

LISA FOR EUROPE... MAYBE?



Micheál Martin's German invasion

Profile: Michael McDowell



Young Blood: Influencer Rob Kenny

Leo Varadkar's Gaza statements

Emmet Stagg and Michael D



ALSO: Andrew Lowe and Ed Guiney in their Element; Trina Vargo's failing fund; Ross Lewis's rich dish; Patrick Mullins's rough diamond; Fun and games at Fota resort





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NORTH HARMONY THREATENED

THE LOVE-IN between Sinn Féin’s Michelle O’Neill and Jeffrey Donaldson’s puppet deputy first minister, Emma Little-Pengelly, should not fool people into believing that lasting harmony has overtaken the northern assembly and executive. Despite the recent shamrockery in Belfast and Washington, there may be trouble ahead with conflicting trends in northern unionism.



Jim Allister

Firstly, Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV) leader Jim Allister is incensed by the DUP’s Donaldson leading his party back into the Stormont executive. Secondly, Donaldson has abruptly undergone a Damascene conversion to the belief that the DUP’s hard-line unionism is counterproductive.

Allister and his extreme unionist supporters see Donaldson’s manoeuvres as a great betrayal and unionists are always on the lookout for betrayal. But two polls have recently galvanised Donaldson. A LucidTalk poll on February 16 showed a 4% drop in DUP support. Then a poll of Alliance members showed deep hostility to Brexit, with 38% supporting Irish reunification and 55% agreeing that will “probably” happen.

Donaldson made a dive for the middle ground. He told a party meeting in Newry: “As leaders of unionism we [the DUP] must realise that a demographic and political shift is taking place.”

He said the north is no longer “70% British red, white and blue”. In short, there aren’t enough Protestants any more

to guarantee the union, something Peter Robinson had pointed out in 2012 after the 2011 census. Accordingly, Donaldson said the party must reach out to gain the support of people who wouldn’t traditionally have backed the union.

Allister’s response was to see this switch as betrayal on betrayal. At his party conference last Saturday Allister doubled down on his attacks on the DUP and Donaldson personally. He rubbished February’s British government ‘Safeguarding the Union’ command paper, agreed with the DUP and which provided the excuse to re-enter Stormont.

Allister is correct in every detail here. The command paper is all smoke and mirrors and changes nothing in the Windsor Framework. His problem is that the LucidTalk poll showed 72% of unionists and 67% of DUP voters support Donaldson’s return to Stormont. True, the poll also showed TUV support rising – to the dizzy heights of 6%.

Nevertheless, Allister and others believe that’s just for starters and they are determined

Continued on page 4

THERE WAS no celebrating at Cheltenham for the well-connected businesswoman Sue Spence, whose Tranquil Sea did not make it on to the turf for the Boodles Juvenile Hurdle despite having been entered. No doubt, Spence had already celebrated plenty, having scooped an estimated €45m for her share of SofJo – the company she cofounded with Jim Coffey – following its reported sale earlier this month. Not all her investments prove such winners, however.

Spence has plenty of strings to her bow. She is a former Dublin Bus director and was recently appointed chair of something called the Dublin Regional Enterprise Plan 2024, which was one of Micheál Martin’s initiatives.

Foxrock-based Susan took a punt outside her comfort zone on a company called EVB Sports Shorts, which manufactured pelvic muscle support wear to help women who experience bladder leakage after giving birth.

Maybe Spence was convinced to come on board by founder Yvonne Brady’s appearance on Dragon’s Den, where the company attracted €90,000 from would-be Irish president Gavin Duffy and one-time pharmacy queen Ramona Nicholas. Sue not only chucked in €75,000 in hard cash but was also appointed a director of EVB. Another investor was Dublin 4-based Brian Joyce, while the taxpayer was represented by Enterprise Ireland.

Alas, EVB never made a cent and collapsed into liquidation last year.

TRINA VARGO’S FAILING FUND

US-IRELAND Alliance (USIA) president Trina Vargo’s statement last week on the “pausing” of the George J Mitchell Scholarship programme didn’t quite get across the abject failure of her entity to source funding.

Vargo is the founder of the USIA and every year manages to generate oodles of publicity courtesy of the annual Oscar Wilde awards bash, immediately ahead of the Oscars. After the shindig this year, Trina decided to inform the public that she has been forced to pause the selection of participants for the Mitchell programme, which “sends future American leaders” to universities in Ireland for every academic year.



Trina Vargo

She claimed the operation is “in no immediate financial difficulty” but it is hard to determine the state of the finances as Vargo did not provide Goldhawk with an up-to-date annual report. The scholarship fund depends on an endowment from the Irish government, with the relevant legislation providing for up to €4m per annum from state coffers, up to a maximum of €20m, as long as matching funds are raised by USIA.

The Department of Education told Goldhawk that in 2022 the level of investment in the fund from the Irish end was a miserable \$40,000, which means this is all Vargo *et al* were able to raise that year. Moreover, in 2023 not a cent was provided by the state “in accordance with the matching funding agreement”.

Separately, the Government has been providing \$485,000 a year towards the programme’s operating costs. The application form for 2024-2025 was sent to Vargo last month and the department is “awaiting a response”. It may be some time coming.

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“I’M WORRIED WE COULD BE SENT TO SOME MISERABLE, UNWELCOMING PLACE!”

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to strike back at what Allister calls “Irish Sea border implementers”. At his conference he produced his secret weapon, Richard Tice, the multi-millionaire leader of Britain’s right-wing anti-immigration, anti-EU Reform party, and announced a portentous memorandum of understanding between the parties.

More seriously, the TUV and Reform will stand “agreed” candidates in the north in this year’s British general election. Allister knows his candidates will find it hard to win seats but he’ll do his damndest to unseat targeted DUP MPs. The most likely casualty is deputy DUP leader Gavin Robinson in East Belfast, who will be defending a slim majority of 1,819 against Alliance leader Naomi Long.

Allister’s intervention also makes it likely that Alliance’s Stephen Farry will keep North Down and means Donaldson himself is at risk in Lagan Valley.

The backing of Tice and Reform also provides Allister with access to cash for Tice has deep pockets. Ben Habib, a wealthy former UKIP MEP who bankrolled the unionist court case against the Northern Ireland Protocol, has also promised funds to the TUV/Reform campaign.

RECOGNISING PALESTINE – AGAIN

WORDS MATTER. Taoiseach Leo Varadkar’s statements criticising Israel’s war on Gaza have helped to muster world opinion against Israeli genocide there. But words should not be a substitute for real action and, despite a decade and more of rhetoric from Fine Gael and more latterly Fianna Fáil in Government, they have used various excuses to resist two actions that would make a real difference: recognition of a Palestine state and implementation of the Occupied Territories Bill.

Most Irish people would welcome Varadkar’s St Patrick’s Day White House pledge to recognise a Palestinian state – a highly qualified pledge, it should be said. As well, Varadkar’s rhetoric was a necessary manoeuvre given many people’s distaste at the Taoiseach (and Sinn Féin) rushing to pay homage to President Biden, leader of the world’s most powerful state that has donated many billions in armaments to the Israeli war machine. This awesome weaponry was



Joe Biden

Ramadan's started so Muslims can't eat during the day

It's been like that in Gaza for months now



still being used to slaughter Palestinians like insects as the Taoiseach spoke those words about Palestinian statehood to Israel’s gun runner, Joe Biden, last Sunday.

The pledge to recognise Palestine has become one of the most specious moves the government has made in its Middle East policy in the last 10 years. The Dáil unanimously passed a Sinn Féin motion recognising Palestinian statehood in December 2014. This was included in the 2016 programme for government led by FG but the then foreign minister, Simon Coveney, repeatedly argued that this clause also said it was “as part of a lasting settlement of the conflict”. These words enabled the government to say no recognition could be granted until there is a “final settlement”.

In an even more disingenuous move, ‘Covetous’ Coveney changed his tune when he led the government’s vanity project to be elected to the UN Security Council, a goal that could only be secured with the support of developing countries. Suddenly, Coveney warned in 2018 that, if Israel continued to block peace moves, Ireland would consider recognising Palestinian statehood. Can anyone in Government seriously argue that Israel has not blocked peace moves in the years since and in recent months?

Not that Coveney meant it anyway. In the same week that Ireland won its Security Council seat in 2020, Coveney point blank refused to allow the Occupied Territories Bill – also passed by the Dáil and Seanad – into the programme for government. He also steered through a clause in the programme that pledged to “honour” the commitment “to recognise the state of Palestine as part of a lasting settlement” or, failing that, in various other qualified circumstances.

Another three years later the new foreign minister, Micheál Martin, also pledged recognition of Palestine but he added a plethora of conditions and qualifications that rendered his commitment meaningless. The “timing” was important; so was the potential “impact”; the “engagement” of other parties; and so on, he said last September.

Varadkar’s latest commitment is also qualified as he insisted in December that Ireland should only recognise Palestine along with a group of EU countries. Varadkar repeated this blocking mechanism last month. And his White House statement last Sunday was carefully crafted, as follows: “Ireland stands ready to recognise a Palestinian state with like-minded partners when it is most helpful to peace”. There are, at least three

qualifying, blocking conditions in that short sentence.

What is there to stop Ireland declaring Palestinian recognition unilaterally and then lobbying other EU countries to do the same? Apart from American disapproval, that is.

TRIPLE LOCK TO GO?

IT OCCURRED to Goldhawk on recently reading the *Irish Times*’s political editor, Pat ‘The Brigadier’ Leahy, that he had contracted gout on some mission abroad, such was the testy, belligerent language he used to describe Irish hypocrisy and blithe indifference to earth-shaking developments afoot.

Amid sneers at Irish pacifists who speak of peace and neutrality, Leahy warned that we do not appreciate that “the EU is preparing for war”. The Brigadier knows this because he has been chatting to chaps from the war office (“two senior members of the government” who are “highly engaged at EU level”, no less) who told him so. Yet we are planning to spend a mere €1.5 billion a year on military spending by 2028 while the EU gets ready to spend billions on defending Ukraine – and Ireland, don’t forget! – from Russian invaders.

There has been a noticeable build-up of media sermonising from warlike ladies and gents recently about the need to defend Ireland from invasion and Brigadier Leahy has not hidden behind the editorial lines in the heat of this editorial battle. Indeed, his chivalrous defence of Dame Louise Richardson, chair of Micheál Martin’s anti-neutrality forum last summer, rivals the story of Walter Raleigh’s cape and Queen Elizabeth 1’s puddle. It was that forum, and the bad publicity that Irish warmongers received as a result, that first stung Leahy into delivering editorial white feathers to pinko pacifists everywhere.

Despite the forum’s poor public reception, Dame Richardson recommended the scrapping of the triple lock that deters snap decisions to embark on military adventures abroad. Martin, would you believe, has now announced plans to do just that.



Louise Richardson



ROYALS CAGEY ON KATE'S ABSENCE

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DON'T MENTION THE WAR

LAST WEEKEND'S article in the *Irish Times* by novelist Sally Rooney represented one of the relatively few public criticisms of the US's policy on Israel by a high-profile Irish writer. Coincidentally, in the paper's *Ticket* supplement the same day, there was an article by Una Mullally on the 'Gig for Gaza' in Berlin, organised by Irish musician Julie Fogarty in response to the actions being taken against certain artists by the German government over Gaza. Germany also happens to be where the Irish Government has unwisely decided to spend over €2.5m on promoting Irish culture this year.



Micheál Martin

Zeitgeist Ireland 24 was launched in Berlin in January by Tánaiste and foreign affairs minister Micheál Martin alongside beleaguered arts minister Catherine Martin. Described as "a celebration of the richness and diversity of contemporary Irish culture", the aim is to "build on our global reputation for cultural excellence".

The trouble is that Germany is the last place the Irish Government wants to be spending money, given the backlash by artists in the country against the clamping down on events held in support of the Palestinian people and on artists who speak out on Gaza.

The temperature was turned up last December when the Berlin senate introduced a controversial "anti-discrimination clause" for all arts funding, requiring recipients of state arts grants to renounce "any form of anti-semitism according to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's (IHRA) definition of anti-semitism".

The trouble is that the IHRA definition is so broad and ambiguous, conflating criticism of the state of Israel with anti-semitism, that it was deemed a discriminatory move by the senate. Following vocal protests by the artistic community, Berlin backed down and scrapped the clause earlier this year.

Meanwhile, some high-profile international artists have also signed a petition ('Strike Germany') urging a boycott of German cultural institutions, including the likes of French Nobel Prize-winning novelist Annie

Ernaux. Echoing recent withdrawals by Irish artists at the SXSW festival in the US, several artists and DJs withdrew from Berlin's CTM Festival in support of the boycott movement, while Bosnian author Lana Bastasic (winner of 2020 EU prize for literature) cut ties with her German publisher, protesting its "failure to be vocal about the ongoing genocide in Gaza" and for keeping schtum "on the systemic and systematic censorship happening in Germany".

In this cauldron, the Irish arts and foreign affairs departments are desperately trying to "deepen Ireland's cultural engagement with Germany", using a big chunk of taxpayers' money for the purpose. As Micheál Martin noted: "My department is delighted to present this curated season in collaboration with a diverse range of German cultural institutions, venues and festivals."

Gott in Himmel!

IN THEIR ELEMENT

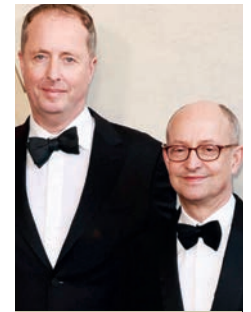
"WE NEED to actually invest in developing our own stories," declared movie producer Ed Guiney, pointing out that there "just isn't enough investment in television drama in Ireland" in a *Mail on Sunday* article headlined, "Strike while our Oscars are hot!" As one half of high-flying Element Pictures, alongside Andrew Lowe, Guiney has been leading the industry charge for yet more public dosh for film and TV producers in the wake of Oscar success for Cillian Murphy and Element's *Poor Things*. Element, however, has already demonstrated quite the knack for tapping the taxpayer.

Murphy first made a splash in 2001 when popping up in *Disco Pigs*, which was produced by Guiney's then business, Temple Films. This was during the period he was hatching Element Films with Lowe, who was working at the state film funding agency, Screen Ireland (SI), putting in place a business support scheme for Irish companies.

Lowe then left SI to set up Element with Guiney in 2001, with the fledgling outfit being one of the first to avail of SI's new support scheme. Over the years, Element has racked up an enviable level of backing from SI and also benefitted hugely from the Section 481 tax break for producers.

The boys also diversified into distribution and exhibition, managing to take over the Light House and Pálás cinemas in Dublin and Galway – both of which had been funded to a significant degree from the public purse. The 2022 accounts for Element Pictures revealed a pretax profit for the year of an Oscar-worthy €5.6m.

But the truckloads of public money underpinning Element's success have proved of little interest for hacks when interviewing Guiney and Lowe about their Hollywood exploits. Moreover, it was left to Goldhawk to reveal that the dynamic duo had vested their shares in various Element businesses in an Isle of Man company called Element Pictures GHC Unlimited.



