan, Independent. There are 37 MEPs who are members of GUE/NGL, with the largest parties – La France Insoumise and Die Linke from Germany – both having five MEPs in the group.

A bitter split in Die Linke, however, may result in a realignment of left-wing parties in the next European Parliament. The Alliance Sahar Wagenknecht (BSW) was launched in early January and its eponymous leader, a former spokesperson for Die Linke, characterises her new party's ideology as being "left-wing conservative". This is an odd mixture of traditional class politics – demanding higher taxes on the rich and expansion of the welfare state – alongside a hard-line anti-immigration policy and condemnation of measures taken to tackle climate change. It is also critical of Nato, and the European Union and Germany's military support for Ukraine in its war with Russia.

Polls in Germany suggest that Wagenknecht and her BSW may end up with as many as seven MEPs and Wagenknecht herself has suggested that she is attempting to form a new left-wing party at a European level. Any new parliamentary group, however, would require at least 23 MEPs representing a minimum of seven EU countries.

SF will undoubtedly increase its representation in the European Parliament from the single seat Matt Carthy won in 2019. That seat is now held by alternate MEP Chris McManus from Sligo but this year, across all three European constituencies, SF is running strong teams of candidates. In addition, incumbents Daly, Wallace and Flanagan are likely to run very strong campaigns for re-election.

Goldhawk wonders whether the fact that McManus and Flanagan recently voted against the contentious Nature Restoration Law means they are "left-wing conservatives".



Clare Daly

O'SHEA SELECTED FOR FRIENDLIES



We're pleased to unveil our interim scapegoat – er, manager.