Andrew Lowe and Ed Guiney

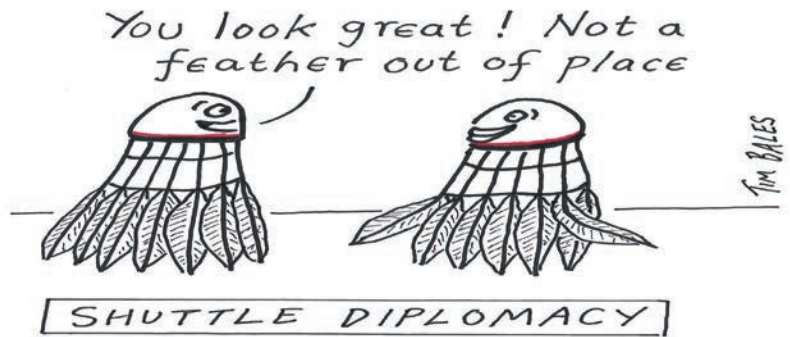
While there are many reasons for relocating to the tax haven, including a greater level of protection from prying hacks, the move predated the sale of 51% of the bulk of the Element business to the giant Fremantle Media Group for €55m. The latter has an option on the remaining 49% that will surely be exercised following the Oscars success for *Poor Things*.

The IOM firm is the ultimate parent undertaking for the Element Pictures group and the board in Ramsey has now been boosted by the arrival of Fremantle suits Stuart Jackson, Andrea Scrosati and Christian Vesper.

One question that remains hard to answer, however, is the scale of Element's share of the *Poor Things* bonanza. The international box office gross stands at \$110m and is set to go gangbusters but it turns out that the production was filmed in far off Budapest, with support from the Hungarian government, and is financed largely in the US with input also from Film4.

Correction

In *The Phoenix* 8/3/24, it was reported that GC Aesthetics was being wound up. We have been informed that the operating company, GC Aesthetics, is unaffected and is "trading well... and fully-solvent". The company now in liquidation is Global Consolidated Aesthetics Ltd and this winding up "reflects a restructuring at the holding company level". We are happy to clarify this matter.



DENTON NO-SHOW TO FOLLOW KENOVA?

OPERATION KENOVA investigated a string of murders perpetrated by Freddie Scappaticci and his associates. It did not result in a single criminal prosecution. Scappaticci, a member of the IRA, worked for British intelligence. He died in April 2023.

Operation Kenova was led by Jon Boucher, now chief constable of the PSNI. Boucher also led Operation Denton before his appointment to the top PSNI post. Operation Denton is looking at the actions of the Glenanne Gang, a group made up of UVF members with links to the UDR and RUC. The probe is examining the extent to which this network was controlled by the British state. Its report is due for release later this year.

The key figure in the gang was 'The Jackal'. Readers of *The Phoenix* were informed as long ago as May 25, 1984, that his "real name is [Robin] Jackson", he possessed information about "the vehicles used in [the] Dublin bombings" of May 1974 and had "fled to foreign climes", ie South Africa. He had, however, "returned to his native soil, unable to settle down" abroad. Jackson's group had also "been linked with weapons in the possession of SAS Captain Robert Nairac".

In 2021, Colin Wallace, a psychological operations officer at British Army HQNI in the 1970s, spoke to officers from Operation Denton and provided them with records from the 1970s concerning members of the gang. The officers told Wallace twice, at the end of last year, that they fully intended to have a further meeting with him but, since then, they have not found the time to do this.

Wallace knows what is written between the lines of these documents. He was central to the psychological operations launched against loyalist murder packs in the 1970s. Wallace



Colin Wallace

also sought clearance to target members of the Glenanne Gang, only to be told to stand aside. The killers were allowed to continue their ghostly work for the next 20 years.

A "secret" letter dated December 12, 1989, has emerged from Britain's National archives (see *The Phoenix* 24/2/23). It was written by Tom King, a Conservative MP who served as secretary of state for NI (1985-89) and as defence secretary (1989-92). It assured UK prime minister Margaret Thatcher that a then forthcoming inquiry into false accusations against Colin Wallace would not examine "alleged assassinations".

For decades the UK has denied that British officials ran assassination programmes in collusion with loyalist paramilitaries. This myth has been demolished in recent years by the British government itself, which has handed over millions in compensation to victims of collusion. The survivors and relatives of the Miami Showband are the most high profile of those compensated thus far. Three band members were murdered in 1975 by Jackson's crew.

Colin Wallace is still available to talk to the investigators from Operation Denton. Tom King should also be in a position to comment on the "alleged assassinations" to which he referred in his "secret" letter to Thatcher.

The scorching hot issue for Denton is whether it will reveal that Jackson and others in the gang were British agents.

NATIONAL PARTY 'MODERATES'

DIVISIONS IN the far-right National Party (NP) emerged publicly last July due to a dispute over the ownership of more than €400,000 worth of gold bars, with two factions claiming to be the authentic leadership of the party. Early last month, a spokesperson for the Electoral Commission stated that a decision on which faction is the legitimate leadership was "expected shortly". On a recent Telegram live show, *The Razor's Edge*, Justin Barrett dismissed this, saying no decision would be made before nominations closed for the local and European elections.

Despite this, Barrett claimed that his faction of the NP, which he argues is the

majority, are no longer prepared to sit on their hands and are preparing to organise under another name if necessary. Barrett even conceded that, as a result of this and other controversies: "The National Party is now a joke. It is a joke in Irish politics. The media knows it and everyone knows it."

Barrett explained the split in the NP as being a result of the faction led by James Reynolds wanting to pursue a more moderate path in order to avoid clashes with protestors.

Reynolds himself echoed this in a speech uploaded to the NP YouTube channel in September. He recalled how, at the 2022 NP Ard Fheis in Fermanagh, Barrett "gave a Roman salute and self-described himself as a fascist". Reynolds went on to deride the fact that Barrett had posted a quote from Hitler's *Mein Kampf* on his Telegram Channel, claiming Barrett was trying "to turn the National Party into a Hollywood parody of an extremist right wing cult".

Just how moderate those who make up the Reynolds faction are, though, is a moot question given some of their activities in recent months, details of which may emerge in upcoming court hearings.

In March leading Reynolds faction supporter Keith Woods shared a video of convicted holocaust denier David Irving on his Telegram channel. Also in March an NP member visited Italy to give a talk at the far-right Casaggi social centre in Florence.

In addition, Yan Mac Oireachtaigh of the NP led a protest at the South African embassy in March in support of Afrikaner Francois van der Merwe, leader of the Betereinders (better ends) movement, who has been charged with assaulting a police officer. At the time of the alleged assault van der Merwe was protesting in support of white farmer Piet Groenewald, who is charged with attempted murder in a case where he hit a black employee on the head with a heavy object before setting his dog on him.



James Reynolds



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DISSIDENT DRUMS

THE MOOD at dissident republican Easter commemorations this year is likely to be subdued with no sustained armed campaign under way, while the electoral rise of Sinn Féin seems irresistible.

Last Easter a few hundred republicans marched through west Belfast for the annual National Republican Commemoration Committee Easter commemoration. The main address was delivered by Saoradh member Dee Fennell. He gave a downbeat, frank assessment of the situation dissident republicans were in: "What we currently have is a plethora of small groups similar in ideology but different leaderships, strategy and popularity."

Fennell went on to argue that co-operation was necessary to reinvigorate and re-energise dissident republicanism and that "the only way through which the republic can be achieved is through comradely co-operation and collaboration based on mutual respect."

Despite this exhortation, little has changed. In political terms, Saoradh has been quite active in relation to the ongoing conflict in Gaza, activism that built on Saoradh's work in recent years publicising the plight of Palestinian political prisoners. Saoradh has also been active in countering the rise of the far right, with statements condemning the National Party and the attack on the migrant camp on Sandwith Street, as well as activists removing racist graffiti, stickers and posters.

In both cases, however, despite Fennell's analysis and plea for unity, Saoradh activism has largely been on its own terms and not as part of broader campaign groups.

It would appear too that the prospect of armed actions have been seriously undermined by a series of protracted court cases, which have resulted in dozens of prominent dissident republicans spending long periods imprisoned on remand. Last summer the Irish Republican Prisoners Welfare Association highlighted that, at that time, republican prisoners on remand in Hydebank, Maghaberry and Portlaoise had



John Caldwell

been imprisoned for over 11,000 days or over 30 years without conviction.

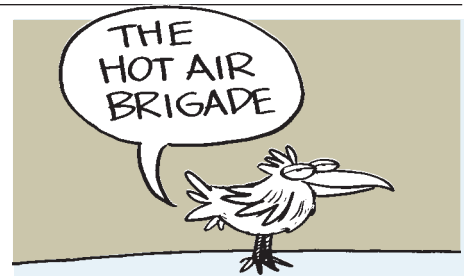
The biggest portion of these days spent on remand were by those arrested and charged with activities linked to the New IRA as part of the MI5-led Operation Arbacia. The evidence for the charges is based on audio and video recordings of meetings held in Co Tyrone in February and July 2020. In August 2020 eight men and two women were arrested and charged on the basis of this evidence.

In the years that followed, bail was regularly refused for those charged until, in November 2023, the High Court accepted that there would be no trial until at least 2025 and, as a result, most have now been released on bail. Those released include Kevin Barry Murphy from Coalisland and David Jordan from Dungannon, who prosecutors have alleged introduced themselves at the recorded meetings as the chief of staff of the New IRA and chairperson of the New IRA army council respectively.

There are other high-profile cases, including the long-running case against Colin Duffy and co-accused Henry Fitzsimons, who were first arrested in relation to a gun attack on a PSNI Land Rover over a decade ago, and the cases of the dozen individuals charged in relation to attempted murder in Omagh of PSNI detective chief inspector John Caldwell in February 2023.

Most likely one of the other small groups to which Fennell was referring in his speech was Arm na Poblachta, comprising former members of Óglaigh na hÉireann (ONH) and the Continuity IRA. It emerged in 2017 with an attempted rocket attack on a PSNI patrol in west Belfast. With some support in Derry, Tyrone, Armagh and Belfast, it has carried out a small number of attacks on the security services in recent years. Last month the group claimed responsibility for two attacks on police with pipe bombs in Dungiven.

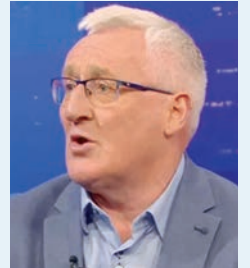
The ONH announced a ceasefire in January 2018, so it took observers by surprise when over 20 members of An Garda Síochána's special detective unit (SDU) arrived at a commemoration for the late Martin Rattigan in Navan, organised by the Republican Network for Unity (RNU), which has long been associated in the media with the ONH. Later a car carrying RNU members was forced off the road by the SDU and its occupants were searched at gunpoint with their hands cable-tied behind their backs. This is a little less delicate than the light-touch policing that far-right members enjoy from the Garda SDU.



The whole programme is a bit like a Japanese bullet train whizzing from Osaka to Tokyo.

Pat Spillane on the All-Ireland football season, Irish Independent

It is fitting that he does have such a prominent role in the ESB because



Pat Spillane

really his role now is about illuminating a dark past and charting a course to a bright future. **Mícheál Lehane on Terence O'Rourke's RTÉ post, Morning Ireland, submitted by reader**

It is not in the character of the English to indulge in bawdy displays of nationalism... Brexit wasn't really a nationalist project... Ireland ought to think carefully about the vision it projects: a braggadocious, narrow and kitschy self-styling has long fallen out of contemporary tastes.

Finn McRedmond on how "English understatement" demands a more sophisticated celebration of Paddy's Day, Irish Times

The many lives she's lived and roles she's taken – from model to wife to mum to actor – have set her up to be open to what life has to offer next. **Shilpa Ganatra on former model and reality TV star Nadia Forde, Sunday Times**

It won't be for long as lulls are not frequent in her multifaceted, polymath existence. **Sinead O'Sullivan on actor Danielle Ryan, Irish Tatler**

Add to that thoroughly trustworthy profile, his unique sartorial style. Baggy corduroy trousers, cotton shirts with big pockets, Fair Isle sweaters, vintage braces and a range of linen scarves sourced on the Greek island of Hydra. Top it all off with his battered hemp hat, and you've got an earthy elegance. **John Daly on Gardeners' World presenter Monty Don, Irish Independent**

I expected Eamon Ryan to take his vast transport and energy department by the scruff of the neck and make Ireland the Saudi Arabia of wind energy. **John Kierans, Irish Mirror**

The home crowd also found their voice in a way not heard in many a year, and all of this was provoked by Ireland becoming akin to the All Blacks in their Tri-Nations pomp. **Gerry Thornley on Ireland's loss at Twickenham, Irish Times**

Josie, a certified cacao-facilitator, was also in attendance and had brought some cacao with her, which they advised was a perfect pairing for some 'blissful breathing'. **Nicole Glennon on 'cacao-drinking', Irish Examiner**

But you don't need to dream continental dreams to consider what could be done better in Dublin city centre. You merely have to hop on a bus or Dart south to the faraway world of Dún Laoghaire. **Una Mullally, Irish Times**

Please send suitable contributions to: The Hot Air Brigade, The Phoenix, 44 Lr Baggot St, Dublin 2 or email: hotair@thephoenix.ie



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CRUELLA VON DER LEYEN BACKS BIG AG

FRESH FROM giving Israel *carte blanche* to commit murder and mayhem in Gaza with the EU's unconditional backing, European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen did her own Cruella de Ville impression last month by scrapping plans to cut pesticide usage across the EU.

Under the EU's much-vaunted Farm To Fork plan, pesticide usage was to drop 50% by 2030 in a move to ease the extreme pressure on nature from the huge quantities of highly toxic chemicals being sprayed every year by farmers across the EU.

Now, apparently, these critical moves to avert ecological disaster and so help protect both nature and agriculture had, according to von der Leyen, become "a symbol of polarisation". This is code for a complete capitulation to the agri-chemical lobby, which has been working flat out to undermine EU environmental regulations.

"Our farmers deserve to be listened to. I know they are worried about the future of agriculture and their future as farmers," was von der Leyen's flaccid cover story.

Her decision was in no way influenced by the sway of agri-chemical giants in her home country, Germany, including Bayer and BASF.

Waves of noisy protests by farmers across Europe in recent weeks, using heavy machinery to block motorways and break through police barricades, have led to almost total political capitulation. The European Commission's roadmap on cutting emissions by 90% by 2040 is now dead in the water, with almost all references to agriculture having been quietly scrapped.

Even more worryingly, the roadmap dumped recommendations on how citizens could help cut their own carbon footprints,



Ursula von der Leyen



"It gets worse - the wheels just came off our share price."

which had included advice on reducing meat consumption. The fact that it is an election year in Europe goes some way towards explaining the sheer spinelessness of the commission and the political cynicism of Cruella, a member of the European People's Party, the group to which Fine Gael is affiliated in Europe.

A notable feature of the farmers' protests was the degree of property damage and destruction involved, including cars crashing into piles of manure dumped on motorways, trees being cut down and burned, slurry being sprayed and police being intimidated by protestors using heavy equipment.

These protests were cheered across Europe's right-wing media, who applauded the plucky farmers expressing their right to disrupt traffic, block emergency vehicles, smash things up and violently confront the police in pursuit of their aims.

Oddly, the same media outlets have demanded that the police crack down hard and criminalise entirely peaceful climate protestors acting in the wider public interest for doing no more than walking on the street. The hypocrisy on display by politicians and press alike is, even by today's low standards, breath taking.

The extent to which Big Ag has been successful in undermining political action on climate was underlined with the recent publication of a scientific report highlighting how the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (UN-FAO) roadmap had issued a total of 120 recommendations on dietary change needed to cut carbon emissions. Astonishingly, nowhere were cuts in

consumption of meat or dairy mentioned.

The UN-FAO report uses the term "dietary change" eight times, yet fails to once refer to reducing meat or dairy consumption, the key drivers of agri emissions. This was described as "bewildering" by the scientists.

It is further evidence of the intensive work being undertaken by livestock interests to shield their sector from scrutiny over its huge and expanding carbon and ecological footprint.

Goldhawk previously reported (see *The Phoenix* 2/11/2022) on the so-called Dublin Declaration, supported by state agri research agency Teagasc and launched at an event opened by junior minister Martin Heydon, decrying how the livestock sector had been the victim of "zealotry". The whole project was developed by international meat industry interests, some with ties to organised climate denial. The Dublin Declaration website lists 27 named Irish individuals as signatories, including 16 Teagasc staff.

JOY WAS unconfined in environmental circles with the revelation earlier this week that Coillte, the state-owned forestry agency, was to turn over a new leaf and switch its focus towards biodiversity protection. "Now is the time for us to hold up our hands and admit that we've been part of the problem for too long," Coillte director Sakinah Brennan was quoted in an article in the business section of the Irish Times. "This marks the start of a new chapter where we focus on restoring native biodiversity and move away from extraction". But the joy was short-lived.

The first indication that something was amiss was when the online version of the article suddenly disappeared from the IT website. Several hours later, the newspaper published a correction, stating that the article "attributes an incorrect policy to Coillte and was published in error". No explanation for the 'error' was proffered.

Goldhawk understands that an email was sent to the IT business desk over the bank holiday weekend purporting to be from Coillte's PR agency, Q4, and including the above quote. It was entirely fictitious and the embarrassing error was not spotted until well after the article had been printed. To add to the IT's discomfort, a report about the fake news story was carried on the RTÉ website, which took the opportunity to rub it in by recalling that the paper had, only last May, also been duped, this time into running a bogus article on, ahem, fake tan and cultural appropriation.





LISA: 'NON, JE NE REGRETTE RIEN'

WAS THERE ever a more controversial 'no' vote by one individual in a referendum? The last-minute decision of Fianna Fáil Seanad leader Lisa Chambers to vote 'no'

in the recent referendums has become the main talking point in the *post mortem* analysis of the disastrous Government campaign on the recent referendums. But while 'yes' campaigners in Government and media have bemoaned Lisa's double standards, nobody has spelled out what it is that could have impelled Micheál Martin's favourite party personality to betray her own side in the campaign.

Taoiseach Leo Varadkar made sure to say that he had to respect the fact that Chambers was an FF politician before saying – with a straight face – that he did not see what was to be gained by claiming to be on the winning side after a vote. Vlad's star has waned after it became obvious that he was not actually JFK in disguise, as Fine Gael minders claimed back in 2017, but Goldhawk refuses to believe that Vlad does not know what the ever so artful Lisa is at.

Phoenix readers will recall that the FF constituencies committee (CC) went against Martin's preferred choice of candidates in the debate about who should accompany Barry Cowen on the party ticket for the EU elections in the Midlands-North-West constituency. Cowen came first with 894 votes at the selection convention's first count, with



Lisa Chambers

Donegal senator Niall Blaney second on 803 and Lisa well behind on 570. Martin wanted his favourite – Chambers – to be added, *sans* Blaney, in this large EU constituency of 14 Dáil constituencies. The CC, however, was aghast at the excision of Blaney as it would have meant ceding three constituencies covering five counties – Donegal, Cavan-Monaghan and Sligo-Leitrim – to Sinn Féin if Blaney was excluded.

Martin was forced to concede to dissenting party voices – possibly for the first time since the general election – and Blaney was added, along with Lisa, to the ticket. But if Micheál and Lisa were dismissive about voters' preferences in border counties when calculating the EU Midlands-North-West EU election, Lisa quickly copped the significance of such political views when she looked at the referendum 'no' vote in these areas.



Micheál Martin

The 'care' referendum showed a 74% 'no' vote nationwide (compared to a 68% 'no' vote in the 'family' referendum).

Donegal voted 84% 'no', with Cavan-Monaghan close behind on 81% and Sligo-Leitrim on 77%. And Lisa may or may not have been surprised to see

78% of her own constituents in Mayo voting 'no'.

If the penny has not yet dropped with Varadkar and FG election handlers as to what Chambers is up to, one can be sure that Cowen, Blaney and Martin are fully aware of her game plan, however futile it may now turn out to be.

The FF 'joint' campaign to win two of the five seats in the constituency will see the party organisers draw up a division of areas for the candidates; the extent to which these are observed; the distribution of resources to candidates; and so on. There will be loud squeals – not of delight – if Lisa is perceived to have been rewarded with the faintest preference by the party or, more specifically, the party leader. Chambers has long been regarded by Martin as the ideal party candidate in his new, revisionist notion of what FF should stand for – ie female, modern, middle class etc or, in Lisa's case, female, pale and politically stale.

Significantly, Chambers was anxious to

point out to RTÉ's *Drivetime* programme that she did not tell Martin she was going to vote against the party's position ahead of the vote. Hopefully this will reassure FF members that Martin would never countenance such disloyalty, regardless of their position in the leader's hierarchy within the party.

It is the voters that will determine Lisa's fate but if Dara Bradley's widely read *Connacht Tribune* column is anything to go by, she is toast. Bradley described her stroke as "one of the most breathtakingly cynical manoeuvres to occur in a country that has produced its fair share of two-faced politicians... snake-like in the extreme... this sort of grubbiness debases politics" and much more.

COMRADES STAGG AND PRESIDENT HIGGINS

THE WHIFF of authentic sincerity marked the tributes of President Michael D Higgins to the recently departed ex-Labour minister Emmet Stagg and the two were definitely close comrades in the murky world of Labour Party power politics in the era of Tricky Dicky Spring.

With typical understatement Higgins this week told of Stagg's "generosity and kindness", how he "embodied the spirit of the Labour Party in its best sense", how he was one of Stagg's "closest friends" in politics and that he had been privileged to share an office with Stagg in the Dáil. But while much of this true, it also camouflaged one of the most effective political manoeuvres in modern Irish politics – one that catapulted Higgins into the cabinet and Stagg into a junior ministry.

Stagg had led a revolt of Labour's membership against coalition government with 'right-wing' parties, ie Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil, in the years during and after the FG/Labour coalition of the 1980s. However, as Labour renewed itself in the early 1990s and coalition appeared to again be inevitable, Stagg and his comrade, Michael D, hatched a plot of alarming proportions that could have not only blocked coalition but seriously damaged the Labour Party.

With implicitly pro-coalition statements being made by such as Spring and Ruairi Quinn in 1992 – the period leading up to the formation of the FF/Labour coalition in January 1993 – Stagg proceeded to hold negotiations with Proinsias De Rossa's then titled New Agenda (subsequently Democratic Left), a split from the Workers' Party. The negotiations appeared to have concluded with a deal that would have destroyed Labour (see *The Phoenix* 12/2/93).

The plan was to create a new party composed of left-wing members of Labour and the new moderates of Democratic Left, with the leader of this socialist party to be



Emmet Stagg



St. Patrick meets Ireland's first Far Right protestor.

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Michael D Higgins. A series of discussions involving De Rossa, Stagg, Higgins and others led to agreement about Higgins as the leader, although another proposal was for joint leadership of Higgins and De Rossa.

Leaks about this new party soon reached Tricky and his chief aide, Fergus 'Fungus' Finlay, who were aghast and recognised that it had to be aborted before it reached full term. Or else!

Thus, the two Labour heads and other trusted Labour TDs began to drop in to Higgins's office for friendly chats about social democracy, trade union politics and other left-wing concerns. These chats quickly turned to offers from Tricky of various inducements in an effort to prevent Higgins, in particular, from defecting. Losing Stagg and even one or two left-wing TDs would have been a serious blow but Higgins also leaving was seen as disastrous.

The upshot? Stagg and Higgins abandoned De Rossa while Stagg told his comrades in the anti-coalition Labour Left that to revive the organisation would be "provocative". He then went on – at Spring's behest – to propose a motion at a special conference on coalition to enter coalition government with Fianna Fáil.

Oh, and Stagg was made a junior minister for the environment while Higgins became minister for the arts.

RECENTLY RETIRED Irish Times seer Fintan O'Toole will surely feel compelled to do what he has been threatening to do for some years now, namely stand for election to the Dáil. As he has argued in the past, the



point is not to merely protest but to act to change things.

In fact, O'Toole has acted to try and change things in the past, and more currently, and has been closely identified with the Social Democrats – in particular, with his old comrade from the Workers' Party, Soc Dems co-founder Catherine Murphy TD. He has assisted in the formation of Soc Dem policy and his ideas and impact can be recognised in parts of its policy documents.

At the Soc Dems 2016 inauguration conference the main speaker billed to address delegates was not Murphy or co-founder, Róisín Shortall, but Fintan. He has identified politically with the party's outlook ever since, but when it comes to the national question this trio is probably not at one with the bulk of the newer members,

who would favour a united Ireland.

If O'Toole does want to break into electoral politics, this is the time to do so as the FF/FG mould is currently under serious stress. One problem is that if he decides, logically, to run in his own constituency of Dublin North-West, he would be facing his mortal foes, Sinn Féin, led by poll-topping Dessie Ellis, at the next election.



LEADERSHIP PARANOIA IN GOVERNMENT

THE WELTER of criticism levelled at integration minister Roderic O'Gorman about the near Gaza-like conditions of Tent City in Dublin's Mount Street was led not by the opposition but by Government politicians last week. How strange. Or perhaps not.

Fine Gael's higher education minister, Simon Harris, and Fianna Fáil TD Jim O'Callaghan took aim at Green minister O'Gorman. The feeling in both of the two larger Government parties, however, was that their respective party leaders were the real targets of both politicians.

FF leader and Tánaiste Micheál Martin – who believes his modernising mission is to liberalise and de-republicanise his party – was dealt a serious blow with the two 'no' referendum votes. He is fortunate in that he is not taoiseach at present, leaving Leo Varadkar to take the bulk of the criticism.

However, Martin, like Vlad, is now under more critical scrutiny than before the referendums, and the local and EU elections will be crucial for his stated aim of leading the party into the next general election. With immigration being at least as tendentious as the referendums, Tent City recently became the lightning rod in this issue and O'Callaghan's attack has been construed as the first shot in yet another round of this slow-burning leadership contest.

FF did much better in the 2019 local elections than had been expected and its

almost inevitable decline in this year's results will challenge Martin's grip on the party – especially as it is the councillors that hold the key to Seanad election success or failure.

For pretty much the same reasons, the FF leadership question will again raise the aspirations of pretender Jim O'Callaghan,



Simon Harris



Jim O'Callaghan

among others. That O'Callaghan's constituency is Dublin Bay south (DBS) allowed, nay demanded, that he raise the issue of Tent City, which is in his constituency, and his criticisms were levelled at not only the Government's mishandling of the Mount Street mess but also "economic migrants".

The TD said their "presence damages those who have come here legitimately seeking international protection" and he demanded "resumed checks at airplane doors at Dublin Airport" and the refusal of disembarkation to those without documents.

There has not been a squeak out of party leader Martin in response.

Harris was less bellicose about refugees and he blamed the chaos and misery on O'Gorman, demanding that the minister speed up the plan to solve the accommodation crisis.

When it was suggested to him by the *Irish Times* that FG and the Government had run out of ideas and was exhausted, Harris said: "I have never been more energised" (whatever about the rest of his party colleagues).

Vlad, too, will be challenged by a likely decline in the number of party councillors elected in the coming local elections for the same reasons as Martin.

Harris has been diligently and 'energetically' beaver away in the not very sexy department of higher education but is still regarded as the most likely challenger to Vlad in any leadership contest, something that the 'no' protest vote has highlighted for FG members.

Meanwhile, Green Party media minister Catherine Martin may also be wondering what lies ahead, given that her party leader, Eamon Ryan, has not exactly been a pillar of solidarity to her in Cabinet during and before her recent travails concerning RTÉ.

Both ministers will be aware that the party's constitution demands a leadership contest within six months of a general election, although that election could rule out one or even both from standing for the leadership again.



ANOTHER KENNEALLY SCANDAL

CHILD ABUSER Bill Kenneally, a member of the well-known Fianna Fáil family, is in jail for multiple child sex offences committed between 1979 and 1990. He is currently the subject of a full-blown Commission of Inquiry, headed by retired judge Michael White.

Although he admitted his abuse to a senior garda in 1987, Kenneally waited 25 years to be prosecuted and convicted. Gardai said that the 1987 victim did not wish to give a statement but another victim claimed Kenneally was named to gardai in 1985. The current inquiry is happening because media coverage of Kenneally's 2013 conviction and subsequent political pressure fuelled speculation that Catholic Church and FF connections influenced gardai not to prosecute. The media is right behind this story and appears willing to pursue it to its conclusion.



Patrick O'Brien

Another serial paedophile, Patrick O'Brien, admitted abuse to gardai in 2002. His abuse then and previously went unpunished until 2016-18. He was, in fact, an already convicted child abuser, having received a suspended sentence in 1989 for abusing a school pupil and church chorister.

A religious lay worker, O'Brien had no FF connections and the chorister he abused was in the Church of Ireland St Patrick's Cathedral Grammar School. Failure to act on O'Brien's extensive abuse of other pupils was due to Garda inactivity and a concerted church cover-up, led by Dean Victor Griffin and headmaster Brian Weir.

It was only due to the determined,

lonely, pursuit of O'Brien by the parents of victim Kerry Lawless that O'Brien was convicted in 1989 and received a two-year suspended sentence. Due to his conviction and sentencing being unreported, O'Brien continued to abuse boys and also returned to work in St Patrick's. That was despite church authorities knowing of his abuse conviction.

Kerry Lawless saw O'Brien back working in St Patrick's and was so disgusted he contacted former classmates. They were not aware of O'Brien's 1989 conviction, so complete was the Griffin-Weir cover-up.

On receipt of this information, they contacted gardai, who only then brought O'Brien to book for abuses he committed in the 1970s and '80s. During the course of this investigation, evidence of Garda refusal to prosecute O'Brien in the early 2000s emerged. He was convicted of those offences after the St Patrick's case ended, with very little coverage.

Thus, in October 2016 O'Brien pleaded guilty to 51 sample counts of abusing 14 children over a 33-year period to 2010. Described in one account as the largest number of offences reported against any individual in the history of the state, two days were set aside at Dublin Circuit Criminal Court to hear details of the assaults and it took over 30 minutes simply to read out the charges (see *The Phoenix* 4/11/16).

This story has no FF or Catholic Church connection. It has a Garda and a Church of Ireland connection. The questions the O'Brien scandal poses are similar to those surrounding Bill Kenneally. Will the media, the *Irish Times* in particular, give the O'Brien horror story the same attention as that of Kenneally?

ROLL OF honour or street of shame? A hefty, three-page catalogue of the Government's 68 advisors, national handlers and media manipulators drawn up by seven of the Irish Times's finest was published last weekend.

Introduced as a "Who's who of the people behind the power", they are described as well paid (two-thirds are on over €100,000 pa) but the paper cautions that they must work long and hard under intense pressure as well as make themselves accountable to "demanding" politicians. The poor dears.

A low-life tabloid newspaper would likely be unable to resist attacking these public servants as overpaid, would-be west wingers with previously unheard of resources but who still managed to screw up. The IT, however, is a responsible newspaper and

it knows that an election looms with dark forces preparing to make mischief. Calm, soothing voices must be heard in these dangerous times.

FARAGE IMAGERY SLAMMED

THE *BUSINESS POST* provoked a storm on X recently with a studious and well-meaning article on immigration and how to blunt efforts by the far right to grow its appeal.

Unfortunately, the imagery accompanying the piece attracted far more attention than Aidan Regan's article, even though it was a sober assessment of Ireland's underdeveloped state capacity and the resultant damage this has done to social cohesion.



Nigel Farage

Regan wrote of the huge increase in the Irish population compared with other EU countries and how the gulf between public services and infrastructure has, consequently, had damaging social results.

However, the photo on the *Post* website, used to illustrate the article's points on immigration, was that used by Nigel Farage on a 'leave' poster during the UK Brexit referendum campaign. It depicted a long line of non-white migrants walking through England's green and pleasant land with a headline, "Breaking Point". It was referred to the UK police for alleged racism and some on social media compared it to images from the Nazi era. British chancellor George Osborne described it as "vile" and compared it to extremist literature from the 1930s.

Many angry tweets filled Irish social media following the *Post* article, with readers accusing the newspaper of using the article as "a disgraceful attempt at clickbait... a dog whistle to the far right" and so on.

Defenders of Regan pointed out that he had written an article about Ireland experiencing much immigration and the best way to suppress racism was to expand much-needed public services.

Regan's article also pointed out that the EU centre-right strategic response to the far right across Europe had been to restrict immigration and he feared that a conservative Irish state and media would follow suit. Regan also argued that we would soon find out if Sinn Féin is "a progressive centre-left party" or "closet conservatives", although there was no reference to the Government parties – Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Greens.

While much social media anger was directed at Regan, some combatants blamed *Post* editorial seniors for the photo and for the headline, "Far right is wrong to say 'Ireland is full' but it is getting there" – a sentiment that appears to endorse the Farage photo that was used online. Either way, the offensive photo was taken down a day after the typhoon on X first raged.



" SO, IT'S YOU, GRUMPY! YOU'RE THE ONE WHO'S BEEN COMMENTING ON MY POSTS. "

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WE BUTCHER THEM**



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Michael McDowell

MICHAEL McDOWELL was the stand-out personality in the referendums campaign and his elation at the count was visible as ‘no’ activists gathered eagerly around him. The same activists are aware that McDowell’s current agenda is greater than the binning of the constitutional amendments. The former tánaiste, justice minister and attorney general has, yet again, been plotting his comeback to the Dáil and government, with the referendums campaign a mere stepping stone to this goal. Recent manoeuvres have also included talks with other parliamentarians to form an alliance with a common programme – talks that are likely to resume in the near future. Such a move, if successful, could alter the Dáil arithmetic and post-election coalition talks.

McDowell has threatened to come back before every general election since his ignominious defeat and ‘retirement’ at the 2007 election. In 2009 he engaged in intense negotiations with Fine Gael to rejoin his political *alma mater* but the Blueshirts lost their nerve when it came to actually taking back the *enfant terrible* of the Grand Old Party.

Shortly after the 2011 election, McDowell triggered a flurry of political activity by calling for a “right-of-centre” grouping that saw various heavyweight Independents such as McDowell, Shane Ross, Lucinda Creighton and Denis Naughten flirting and competing with each other simultaneously.

However, the outspoken Independents proved to be as paranoid about McDowell as his old party was, on top of which his constituency of Dublin Bay South (DBS) was shared with Creighton, providing an irresolvable problem. (Lucinda sweetly suggested he remove himself to the adjoining constituency of Dublin South.)

Ross was even more hostile to McDowell, knowing he would not be the dominant figure in any group that included the former head of the Progressive Democrats. So it was back to the drawing board for McDowell again.

In what appeared to be a small but significant shift to the left (everything is relative, comrades), McDowell called for a “pop-up-centre/centre-right party” before taking his NUI Seanad seat in 2016.

In the following years the once decidedly ‘centre-right’ champion worked

with various politicians on a variety of issues – Sinn Féin MEP Lynn Boylan in an effort to draft an anti-media monopoly bill; FG grandee Maurice Manning on Seanad reform; various politicians on Brexit; and so on.

McDowell also made sure to champion other vital issues such as the local property tax, which persecutes home owners in Dublin to the benefit of cosseted culchies; the “Metro link madness”; and home ownership – all issues that affect middle-class Dublin voters in areas such as McDowell’s Ranelagh home base.

Meanwhile, the senator’s apparent devotion to Manning’s Seanad reforms included an interesting observation on his website in 2017 – the seven “important constitutional functions” enjoyed by the Seanad included one that said “up to two members of the Seanad may be appointed to cabinet as government ministers”.

Was it modesty that persuaded the senator to subsequently delete this ‘constitutional function’ from the list he published in his local literature?

That literature has been composed of expensive and carefully prepared brochures expounding on national and constituency issues in the years since he was cast

out of the Dáil in 2007.

In what was his third preparation of an election campaign, a bumper brochure at the start of 2020, just a few weeks before the general election, was stuffed with trenchant comment on housing, the iniquitous property tax, Dublin Bus, safe cycling and so on. This was circulated to the hovels of Ranelagh, Donnybrook, Sandymount, Terenure and other deserving areas of DBS. Nevertheless, McDowell yet again retreated, although he successfully ran once more for the Seanad.

Since then, McDowell has used his platforms in the *Business Post* and the *Irish Times* to build a new Mark 11 McDowell, presenting still as centre-right but more comprehensive in his opinions and less abrasive than the “radical or redundant” soundbite he made famous.

VERBAL SADISM

He has, however, targeted the quietest boy in the DBS class, Green head prefect and climate minister Eamon Ryan. Big Mick regularly picks on shy Eamon with taunts such as “piffle about sod turf, lettuce in window boxes... no time for wand waving or wishful thinking... highly irrational” and so on.

Despite his penchant for verbal sadism, there is usually method to McDowell’s mania. He knows that Ryan is one of the most unpopular ministers and that his seat in their shared constituency may be vulnerable. At the same time, he has not forgotten that the threat of Sinn Féin is central to FG voters’ anxieties. Thus, he maintains a regular stream of invective and polemic against SF on many issues, including a border poll and even SF’s housing policies, the party’s strongest suit.

McDowell will be 73 in May but, apart from his age, he can hardly posture as a Dáil candidate and resile yet again without inviting jibes about the Grand Old Duke of York. Also, he now has an impressive political victory under his belt that will not be forgotten this side of the next general election. It really is now or never.

There are other factors in favour of a rebirth of his brand of ‘centre-right’ politics. Leo Varadkar and FG are a tired, flaccid political force. The party has been in power for 13 years and has long since abandoned its guiding, ideological tenets as well as much of its core, middle-class following.

Fianna Fáil appears rudderless and has discarded its working-class base, while leader Micheál Martin might as well be a member of FG. Meanwhile, the main personalities in both parties appear to be waiting for sinecures in Euroland.

The Greens are most unpopular and are attracting hostility that



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affects all three Government parties.

McDowell can see that the post-election arithmetic will probably resemble the second-last election result (2016). If FFG want to remain in power, they will require a group of Independents similar to Shane Ross and Finian McGrath's Independent Alliance over eight years ago. This grouping would require that six or so TDs with 'centre-right' politics come together on a relatively loose platform under a leadership of sorts (called Michael McDowell). The politics of this group would veer markedly to the right and would play it tougher than the current Government on immigration.

McDowell was pictured with several TDs and senators at the referendum count and two of the TDs – Wexford's Verona Murphy (formerly FG, now Independent) and Galway West TD Noel Grealish (a former Progressive Democrats TD and a strong supporter of McDowell back then) – have highly contentious records on immigrants.

Murphy once suggested that asylum-seeker children as young as four years old need to be "deprogrammed" as they may have been "manipulated by Islamic State". In an interview with local radio in RTÉ in December 2019 she asked: "Do we have to wait to have a London Bridge incident on Wexford Bridge?"

The same year, Grealish said there were "people coming over here from Africa... to sponge off the system here in Ireland" and he used the Dáil to speak of billions of euros being sent from Ireland to Nigeria. He also said that he exempted certain immigrants from these allegations, namely, "Christian... genuine refugees who were persecuted... because they were Christian by ISIS".

In 2004, when then justice minister McDowell still believed it was necessary to be either radical or redundant, Grealish was at one with him in moving the overwhelmingly successful referendum to restrict the citizenship rights of Irish children born to non-nationals. That proposal was branded as an encouragement to racism by various TDs and the leadership of the Labour Party.

It would be unfair to say that McDowell is a racist but if the new alliance identifies immigration as an issue to distinguish itself from Government parties, as appears likely, McDowell and his colleagues will have to tread carefully. In a coyly worded article early last year, McDowell tackled the question as follows: "We have a national right and duty to determine migration policy. Our government must exercise that right carefully. Half thought-out proposals to extend asylum rights to climate refugees are not helpful.

"If we want to avoid creating a space for far-right politics in Ireland, we need our elected politicians and government to respect and value the people's sense of cohesion and common interest".

The politics of the group will rest on the notion that a government should focus on bread-and-butter issues rather than culture wars, with a return to competence in the administration of housing, health and the economy at a time when the exchequer is

overflowing with extra billions in tax revenues.

The putative alliance is also likely to take a hard line with the Greens and McDowell has thundered about the dangers of "blindly adhering to climate change goals".

There will, of course, also be a hard line taken with SF. In October 2021, McDowell's *IT* column denounced the Government's alleged practice of giving in to every demand on the exchequer for post-Covid recovery programmes, among other things. The print article was headlined, "Is there room for another political party", but the online version had the headline, "Is it time for return of the Progressive Democrats?"

NGOs, meanwhile, can expect to be targeted like left-wing Hollywood script writers in the 1950s.

Former MEP Marian Harkin TD – once a member of FG, like McDowell – and ex-Labour TD Michael McNamara have engaged in talks with McDowell, as has McDowell's former special advisor in government, Cormac Lucey, who has declared his intention to stand as an Independent in Blackrock, Co Dublin, in the local elections. It is likely that Lucey will go for the Dáil if he wins a council seat.

These talks have produced little so far apart from a recognition that the two Independent TDs are anxious for a government role. When

the current coalition was being formed, both of them held talks with FF/FG under the misapprehension that they could become junior ministers.

AGREEMENT

Negotiations about a deal between McDowell, Murphy, Grealish, Harkin, McNamara, Lucey and other possible recruits are less urgent since the dramatic referendums result. The view is that the Government would not dare rush to the polls so soon after that defeat, meaning that McDowell has time to hone a political document and programme acceptable to interested fellow travellers. But the current hiatus has little to do with ideology and the real problem for this alliance will be how to reach agreement in advance on who is likely to get what in a new right-of-centre cabinet and list of junior ministers.

For McDowell there also remains the question of how to win a seat in DBS. SF's Chris Andrews will retain his seat; there will surely be one FG seat (James Geoghegan or Emma Blain); either Ryan or Labour leader Ivana Bacik, but not both, will take a seat; and the fourth will be a battle between McDowell and Fianna Fáil's Jim O'Callaghan.

McDowell knows there is a space somewhere between FG and the loud, unsavoury crew that definitely are to the right of centre but whose members have little to offer the electorate on economic 'bread-and-butter issues' and who are unlikely to win a single seat in the next Dáil. Michael, however, could lead half a dozen or so TDs into government and influence it way beyond its real political weight – as before.



Bog Cuttings

FISTICUFFED

SLIGO DISTRICT Court heard the case of a 25-year-old man who pleaded guilty to engaging in abusive or threatening behaviour towards gardaí following an incident on Shore Road, Sligo. Sergeant Derek Butler told the court that officers were attending a report of a couple having an argument on September 24, 2022. When they arrived they discovered the defendant, Aaron Duggan, of Dromore Hill, Peterswell, Galway, in an agitated and intoxicated state. Duggan immediately became aggressive towards the gardaí, telling one of them to "fuck off". He then challenged the officer to a fight, adding that the garda was "a cunt". The officer concerned refused Duggan's offer to fight and instead arrested him. Defence solicitor Gerry McGovern told the court that his client was "very embarrassed" and shouldn't have taken out his frustration on gardaí. Judge Michael Connellan fined Duggan €400. *Sligo Weekender*

LAST ORDERS

AN INTOXICATED publican who verbally abused gardaí appeared before a recent sitting of Macroom District Court. Garda Evan Horan told the court that on June 18, 2023, a patrol car passing through Coachford heard significant noise coming from O'Riordan's Bar long after closing time. Upon inspection they discovered a large crowd drinking in the rear of the pub. After flashing their lights, they were approached by the publican, Pat O'Riordan, 52, who was clearly intoxicated. He demanded to know "what are you doing here?" When the gardaí informed O'Riordan that he had 15 minutes to clear the premises, he replied: "Ye are a crowd of cunts. Who the fuck do you think you are? You are a fucking cunt and your job is fucked." He then attempted to usher the departing guests back into the pub. Judge Adrian Harris issued a one-month sentence, suspended for two years, and a fine of €300. *Echo*

URINE TROUBLE

MATEUZ MARGOL (35), of 1 St Bridget's Terrace, Abbey Road, Thurles, appeared before Thurles District Court charged with public intoxication, engaging in abusive or threatening behaviour and criminal damage after urinating and defecating in the waiting area of a Garda station. The court heard that on April 30, 2022, the defendant arrived at Thurles Garda Station in an intoxicated state. In the reception area, Margol proceeded to defecate on the floor, urinate and then take a seat. When he was approached by the officer on duty, Margol became enraged, saying: "Fuck you, take off your uniform and I'll fight you." Margol was immediately arrested and a cleaning company was contacted to deal with the waiting area. Judge Elizabeth MacGrath deferred sentencing until May 7 to give Margol time to cover the costs of the cleaning firm and to show proof of engagement with an alcohol treatment programme. *Tipperary Star*

• Please send suitable contributions to: **Bog Cuttings, The Phoenix, 44 Lr Baggot St, Dublin 2, or email bogcuttings@thephoenix.ie**



Verona Murphy



Rob Kenny

HAVING GAINED an early profile through the social media site Snapchat, the canny Rob Kenny combines running a PR agency with being a social media influencer in the fashion and lifestyle sphere. The flamboyant 33-year-old is his own best ‘client’ though, as he rarely misses an opportunity to self-promote. Fans of Goldhawk will be aware that he has also dipped his toe in the political PR field courtesy of one Holly Cairns.

Kenny says he takes a “younger, very creative approach to PR and influencer marketing” and his launch events for brands tend to be filled with showbiz hacks and popular young people with social media followings, rather than traditional media. Whether he can make the transition to promoting blue-chip companies and brands has yet to be seen but his approach to promoting the brands he already has on his books can raise eyebrows at times.

For example, Kenny’s agency handled the press event for the recent launch of Virgin Media’s streaming service, which was hosted by *Ireland AM* presenter Muireann O’Connell and TikTok star Eric Roberts. The sparsely attended event attracted about 10 (mostly showbiz) hacks and resulted in only a handful of mainstream media articles. At least the reporters were present, however, unlike Kenny, who was off skiing in the French Alps at the time.

Rob takes to the skies on a regular basis and told the *Sunday Times* that, as he can work from anywhere with his phone and laptop, he loves to book flights and work abroad in “swish resorts”. But leaving such a significant client’s event in the hands of his staff does seem a puzzling strategy.

The admission to the *Times* was made as part of a puff piece interview he did a couple of years ago in association with his fiancé, Shane Cassidy, who has his own practice, Neurolinks, which supports adults and children with neurological conditions through music therapy.

Kenny initially worked as a junior executive at a large PR agency in London that handled fashion brands. Once back in Dublin, he worked with FleishmanHillard, Publicis and PSG Communications (now Teneo). He set up his own agency, Rob Kenny PR, in 2019 and incorporated his company, Rob Kenny PR & Social Limited, in June 2022. His clients have included Unislim, Virgin Media and The Handmade Soap Company, as well as restaurant and bar launches.

Rob handled the launches of Van Gogh Dublin – An Immersive Journey at the RDS, Warner Bros’s *The Friends Experience* and Bricktionary: The Interactive Lego Brick Experience at Point Village.

Kenny also promotes himself as a men’s fashion expert and does regular radio and media slots. With his eye on both strands of his business, he can make his media presence work in his clients’ favour. For example, while speaking to *Image* magazine about his career, Kenny managed to shoehorn in glowing mentions for three of client Eavanna Breen’s skincare products. He also boasted about how his agency has never had to seek out a client, as each one “has come to us directly due to

our stellar word-of-mouth reputation”.

Many eyebrows were raised last year when Kenny announced that he was handling a PR campaign for Social Democrats leader Holly Cairns. He seemed surprised himself as he wrote to assorted media members declaring: “An email I never imagined myself sending! But I am dipping my highly manicured little toe into political PR! I absolutely couldn’t say no when I saw the request was from the (truly) one and only, Holly Cairns.”

Kenny was a surprising choice to work with Cairns given his lack of experience in the political arena. What they have in common, however, is their love of combining the serious day job with glitzy turns in the limelight.



Rob Kenny

Cairns was undoubtedly pleased when Kenny landed her a seven-page spread with the *Sindo’s Life* magazine last July. It is unclear exactly what her Kildare Street colleagues made of the accompanying photoshoot – complete with the politician modelling various fashion looks and credits for makeup, hair and styling (see *The Phoenix* 13/7/23).

Later that week, Kenny organised an Evening with Holly Cairns in the South William Street bar and restaurant Farrier & Draper. The event involved Cairns being interviewed, in front of a 50-strong audience, by social media influencer James Kavanagh and Tropical Popical nail bar owner Andrea Horan.

The invitation had Kenny characteristically waxing lyrical. “Widely nicknamed ‘Ireland’s AOC’, Holly Cairns has resonated and connected with a new generation like no other Irish politician has,” he exclaimed. “She’s smart, liberal, eloquent and, as James

Kavanagh recently put it, ‘extremely sound’.”

While Cairns told the *Sindo* that the assembled audience would contain “Social Democrat members and supporters”, the photos published on *Evoke.ie* suggested the audience was dominated by young showbiz hacks and *Dancing with the Stars* dancers.

Despite the razzamatazz, the event generated a relatively small amount of coverage. Kenny and the “extremely sound” Cairns don’t appear to have worked together since.

In September 2022, Kenny signed up to the Irish arm of UK-based talent management agency Matchstick Group (see *The Phoenix* 2/9/22). Matchstick describes Kenny as one of Ireland’s “top male fashion and lifestyle

media personalities and influencers”. The agency enthusiastically contends that his “hilarious personality, quick wit and outgoing nature has led him to be booked for ‘big personality’ social jobs by brands such as Virgin Media, Samsung, Visa and Discover Ireland”.

According to the blurb, his eye for high fashion and men’s grooming has “led Rob to land multiple presenting positions over the years amongst many of Ireland’s top media brands, such as *Ireland AM*, Spin 1038, FM104 and RTÉ’s *Today* show”.

Recent brands that Kenny has produced paid content for on his own social media pages include Jose Cuervo tequila.

In 2022 Kenny started online “masterclasses” at €60 a head for those hoping to break into the PR industry. He certainly gave a free masterclass in strategic flattery when he wrote a piece for RTÉ’s website on the “most stylish Irish people to follow online”. Several Matchstick stablemates made the cut including Holly Carpenter, James Kavanagh, Greg O’Shea, Paddy Smyth, Niamh O’Sullivan, Shauna Lindsay and Lauren Bejaoui. The agency was co-founded by Vogue Williams, and Kenny included Vogue’s mum, Sandra, in the list.

Irish designer Audrey Hamilton made the cut, with a special nod to her luxury athleisure brand, Audrey Hamilton Apparel. Goldhawk is sure that the fact Kenny is the brand’s publicist is entirely coincidental – as is the fact that Kenny previously lived with Carpenter and Heffernan, while Kavanagh and Smyth are part of his posse of pals.

The canny Kenny also included various editors such as VIP Publishing fashion editor Zeda, *Image* fashion columnist Marianne Smyth, the *Irish Daily Mail*’s Corina Gaffey and *Sindo* beauty writer Triona McCarthy.

By including key media contacts, agency compatriots and clients in one flattering RTÉ article, Kenny shows that beneath the frothy persona lurks a more calculating business mind.



ROSS LEWIS'S RICH DISH

AS USUAL, there was plenty of speculation last month ahead of the Michelin restaurant awards that Dublin's swanky Chapter One might land a third star. That didn't end up on the menu but the good news for owner **Ross Lewis** is that he has scooped a rather bigger prize.

These days the Parnell Square restaurant is fronted by Finnish wonder-chef

Mickaël Viljanen but before his arrival in the kitchen in 2021, Lewis oversaw operations and landed the first star. (Viljanen



Ross Lewis

doubled the count in 2022.)

While Lewis had announced that he was going to "release equity" and it was reported that the two boys had "entered a business partnership... with the two chefs as co-owners", the split is not as even as it might sound.

Unsurprisingly, Lewis remains by quite some way the biggest player. Before the 2021 "equity release", the company behind Chapter One was Lindley Ltd – owned by Lewis through his

company Mindhaven Ltd, which had 50%, while the other half was held by Lewis personally.

In 2022, the business name 'Chapter One By Mickael Viljanen' was registered by a new company called Shenbob Ltd, where Lewis is listed as having no less than 95% of the shares and his fellow

director and 'co-owner' just 5%. Lindley, meanwhile, was wound up at the end of 2022, boasting net assets of a tasty €34m.

Now Mindhaven has been taken off the menu, with **Myles Kirby** in charge of the winding up. This time, 100% shareholder Ross is sitting on net assets of a three-star €1.1m.

As for dessert, the latest figures for the new Chapter One reveal the two directors shared emoluments of just on €1.5m in the year to April 30 last, including "directors pension" of €450,000. Yum, yum.

JOHN MOREHART, squire of the splendid Bellamont House and its 1,000 acres outside Cootehill, Co Cavan, has been getting busy again.

It will be recalled (see The Phoenix 8/3/24) that the loaded American lawyer has not been shy when it comes to objecting to issues in his neck of the woods. He had a rare setback in the High Court last month when attempting to stymie the latest expansion plans by the Abbot Ireland agri-food plant. Judge Richard Humphreys, however, refused to allow the Yank lodge his appeal late in the day.

Morehart also had a run-in with local businessman Ollie

Gibson, at one stage briefly forcing the latter to cease his boat tours on the lakes of the Bellamont estate.

Now Morehart has lobbed in a submission on plans by Monaghan County Council to develop the Dromore River Blueway, involving the building of infrastructure along the river, upgrading slipways and adding new pathways, a play area, picnic tables etc.

In his submission, Morehart welcomes the "concept" of a blueway but highlights the fact that the proposal "impacts on private land", noting that the council's "clear intention is to increase the number of visitors, boats and other recreational vehicles onto the lands and lakes in the area". The blueway will, he claims, impact on wildfowl sanctuary, which requires "undisturbed grazing lands" for the likes of the whooper swan, great crested grebe and lapwing.

Another local landowner who made a submission is Jack Tenison. He has expressed concern over the "wider consequences" of the proposed works and the "potential adverse impact".

PEDRO DE AZAMBUJA'S DOUBLE FAULTS

WITH AN asking price of no less than €5.5m, the Georgian Kilquade Hill House outside Greystones in Co Wicklow is one of the pricier piles to come on the market in recent times. According to the *Irish Times*, this "manageable sporting estate" on five acres was "totally transformed" over a three-year period with the help of "craftsmen from all over Europe". There were, however, a few hiccups along the way that the *IT* forgot to mention.

It should come as no surprise that the owner of Kilquade Hill House turns out to be someone with very deep pockets. Since November 2013 the property has been registered to the ultra-low-profile Portuguese-Brazilian moneybags, **Pedro Castrioto de Azambuja**.

While Pedro knows his way around, the classic car collector needs a learner plate when it comes to navigating the planning laws here. Happily, despite several run-ins with Wicklow County Council planners, the impressive Kilquade Hill House is today fully compliant with the regulations.

De Azambuja has submitted an awful lot of planning applications since 2013, with a number of these subsequently withdrawn for assorted reasons.

After a false start, the first

green light was given in March 2014 when the squire of Kilquade Hill House obtained permission for a couple of extensions to the existing 1820 house on the south and west elevations.

Six months later a new application was lodged for the construction of a mixture of one- and one-and-a-half-storey outbuildings, to include gym and spa facilities as well as a spacious garage for Pedro's "extensive classic car collection". (A dossier on the fleet was supplied to the planners to demonstrate the need for such a large structure).

Council planners, however, paid a visit for a site inspection and were less than impressed by the fact that extensive works had been carried out (and were ongoing), including the unauthorised demolition of a number of structures to facilitate the new planning application. This resulted in the plan being refused on the grounds that the work carried out represented "the consolidation of unauthorised development on this site".

Shortly before Christmas

2014 the irrepressible Pedro was back behind the wheel and lobbed in an application for retention of the demolition of "a large portion" of the house itself. Retention was also sought

for the new two-storey extension that was being constructed but not in accordance with the planning permission.

De Azambuja's advisers informed Wicklow Co Co that the demolished outbuildings had deteriorated to the extent that

the structural engineer advised demolition, while the 1970s extension that had been taken down was deemed "poorly constructed".

Moreover, it turned out that the applicant considered that the removal of the structures did not require planning permission: "Our client, who is a layman in these matters, mistakenly and understandably considered that the demolition of these buildings was exempted development."

The retention application eventually got the thumbs up and was followed by a successful 2015 application to retain the

demolition and replacement of the "decaying and obsolete" outbuildings.

That was not the end of the planning headaches, however. In its puff piece on Kilquade Hill House last week, the *IT* paid special attention to the tennis court, describing the Wicklow estate as "one of the few private houses in the country with a tennis court built to International Tennis Federation regulation size for competitions".

It turns out, however, that the floodlit court was installed without any planning permission.

This omission resulted in the council issuing an enforcement notice in July 2016, followed two years later by a planning application from Pedro for, yes, you've guessed it, retention of the floodlighting on six lampposts.

Not surprisingly, the light pollution impact on the two neighbouring houses to the south had not gone down well with **Denis** and **Oonagh Ryan** and **Joseph** and **Patricia O'Connor**, who objected to the application, which duly got the thumbs down.

The lights and poles have since been removed, so at last all is in order, as long as the new residents of Kilquade Hill House don't fancy playing tennis at night.



Kilquade Hill House



IRISH OSCAR PLOT SPOILERS

Despite all the hoopla around the successful Oscar run by **Cillian Murphy** in *Oppenheimer* and Element Pictures' *Poor Things*, the delirious hacks have managed to remain undistracted by inconvenient plot spoilers, such as the fight for long-suffering Irish performers to be given contracts on a par with UK and US actors working in Ireland on the very same productions backed by the taxpayer. The campaign, fronted by **Gerry O'Brien's** Equity union, just happens to be a cause that is strongly supported by one

Cillian Murphy.

Nor did anyone raise the impending Labour Court appeals relating to recent Workplace Relations Commission (WRC)

findings against big producer Metropolitan Films International Ltd in favour of around 30 members of bolshy **John Arkins's** Irish Film Workers Association. The total awards made against **Morgan O'Sullivan's** Metropolitan approached €½m and relate to the employment status of crew members who, O'Sullivan's company insisted, were never employed by it but rather by temporary so-called special purpose vehicles.

Interestingly, it's has been **Torlach Denihan's** Audiovisual Ireland division of Ibec, rather than **Susan Kirby's** Screen Producers Ireland, that has been representing Irish producers at the WRC. Coincidentally, Audiovisual Ireland is chaired by the one recent Oscar nominee,

Andrew Lowe of Element.

Denihan was straight out of the blocks following the Oscars with a plea for yet another escalation of the Section 481 tax breaks because the Brits have announced they will ramp up film and TV 'incentives' to a bumper 40% of spend: "We want to look closely at what the British have announced... At the end of the day, if the numbers stack up, that's where productions will go – either north of the border or across the sea."



Cillian Murphy

This is what former arts minister **John O'Donoghue** once referred to as a "Dutch auction" between countries.

And perhaps Lowe might have a quiet word with Denihan and advise him that *Conversations with Friends* was mostly filmed north of the border and *Poor Things* was filmed in Budapest exactly because that's how "the numbers stacked up" – long before the UK announced its planned giveaway.

NO SURPRISE to see well-connected former *VIP Publishing* boss *Vicki Notaro* attracting some high-level plugs for her upcoming debut novel, *Reality Check*. These include the likes of fellow Penguin imprint author *Paul Howard* ("Absolutely hilarious") and *Sarah 'Aisling' Breen* ("Escapism at its finest"). *Breen* is formerly of *Stellar* magazine, part of the *VIP* stable.

Reality Check readers will encounter *Portia Daniels*, who "has the perfect man (hot TV producer *Jason*), perfect apartment (in *Lower Manhattan*)" etc, etc – at least until "*Jason* drops a bombshell". You get the picture.

The least surprising plugger for *Reality Check* is surely from *Notaro's* pal and fellow Penguin scribbler *Marian Keyes*, whom *Notaro* has described as: "My beloved, my absolute favourite, the *Queen of Ireland*... I love her and I always will."

The admiration is mutual and *Keyes*, who is busy promoting her own new buke, *My Favourite Mistake*, has given *Reality Check* the thumbs-up, announcing: "I horsed through it!"



WRECKING BALLS-UP

BARRY CONNELL'S

short-priced ante-post favourite for Cheltenham's Arkle Chase, *Marine Nationale*, was ruled out of Cheltenham following his flop at the Dublin Racing Festival last month. Of course, he also has *William Munny* – "the best bumper horse in Ireland" – but left the horse at home last week, earmarking him for the Punchestown Festival.

While the latter horse's regular amateur rider, **Finn Maguire**, has been impressive when aboard *William Munny*, the same could not be said of his ride on **Luke Comer's** *Eskimo Komet* at Dundalk earlier this month.

Maguire was one of 12 riders suspended for allowing the **Paul Mulligan**-trained *Wrecking*

Ball Paul (Mulligan being a crane driver as well as training in his spare time) an unassailable lead in the Peter K 'Hits the Big 50' qualified riders race at Dundalk.

Owned by the Crane Crew Syndicate (all the members have worked together on the redevelopment of St James's Hospital), there were jubilant scenes when the horse passed the post 15 lengths to the good of the **Harry Swan**-ridden favourite, *Riyami*.

Wrecking Ball Paul led from the start and pulled well clear of the chasing pack, led initially by **Aine O'Connor** on *Dark Voyager*. O'Connor is the co-ordinator of Horse Racing Ireland's equip department (which aims to attract new people to horseracing and breeding) and was recently to the forefront of the agency's jockey



Barry Connell

coach qualification courses. It looks like all 12 riders could do with some intensive jockey tuition from the newly qualified coaches.

When interviewed by the stewards, O'Connor said she knew the winner was a long way clear but her mount "got unbalanced and could not go any

faster". Swan stated that he had ridden his horse to instructions but, knowing the leader was so far in front, had "shouted to the other riders to close the gap".

The stewards found the riders to be in breach of the riding rules but all concerned have appealed the decision.

THE IRISH Horseracing Regulatory Board and the British Horseracing Authority (BHA) recently joined forces in an anti-doping initiative. Citing "out-of-competition testing" as a critical component of any strategy, tests will be performed through joint operations in Ireland and Britain.

One area sure to attract attention is the cost to taxpayers, given that Irish personnel will be conducting tests across the Irish Sea. The first action here saw 120 Irish horses entered for the Cheltenham festival tested in 14 training premises last month.

Presumably, the partnership will be less controversial than the BHA's debacle at Southwell racecourse this month, when Irish jockey *Kieran O'Neill* was wrongly deemed to have failed a saliva and sweat drug test, resulting in him forfeiting all his booked rides. The subsequent urine test returned negative, allowing O'Neill to return to action the following day.

MULLINS'S ROUGH DIAMOND

While **Patrick Mullins's** victory aboard *Jasmine De Vaux* provided his father, **Willie**, with his 100th Cheltenham success, his faith in *Ashroe Diamond* in the Mares Hurdle proved to be misplaced.

Before the meeting, a bullish Patrick declared that "no mare had yet beaten her over hurdles", adding that "I'm counting on *Ashroe* to prove a diamond in the Mare's Hurdle".

Racing in the colours of Blue Bloods Racing, a syndicate of 134 members of An Garda Síochána, the mare started as second favourite.

Having led at the fourth hurdle, *Ashroe Diamond* weakened quickly and was pulled up, leaving the hapless Blue Bloods rather red-faced.

The horse was subsequently drug tested, confirming that nothing untoward had occurred.

Her stable companion, *Lossiemouth*, went on to a comfortable victory and was greeted in the winner's enclosure by her minted owner, **Rich Ricci**, where once again his flowing mane, rather than flamboyant suits, was the talk of those gathered around the enclosure.

Craic & Codology ... Craic & Codology ... Craic & Codology ... Craic & Codology

THE IRISH TIMES

Referenda fiasco a stepping stone to other fiascos

Amid the political fall-out surrounding the recent referenda, the taoiseach has repeated his view that he does not expect coalition members revealing they voted against the amendments to adversely affect relations between the partners.

"The fiasco was a complete success in that it reflected people power at its best," said Mr Varadkar. "The results show that ordinary people can decide for themselves about confusing



campaigns and gimmicky moves to make voting

coincide with International Women's Day."

A Fianna Fáil spokesperson was equally upbeat, saying: "Micheál Martin has already dealt with this matter in a clear and transparent manner by pretending it didn't really happen – which is how he deals with all problems."

Meanwhile, when asked by reporters if she had any personal regrets about how she voted, senator Lisa Chambers said: "Well, yes and no."

Paschal Donohoe's IMF stitch-up

There was disappointment throughout Europe last night at the news that Paschal Donohoe had appeared to rule himself out of the running for the top IMF job, just because he had been ruled out by the IMF.

Said one shocked journalist: "A reliable source near the top of Fine Gael told me 'Mr Donohoe has a razor-sharp mind and it's a wonder that he has never been taoiseach!'"

In a statement, the minister

praised the current IMF chief, Kristalina Georgieva, saying: "She has done an excellent job – despite the fact that she knows so little about complex financial matters compared with me, myself and I."

"My focus is on continuing to serve with distinction at the heart of Government. And, of course, it's only right that I give way to some other time-server to be humiliated whenever they apply for the next cushy EU job."

'LESSONS LEARNED FROM IRELAND REFERENDUMS', SAYS PUTIN

RUSSIAN PRESIDENT VLADIMIR PUTIN HAS SAID HE DREW INSPIRATION FROM THE IRISH GOVERNMENT'S RECORD DEFEAT IN RECENT REFERENDA TO HELP SECURE HIS LANDSLIDE ELECTION VICTORY.



"We did all we could to avoid a similar fate. So, sometimes in a free and fair election, the people need a friendly nudge, if you will, from a burly, heavily armed man at the polling station to remind them

how they really want to vote. After all, we don't want anyone ending up like Ms Lisa Chambers, ticking 'Nyet' when they helped remind me of just how thoroughly you can be humiliated when a decision is left in the hands of the people.

how they really want to vote. After all, we don't want anyone ending up like Ms Lisa Chambers, ticking 'Nyet' when they helped remind me of just how thoroughly you can be humiliated when a decision is left in the hands of the people.

In recognition of Cillian Murphy's greatness

By All Hacks

Not since Cú Chulainn single-handedly routed all comers in the 41AD Champions League Handball Olympics or since Bono brought peace to Northern Ireland has an Irishman reached the Herculean heights now



attained by our very own Cillian Murphy. (Excellent start - Ed.)

Admirable as America's glory

was when it put a man on the moon, it took three of them to do it. But it took just one man from our lovely little speck on the outer fringes of the European landmass not only to reach the stars but to outshine them! (Pure poetry! Keep going - Ed.)

The enormity of this humble

hero's achievement means that every man, woman and child, including those not yet conceived, in this country will be inspired towards greatness. Irish doctors will cure the incurable. Time travel will be achieved. The children's hospital will be built! (Unbelievable stuff, take Tuesday off - Ed)

And let us not forget the genius of Ireland's film industry that delivered to us, as did a stable in Bethlehem once deliver another beacon of hope, the wonder of Cillian Murphy made flesh. Surly canonisation cannot be far...

(Continued inside and for a few more months.)



AFTER THEIR DISASTROUSLY EXECUTED SCHEME WAS UNDONE BY TWO WICKED LITTLE LETTERS, 'N', 'O', THIS MOTLEY CREW ARE LEFT TO PICK UP THE PIECES AND TRY SOLVE THE MYSTERY OF JUST WHO'LL TAKE THE BLAME FOR THIS HUMILIATION.

PUTIN'S RUSSIA VOTES



Willie Oh Dear rails against woke

As one of the longest serving moustac – er, members of Dáil Éireann, it saddens me to see my mighty Fianna Fáil bow to the woe-ful woke agenda with a multifarious mix of hate bills, greenways and homespun referendums!



them in the bar with not a knife in a back to be seen. And I doubt any of them would recognise a builder coming to their back door at a quarter to midnight for 'discussions'! Not one of the current party have ever had a brown envelope in their arse pocket, let alone be threatened with jail. It's time we dropped this woke malarkey and got back to what Fianna Fáil has always been good at... (That's enough Oh Dear for now – Ed.)

What is happening is nothing short of neglect turning to tragedy! Where is our party's tradition and culture? I see colleagues making grandiose speeches and promises without a finger crossed behind their backs! I see

What think-pieces tell us about referendum analysis

In the rush to understand the overwhelming No vote in the recent referendums, there has been a glaring oversight of key factors, most notably the inherent Catholic conservatism of the current liberal epoch. In his influential post-modernist text, *Hopelessly Pretentious*, US academic Trevor Trendy contends that modern progressive politics is mired in psychosomatic didacticism.



such points have merit. But there are other factors at play in the current hellscape of recondite post-woke neo-Maoism. In a recent *New Yorker* piece, respected journalist Mike Hack argued that in 21st century Ireland, post-Dada rhetoric had been usurped by pre-Raphaelite absurdism. As the struggle continues to decipher such analysis, there can be no doubt of the imminent emergence of retrograde futurism.

Certainly, as I – and those other *Irish Times* hacks I'm leaving behind – try desperately to explain the referendum results,

See inside for more takes from Batty Sheridan, Goona Bullally etc.

IRELAND COLLECT TROPHY

The Irish rugby team recently received delivery of the Six Nations trophy, which sports-writers everywhere are now

considering an annual guarantee. Details of next year's collection date and time are to be confirmed.

HARRIS IN FIRING LINE

Garda Commissioner Drew Harris has found himself embroiled in a new row, after a 24-hour period elapsed with no fresh Garda controversies. With no gardaí suspended for removing bikes from their local station or for any other offence, calls have grown for Harris's resignation as the force threatens to implode due to an unprecedented period of stability.



"We are in danger of looking like a competent police force here," said one Garda insider. "However, the message to the public is to rest assured the usual series of controversies and debacles will be resumed shortly. We remain determined to avoid the kind of competency and efficiency that might give the wrong impression of Ireland having a proper 21st-century police force."

New royal photo drama

The royal family are at the centre of fresh uproar after a heavily doctored image was sent to photo agencies. Suspensions were aroused after it was noticed that the picture showed Kate Middleton and her children on the moon.



unfortunately ended up showing us on the moon. "There has also been a photo doing the rounds of us in a heavily guarded South American compound, but that was due to an everyday mix up involving various intelligence agencies, the American and British governments, and North Korea. "Hopefully that puts an end to these outlandish conspiracy theories."

IRISH WIN BIG AT OSCARS



And the award for worst actress goes to...

Lisa Chambers in *Referendum!*

THE ADVENTURES OF FESTY O'SEMTEX



Created by Phoenix 3/22/24

Craic & Codology ... Craic & Codology ...



STAKEKNIFE REPORT UPDATE

by Hans Wringing

The bombshell report into the activities of British Army double-agent Freddie Scappaticci, code-named Stakeknife, has uncovered widespread wrongdoing linking him to countless murders during the 1980s.



“But now that Freddie has sadly passed away, there is simply insufficient evidence to prosecute anyone. So we can consider this tragic matter closed forever and get on with forgetting about the whole unfortunate business.”

whole unfortunate business.”

REPORT FINDINGS (IN FULL)

1. This must never happen again
2. Scap wasn't a terribly nice man
3. British duplicity at every turn
4. This must never happen again

“The notorious Stakeknife case shows us just how dreadful things were back then and that something really should have been done at the time,” said Chief Constable Jon Boutcher, author of the €50m inquiry.

HARRIS FACING CALLS TO GO AFTER LATEST GAFFE



Dr Leo's guide to measles



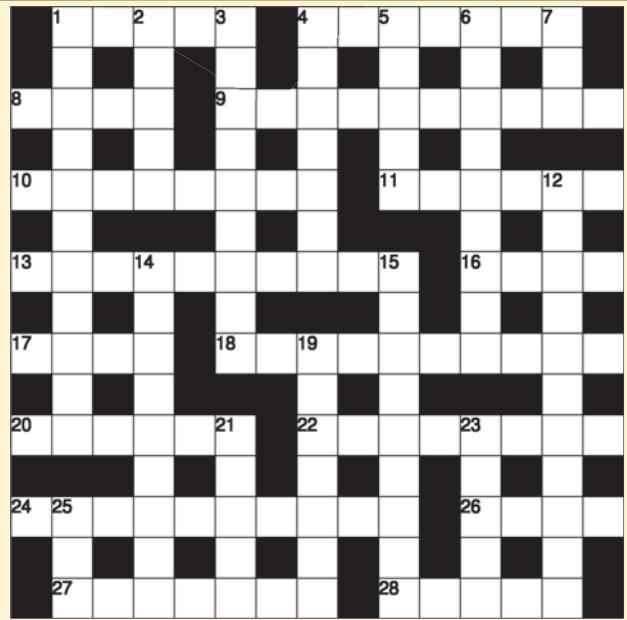
As a doctor I'm often asked to explain complex medical conditions in a simple-to-understand manner. This week I'll be talking about measles and the devastating

impact it can have on political leaders. Measles attack the body in the same way that the average Fianna Fáil politician attacked yours truly after the recent referendum. Like the odious virus, these Soldiers of Destiny really know how to get under your skin and leave you looking red-faced. Other symptoms include whooping about being on the losing side of something and causing a tremendous pain in the posterior for your coalition partners. The best method to combat this dreadful affliction is to just ignore the terrible noise and hope you'll get your reward in heaven or, in my case, the European Commission.

Scribble Box



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Crossword by Procrustes

ACROSS

- 1 Seriously bogged down like a doctor with a degree of pent-up anger inside. (5)
- 4 What Poppy did when Battle of the Somme ended with blood all round. (7)
- 8 Disturbance in the country around Vientiane – it's as well. (4)
- 9 Such greeting is of just medium value in a radio or TV broadcasting hub. (10)
- 10 Beside which, it'd be like giving a person in charge of the music at a rave a little money. (8)
- 11 After last month, drawback is it's a definition of fraud or duplicity. (6)
- 13 Neck-warmer has no right to lead IT file holder ever higher up outside of building. (10)
- 16 Trust the fact that losing the head was never a problem for pre-Iron Age Homo sapiens. (4)
- 17 Record the fact that explorer is the first to find new place, thing or fact? Over and out! (4)
- 18 Type who omits abuse of any substance is crazy to be one of only two to keep his vowels in order. (10)
- 20 Have a new piece of equipment fitted, coming from Dublin's Tallaght area. (6)
- 22 There's a real chap in it but it's really more like one of the Na'vi out of Avatar. (8)
- 24 Stop Old Rob going crazy for hunting, shooting, bear-baiting, cock-fighting, dog-fighting and the like. (10)
- 26 BI is not what you take for your soft tissues and organs. (4)
- 27 Those with flocks to attend to find a way through the mountains around a small hill. (7)
- 28 Send message in the old way that League leaders are following taxi. (5)

DOWN

- 1 It's a curse how father, uncle or brother say the words, but not mother, aunt or sister. (11)
- 2 In famous carnival city, visitor from Berlin is positive the wine is not local. (5)
- 3 How strange enema's odd effect has on Shakespearean character who meets a sticky end. (9)
- 4 Did not come in time in bed and sent apologies several days after they ought to have been sent. (7)
- 5 Went for leading troublemaker in important opinion piece by non-staffer in newspaper. (5)
- 6 Having encountered a fishy type, I conclude it's worth several of them in the hand! (9)
- 7 Find there's a pair of them in the beginning of the first part of the small intestine. (3)
- 12 In US, cocaine abuse is viewed with a certain lack of concern, a certain nonchalance. (11)
- 14 Ace of suit being played by flippant one who is one of only two to keep his vowels in order. (9)
- 15 By involving him, curate develops an unhealthy fever. (9)
- 19 Get to Hogwarts and similar places in trains. Or coaches. (7)
- 21 Rope found in Dallas' Southfork Ranch would go well with JR's cowboy hat! (5)
- 23 Back up article on familiar old shilling and how it led to him being a rich and powerful man. (5)
- 25 Struck with open hand, then sped away to run just once around the track. (3)

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LAST ISSUE'S WINNER: Declan McAteer, Ashford, Co Wicklow



Gene Murtagh's strange strategy at Kingspan

SHORTLY BEFORE the company's latest PR debacle at the hands of the EU, Kingspan CEO Gene Murtagh announced a strategy involving the commitment of €750m to enter the American roofing and waterproofing market. This could well prove another of the follies that have characterised some of the big moves by the Murtagh family-dominated insulation group. Of more immediate concern to investors, however, must be the imminent report of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry, which could further damage the already underwhelming share price. It looks like the impact of the London tragedy on Kingspan has already been around €10bn.

If it is the Kingspan strategy to spend big bucks to push expansion in the roofing and waterproofing sector over the next five years, it is difficult to understand why the company would not continue to focus on the areas where it has the biggest sales presence – the UK and continental Europe. Kingspan's market penetration in North America is actually tiny.

Even if Murtagh is right to set about building a big new product base in the US, a country where it is not a leading supplier, why announce it?

He says Kingspan is going to deliver on the strategy by building its own plant and courtesy of mergers and acquisitions. Clearly, it is not a good

idea to go on record about a plan to shell out €34bn in North America before approaching target companies.

Another curiosity concerning Kingspan is that Murtagh has moved in virtually the opposite direction to fellow Irish multinationals by abandoning its London listing, while Flutter and CRH have exited the Dublin market in favour of New York.

Being quoted solely on the Euronext market in Dublin at a time when the company is targeting US expansion makes the strategy all the more odd.

In the 2022 annual report, roofing and waterproofing accounted for just 2% of group sales and 1% of profits, so this area of its business is clearly limited and more suited to expansion on a staged basis. Geographically, Europe accounted for 73% of Kingspan's turnover, while

the Americas (north and south) together accounted for 21%.

The more obvious path forward for Kingspan is not in buying conventional roofing and waterproofing businesses but rather developing roof products with built-in solar panels as part of an integrated structure and single installation offering.



Kingspan has only just developed an integrated option, incorporating solar panels into its QuadCore insulated panels, which it calls PowerPanel. It has arrived here rather late in the day but this PowerPanel engineering innovation forms part of the group's insulated panel division rather than its roofing and waterproofing division.

Kingspan should be ahead of the curve here, with solar-embedded insulated roofing panels as a way to achieve the twin objectives of energy conservation and renewable energy generation. The company should clearly be planning to spend big bucks on developing its integrated solar insulated panels rather than acquiring conventional roofing companies.

It is worrying that, on a like-for-like basis, underlying sales last year actually fell 7%. Even after



Gene Murtagh

including significant sales from acquisitions, total sales were still down 3% to €8.1bn and of most concern is the fact that Kingspan's core insulated panels division saw sales drop by 9%.

On the trading profit front, despite the fall-off in sales, on a like-for-like basis the underlying figures showed a surprising 3% increase in 2023. Including contributions from acquisitions, total group trading profits were up a moderate 5% to €833m, which reflected an increase of 80 basis points in trading margin to 10.8%, compared with 10% in the previous year.

The biggest acquisition Kingspan made last year was that of a German roofing and waterproofing company, CaPlast, for a total cost of €87m.

Another €139m was spent on other, smaller acquisitions in Portugal, France, Uruguay and the Baltics on the insulation panel side, and on Hempflax in Germany and Thor in Australia on the insulation board side of the business.

The group increased its existing stake in Nordic Waterproofing to 6.8% at a cost of €22m, to bring its holding up to 30.9% and triggering a mandatory offer, one that has been rejected. It will be interesting to see how this partial acquisition works out.

Kingspan's significant cashflow was well in excess of its acquisition costs, such that it was able to reduce its previous year's €1.5bn net debt to just under €1bn net

debt in December 2023. The group, however, is still carrying huge firepower for acquisitions thanks to the private placings of loan notes for €1.6bn and a revolving credit facility of €800m. This means Kingspan could spend €1.4bn in cash if the right acquisition came up.

PERFORMANCE

An interesting move last year was Murtagh's "informal" approach to a similar-sized American insulation company, Carisle, which is capitalised at €16bn. Presumably, the thinking was that – just as Smurfit Kappa Group is proceeding with its mainly paper acquisition of the larger American WestRock operation – this would be a way of backing Kingspan into a main quotation on the New York Stock Exchange. The deal, however, did not get very far.

Kingspan's performance last year was disappointing when compared to recent outturns. Sales in 2021, admittedly driven by significant acquisitions, were up a whopping 42% to €6.5bn and trading profits an even larger 50% to €753m, to return trading margins of 11.6%.

In 2022, sales bounded ahead (again helped by acquisitions) by a chunky 28% to €8.3bn, although

Continued on page 24

Reference the Market Abuse Regulations 2005, nothing published by Moneybags in this section is to be taken as a recommendation, either implicit or explicit, to buy or sell any of the shares mentioned.

Stocks & Shares

Rising Cairn Homes shares still undervalued

THE HOUSING crisis continues to dominate politics but, were it not for the raising of almost €1bn in equity between Cairn Homes and Glenveagh, the current state of affairs would be an awful lot worse. In particular, Michael Stanley's Cairn Homes delivered 1,741 new homes last year, up from 1,526 in 2022, bringing the total units it has built since the company was set up in 2015 to 7,500, while the target for this year is 2,200. The market has been reacting well to Cairn's performance but the share price still does not reflect the company's potential.

Cairn acquired large plots of development land around Dublin, which contained sites for 17,000 dwelling units that Stanley appears to have been trying to deliver as fast as he can, despite the not insignificant challenges associated with the Irish planning system, legal challenges, road engineering, water connections etc.

When releasing the latest Cairn results earlier this month, Stanley let fly, highlighting the huge impact on the economy of the shortage of housing.

He commented: "We are an affluent society but this feels like the mid-80s" – a period that was blighted by mass immigration.

He also noted that home-ownership rates among the key 25-39-year-old age group have fallen dramatically to 7% compared with 22% in 2011.

Stanley is well aware that last year's completion rate of 32,695 housing units is totally inadequate and way off the Housing Commission's estimate of a required 42,000-62,000 new homes completed per annum.

This is not just an Irish problem, however. In the UK only 210,000 houses were built last year, well short of the target of 300,000, although the difference is levels of affordability.

Across the Irish Sea, the ratio of average house price to average income has risen from 5.92 in 2003 to the current 8.28. Here, the multiple is worse, at just on 10 times, which puts houses out of reach for most buyers.

SOLUTIONS

Although the crisis is very evident, realistic solutions are notably thin on the ground, as is imagination.

The Government should be procuring 10,000 houses a year but not by direct build, where the costs get out of control. Supply could also be boosted by the importation of completed housing

pods from Eastern Europe, where completed two-bed units can be bought for €100,000.

Another option would be to loosen planning regulations to allow for greater intensification in city centres – as is the case in Houston, Texas, for example, where all the back-up facilities such as water and power are delivered easily and promptly, with average house prices in that city at \$300,000.

Cairn lashed out €1.5bn to build up the company's 17,000-site landbank after raising €720m in the 2015 IPO, topping this up to €900m over the following few years.

Stanley, however, has often



been frustrated in his plans, such as sitting on the €107m high-profile 9-acre site he bought at Montrose in Donnybrook for five years.

Planning permission was finally granted last summer for a development of 808 apartments, although a hotel and 80 additional units were excluded under appeal, despite the appeals board inspector recommending that permission be granted for the full scheme. But Cairn has yet to lay one block on this big development.

Nevertheless, Stanley was able to deliver 1,741 completed dwellings last year, generating sales of €667m, a rise 8% on 2022. On the back of this, Cairn generated a 10% increase in operating profits to €113m and pushed trading margins up by 40 basis points to 22.1%. This increased earnings per share by 12% to €12.7c.

Stanley has managed to achieve this outturn on the back



Michael Stanley

of controlling total assets of just over €1bn, financed mainly by equity of €757m and debt of €148m. After paying interest, last year Cairn was left with pre-tax profits of €99m, up only 6% on the €93m turned in for 2022. This means that on a capital employed of €900m, the return generated was an underwhelming 11%.

This is pretty underwhelming considering all the work involved in delivering finished housing. Stanley could simply opt to sell off fully serviced sites with planning permission rather than building out the units but he can forge ahead with the extensive building programme because of Cairn's huge equity base of €757m.

Other house builders, apart from the listed Glenveagh, have to rely on the risk-averse pillar banks

to buy and develop sites.

This leaves most builders reliant on secondary funders that charge around 12% – a level that would leave Cairn unable to even cover the costs.

Stanley is planning to increase Cairn's housing output by a hefty 26% to 2,200 dwellings in the current year. On the back of this higher level of activity, he hopes to achieve significant efficiency benefits across the group, targeting an operating profit of €145m. If achieved, that would boost the return on capital employed to over 15%.

SOCIAL HOUSING

Cairn is currently working with the Land Development Agency, approved housing bodies and local authorities to provide

Continued on page 24



'The product is fair trade, but I'm on zero hours.'

Stocks & Shares

Kingspan continued from page 22

trading margins fell off by 160 basis points to 10%. This still left operating profits up 10% at €833m.

In comparison, last year's results underwhelmed, with the group's core insulation panels division recording a 9% downturn in sales to €4.7bn. Surprisingly, the division delivered an increase in its trading profit contribution of 5% to €574m, while trading margins actually increased 160 basis points to 12.2% boosted by lower energy costs.

M A R G I N S

On the insulation board side, turnover was likewise down 8% to €1.5bn. In this case Murtagh, couldn't maintain margins, with trading profits here falling 12% to €145m and trading margins dropping 50 basis points to 9.5%. These were impacted by Murtagh having to reduce prices.

Despite acquisitions in its so-called Light, Air + Water division, which includes Kingspan's attempt to get into areas such as natural daylighting, sales actually fell 2% to just under €1bn. This division returned trading profits up 16% to €79m, while trading margins were up 120 basis points from 8.1%, still significantly under the group's average.

On the roofing and waterproofing side, the acquisitions of Ondura and Derbigum in 2022 were followed by the €87m

acquisition in April last year of the German CaPlast operation. Sales in the division more than doubled to €493m and trading profits jumped to €28m. Trading margins, however, hit just 5.7%, again well under the group average.

In Kingspan's raised flooring division – which mainly is dominated by Tate in the US and Hewetson in the UK – sales were only up 5% to €380m but trading profits increased by 19% to €51m, returning trading margins of 13.4%, the highest in the group.

Kingspan's €250,000 pa chairman, Jost Massenberg – who has been *in situ* for two years and had joined the board in February 2018 – has not overly impressed the market and he should surely have seen to it that heads rolled after damaging evidence emerged from the Grenfell Tower Inquiry.

He also should have intervened before Murtagh's embarrassing €5m Formula One sponsorship with Mercedes, which was "mutually" ended a week after the deal was announced.

Presumably Massenberg is onside with Murtagh's current plan to build a big plant in Lviv in Ukraine, where the company has acquired 120 acres and intends to spend €250m on a so-called "Building Technology Campus".

No doubt Murtagh got a good deal on the land but, with the war with Russia looking to be far from over, this commitment seems premature.

The Kingspan share price has never really recovered from the Grenfell Tower disaster and,



Jost Massenberg

despite its progress over the last couple of years, the shares are still significantly off the €105 at the beginning of 2021. While they have recovered from €47 in October 2022, today the shares are still trading at only €83, which is just on 20% off the 2021 level.

At this price, Kingspan stock is on a respectable trailing price/earnings multiple of 24.

At €83, the company is capitalised at a little over €15bn. Without the Grenfell factor, it is likely that Kingspan would have

maintained its 40 times pre-disaster p/e multiple, which would mean that, on the current higher earnings base, the company would be capitalised at just on €27bn.

In other words, it looks like the impact of the Grenfell Tower fire on Kingspan has been of the order of €10bn-plus. And now there is a potential €800m fine hanging over the company courtesy of Margaret Vestager.

The headaches are mounting for Gene Murtagh and his hapless shareholders.

Cairn Homes continued from page 23

social and affordable homes. These schemes include the likes of Seven Mills in Clonburris in west Co Dublin, where Cairn is building 318 homes; Parkside, which is in Dublin 13 (368 homes); and Piper's Square in Dublin 11 (598 new homes).

P L A N N I N G

Elsewhere, the John Reynolds-chaired Cairn is working on 17 sites, including a new one at Sorrell Wood in Blessington, Co Wicklow, and Bayly in Douglas, Cork. The company is also opening new phases in existing developments such as Nyne Park in Kilkenny, Castletroy in Limerick, Mercer Vale in Cherrywood, Swanbrook in Navan, and Citywest in Dublin 24.

Significantly, Cairn obtained planning permission last year for a total of only 2,350 new homes. Stanley cannot keep increasing housing output at pace if the com-

pany is unable to secure significantly more planning permissions than house completions.

At the same time, the CEO has to keep an eye on his shareholders and is finally paying out 50% of earnings via dividends of €42m – which is giving shareholders a return on equity of only 5.5%. This is an awful lot better than in the past but is certainly nothing to shout about.

Despite the progress Cairn has made since it was established in 2015, it is hard for those shareholders who bought at the peak of €2 a share in December 2017 to celebrate.

The shares sank to a dreadful low of 50c in April 2020, having almost halved on foot of the Covid-19 pandemic. They have since recovered well, however, more than doubling from the price at the beginning of last year. Moreover, in the last four months, Cairn shares have jumped by 30% to the current €1.56.

This leaves the shares on a trailing price/earnings multiple of 12 and, on the basis of the CEO's guidance for 2024, a prospective



John Reynolds

p/e of 10. This is why the share price has performed so well over the last number of months.

If it turns out that Cairn can continue to grow while increasing trading margins at the same time, the shares will look like great value to investors.

One concern that investors will have relates to the general election that is now in the offing and whether Sinn Féin gets into government, at least partly on the back of a promise to try to drive house prices down to an average €300,000.



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PUNCHESTOWN FESTIVAL

PUNCHESTOWN
2024
Festival



As with tradition, the Punchestown Festival kicks off on the final Tuesday of April, which this year means a true spring festival from Tuesday April 30 - Saturday May 4.



Fastorslow winner of the 2023 Irish Gold Cup, Punchestown Festival.

You Spoke...They listened... Change for Punchestown 2024

THE Punchestown team commit to progress each season but this year have introduced some dynamic changes to the five-day sport, corporate and social highlight. The four-step plan has evolved from customer feedback, business analysis, market research and consultation.

EARLIER START TIMES

The first two days of the 2024 Punchestown Festival will revert to a more traditional 2.30pm start, which means the final race will go to post at 6.30pm. Thursday and Friday remain at a 3.40pm start time with Saturday staying with 2.30pm start.

REDUCED TICKET PRICES

No deals, no promos, no gimmicks, just great value pre-booked tickets from just €30 - €40 for top-class racing action and entertainment. It will cost more to pay on the day. The new €35 Choice Ticket allows entry on either Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday. Group discounts available on pre-booked tickets, and seniors and students concessions are available on the day. As always, children under 14 years can attend the races for free.

REFRESHED LAYOUT

There will be an improved customer experience as the entire Punchestown site will be optimised. There will be no separate traditional 'reserved enclosure', however, the same great bars, shops, music venues and viewing lawns, outside the hospitality areas, will be available to all.

ENHANCED AND IMPROVED RACE DAY EXPERIENCE

This point is neither new nor dynamic as the pursuit of excellent customer experience is an ongoing process with Punchestown. The enhancement of the race day visit will go hand-in-hand with the new layout. The Punchestown demographic is a diverse one, with varied tastes and requirements for a memorable customer experience. Alongside catering and service partners, Punchestown aims to deliver a selection of great quality food and beverage options with efficient, friendly service in comfortable surroundings.

Conor O'Neill, CEO, Punchestown, explains the theory behind the proposed plan: "If we're not improving, we're going backwards – it's as simple as that – and in the current climate that is not something any business can afford to do. Each year we commit to making two or three improvements to either service, facilities or both. Customer feedback, good and bad, is what shapes policy and strategy and we look forward to our customers supporting and embracing what we've done."

BOODLES ADDS SPARKLE TO FESTIVAL FRIDAY

A major new addition to the festival sponsorship line-up is the introduction of luxury jeweller Boodles as sponsor of festival Friday feature race the Champion Hurdle. This three-year deal takes in the €300,000 Grade 1 Boodles Champion Hurdle and celebrates 20 years of business in the Boodles Grafton Street Store. Along with the race, the

Boodles Bar on the private suite level will showcase some of the award-winning collection including the recently launched horse racing themed Lucky Collection. Whilst Boodles is currently involved with Cheltenham, Chester and York race courses in the UK, its Punchestown agreement is its exclusive Irish activation.

HOMECOMING OF CHAMPIONS AND UK RECRUITMENT DRIVE

Fresh from the Cotswolds, the Irish raiders return from Cheltenham with an impressive bounty of 18 wins – half of which were landed by the record-breaking Willie Mullins. This result feeds nicely into Irish racing's grand finale at Punchestown as the homecoming of champions, which will feature many of the stars from throughout the season all vying for a piece of the €3.4m prize fund.

In a refreshed bid to attract more UK-based runners, the Punchestown team launched The Full Circle Series with five UK and five Irish qualifiers in recent months. Aimed at mid-level hurdlers, the Full Circle Final is worth travelling for, with €60,000 on offer on the opening day of the festival.

IT'S A SELL OUT!

The hospitality team are operating a waiting list for festival hospitality packages. It is an ever-changing landscape, so please make sure to register your interest by email on hospitality@punchestown.com or call +353 45 897704.

www.punchestown.com

Cheltenham Gold Cup winner *Galopin Des Champs*

A Feast of Jump Racing

Tuesday April 30 - Saturday May 4

Once again, the Cheltenham Festival last week rubber-stamped Ireland's prowess in training the finest racehorses – tremendous news for Punchestown Racecourse, where vigorous preparations are under way for the upcoming five-day festival to conclude the season.



CHAMPION trainer Willie Mullins led the charge at Prestbury Park with nine winners and has spoken frequently of late about not being afraid to run his horses regularly in the interest of providing the public with a chance to see the stars of the jumps game perform.

That means that *Galopin Des Champs*, who earned comparisons with the great *Kauto Star* after making it back-to-back triumphs in the Cheltenham Gold Cup, and *State Man*, the Champion Hurdle victor, will both conclude their busy campaigns at the Punchestown jamboree.

Twelve months ago, the Cheltenham 1-2, *Galopin Des Champs* and *Bravemansgame*, renewed rivalries in the Ladbrokes Gold Cup but had their colours lowered by *Fastorslow*.

Fastorslow proved the result was no fluke back at Punchestown in November, when landing the John Durkan Memorial, but the Sean and Bernardine Mulryan-owned eight-year-old, trained on the Curragh by Martin Brassil, had to give best when they crossed swords in the Irish Gold Cup at Leopardstown's Dublin Racing Festival in February.

Unfortunately, *Fastorslow* unseated JJ Slevin too far out at Cheltenham for us to know if he had another trick up his sleeve but Brassil has confirmed the Ladbrokes Gold Cup as a target once more.

Eventual runner-up *Gerri Colombe* put in a career-best performance in chasing *Galopin Des Champs* home and trainer Gordon Elliott has suggested that this will be the destination if his charge is to run again this term.

And fairytale horse *Hewick*, purchased for just €850, is another likely contender,

with trainer 'Shark' Hanlon having confirmed the Ladbrokes Gold Cup as an intended destination after the King George winner takes in a trip to Aintree.

State Man has only been beaten once in 12 completed outings since arriving at Closutton from France and that was to *Constitution Hill* in the 2023 Cheltenham Champion Hurdle. Marie and Joe Donnelly's winning machine is jockey Paul Townend's favourite horse and it is easy to see why as the seven-year-old eschews drama and just gets the job done.

With *Constitution Hill* falling foul of illness for a second time in a couple of months, the son of *Doctor Dino* cantered to a far more comfortable victory over *Irish Point* than the one-and-a-half-length margin might suggest.

He is five from five at Punchestown, bagging Grade 1s at the last two festivals and will be the one they all have to beat as he bids to repeat last year's success in the Boodles Champion Hurdle.

Irish Point justified the decision of trainer Gordon Elliott and owner Robcour to redirect their talented six-year-old to the two-mile test, having initially favoured a tilt at the Cheltenham Stayers' Hurdle, and he may well have another go at the champ, along with *Zarak The Brave* and *Colonel Mustard*.

That call was made easier by the Elliott/Robcour tandem having *Teahupoo* as favourite for the three-mile examination and he duly delivered as expected. That sets him up for a stab at the Ladbrokes Champion Stayers' Hurdle, in which he finished a three-length fourth behind *Klassical Dream* last term.

Captain Guinness was among the most popular winners all week at Cheltenham, finally earning a Grade 1 triumph at the 14th attempt in the most prestigious two-mile chase of them all, the Queen Mother Champion Chase.

Declan Landy's willing nine-year-old has been an ultra-consistent operator under the tutelage of Knockeen maestro Henry de Bromhead and, with Rachael Blackmore doing the steering, capitalised on the shuddering error that ended the chances of odds-on shot *El Fabiolo* to run out a definitive winner.

In the process, Blackmore joined an elite group of riders to have won the four most illustrious races in jumps racing: the Gold Cup, the Grand National, the Champion Hurdle and the Champion Chase.

A winner of his beginners' chase at Punchestown, *Captain Guinness* was well beaten when last appearing in the William Hill Champion Chase two years ago and skipped a reunion with *Energumene* last season but, as the kingpin this time around, he might be given the opportunity to add this prestigious prize to his CV.

El Fabiolo may be given the opportunity to redeem himself after fluffing his lines, but his participation remains in doubt as he was very sore after his sprawling mistake.

Those are the senior standouts, but the talent pool is deep and the mouth waters at the prospect of some of the novice hurdlers and chasers, as well as bumper horses that could have Punchestown on their agenda.

Fact Or File, *Gaelic Warrior*, *Ballyburn*, *Majborough* and *Jasmin De Vaux* – the Champion Bumper winner that brought up the century of Cheltenham successes for Mullins – are just some of the young guns the Closutton marvel is likely to have on the lorry to Kildare, while de Bromhead's *Slade Steel* is certain to hold high rank next year and should be attempting a Cheltenham-Punchestown double before gorging on summer grass.

But first, we have a feast of racing to look forward to.

Virgin Media's Backing Business Community: Fostering SME Growth and Collaboration



In the wake of the pandemic, small businesses faced unprecedented challenges. The economic landscape shifted, and businesses had to adapt rapidly to survive. Recognising the plight of SMEs, **Virgin Media** launched its **Backing Business** campaign. Over 400 businesses were promoted across Virgin Media's platforms as a result. However, the challenges SMEs face are not limited to the pandemic; they are ongoing and multifaceted. Today, Virgin Media Business celebrates not just the success of the original campaign, but the dawn of a

new and even bigger initiative, aimed at propelling SMEs towards growth.

This year, as well as expanding its network reach, Virgin Media Business is expanding its commitment to small businesses through an initiative called the Backing Business Community, aimed at addressing ongoing challenges and fostering growth for SMEs. At the heart of this initiative is the creation of a vibrant community network, where SMEs can share experiences and knowledge and access invaluable resources. Debbie Behan, Business Products, Sales, and Marketing Manager at Virgin Media Business, aptly captures the essence of this initiative: "SMEs are facing numerous challenges; rising costs, increased taxes and more. We acknowledge their struggles and are committed to leveraging our resources and platforms to foster connections, share

experiences and knowledge, and promote as many small businesses as we can, ultimately aiding them in moving forward."

In February, the community celebrated its official launch, welcoming esteemed past Backing Business winners to the panel. Their words underlined the profound impact of the Backing Business initiative on their businesses. Through candid discussions and shared experiences, these entrepreneurs highlighted the lonely journey of small businesses, emphasising the crucial and transformative power of support and collaboration in driving business success.

This burgeoning community offers Irish SMEs a fertile platform for expansion, learning and prosperity, fostering networking opportunities and uncovering new avenues for growth. The Backing Business Community promises to shine

a spotlight on its members through social media features and monthly newsletters, while also offering enticing prizes such as TV slots and ads, print advertising and free broadband, as well as making sure the community members will gain exclusive access to enriching networking experiences through their monthly virtual and online events.

This exciting hub is open for everyone, whether you are a Virgin Media Business customer or not. Behan concludes: "Our community is open to every SME, it's free to join for all. We are aware of the challenges small businesses face and we are here to help."

To register your business to this bold and energetic community, all you have to do is to search "Backing Business" or join via virginmedia.ie/business/the-hub/backing-business/

Elevated Meetings and Events at The Johnstown Estate's Conference Centre

Conveniently located just 35 minutes from Dublin Airport, experience the newly reimagined **Conference Centre at The Johnstown Estate**. Featuring luxurious design accents, cutting-edge technology, infusion of natural daylight and captivating garden views, this revitalised space offers world-class meeting facilities for your next company meeting, event or conference.

The stand alone Corporate Centre exudes sophistication from the moment guests enter through a private entrance and boasts of opulent meeting rooms, the grand Gala Ballroom and a newly fashioned lobby lounge, which provides an intimate setting for private conversations, breakout sessions or exclusive events, adding to the centre's allure.

Complementing this space are dedicated meeting areas and the magnificent glass atrium of the Orangery, which features a stylish cocktail bar with an adjoining terrace overlooking the manicured lawns and walled garden. During warmer months, the terrace is



perfect for corporate retreats, team-building activities, relaxed barbecues or evening alfresco receptions beneath lantern-lit trees.

The great Gala Ballroom, renowned for formal conferences, easily transforms to host glamorous parties, launches and receptions, offering versatile options for diverse events.

Furnished with state-of-the-art audio-visual facilities, high-density wi-fi, and adaptable setups, the

Corporate Centre ensures seamless interaction between on-site and remote participants, enabling dynamic meetings, conferences and events – all supported by a dedicated on-site technical team.

These stunning renovations have redefined social spaces and elevated interiors, creating bright, spacious areas with high ceilings, large windows and plush furnishings ideal for both daytime gatherings and evening events. This versatile centre

can cater to groups of any size, accommodating intimate gatherings or seating up to 1,200 delegates, offering endless possibilities for event planners.

Elevate your event with inspiring menus from the renowned Fire & Salt restaurant or The Coach House Brasserie, tailored to suit every occasion – whether an extravagant gala dinner, relaxed barbecue, professional business luncheon or an intimate private dining experience.

Additionally, the centre offers direct access to the hotel's 127 guestrooms, suites and 40 lodges, the Parterre cocktail bar and an award-winning Spa. There is also a helipad, complimentary on-site parking and electric vehicle charging facilities, including six Tesla supercharging bays.

A dedicated team of exceptional event planners ensures the success of every meeting or event, providing personalised attention to detail and service excellence throughout your experience at The Johnstown Estate.

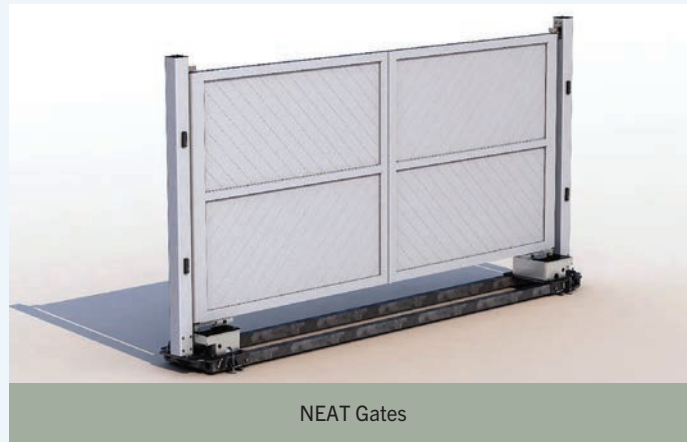
www.thejohnstownestate.com

Unlocking Automated Gates: NEAT Gates' New Turnkey Solution

Located in a state-of-the-art factory in Damastown, Co Dublin, **NEAT Gates** produces Europe's finest hand-finished aluminium gates.

The automation of NEAT Gates adds convenience and security to what has traditionally been a potential headache involving the co-ordination of surveyors, gate manufacturers, fitters, electricians, civil contractors, automation experts and landscapers – all in concert with potential delays, miscommunication and frustration.

After customers choose their gate design, NEAT Gates makes the process simple by completing the specialist work within its factory. A specially designed frame that includes the gates, posts and automation is created. Everything, including automation and wiring, is factory-installed and tested to



operate exactly as desired. All that is required is to install the posts and the cross-driveway frame, which includes pre-wired ducting. Once set, the gates are hung and the system is plugged in using prewired

connections. Although professional teams are available for assistance, there is a self-install option for any competent tradespersons or experienced DIY enthusiasts, who can handle the installation with

ease. A suitable tested power supply (5/6 amp, which is isolated at the dwelling) must be provided at the gate location, completed by a qualified electrician.

The beauty of NEAT Gates' approach lies in its simplicity. The automation is installed, set up and commissioned within factory-controlled conditions, all operating to the customer's precise requirements.

See www.neatgates.com or contact on 01 5253259. Or why not arrange a factory visit to view the wide range of exceptional aluminium gates.

The Phoenix received the above exclusive pre-launch information for the launch of this new automatic aluminium gate solution expected in May 2024.

Lifeline Ambulance Service: Leading the Way in Care and Innovation



Lifeline Ambulance Service holds the position of the second-largest ambulance provider in the state. Established in 1998 by CEO David Hall, Lifeline operates from 11 different bases nationwide, with its headquarters located in Leixlip, Co Kildare. Since its inception, Lifeline has been steadily treating and transporting an increasing number of patients each year, achieved through the employment of high-quality staff equipped with the latest technology and equipment.

Lifeline Ambulance Service stands as a wholly owned Irish private ambulance company and over the years it has witnessed continuous growth, solidifying its status as Ireland's largest private ambulance company. In addition to its primary service, the company offers the Lifeline Ambulance Education programme, headquartered in Galway, providing a range of courses such as CFRA and EMT. Managing an average of 38

ambulances on weekdays and 13 on weekends, Lifeline transports 24,000 patients and travels four million kilometers annually. It also operates an exclusive organ transplant transport service nationwide, boasting a fleet of 49 ambulances, with 20 new vehicles expected in 2024, alongside 10 dedicated organ transplant transport vehicles. The company's workforce exceeds 200 employees, comprising dispatchers, EMT's, and paramedics.

With an unwavering commitment to values such as patient-centred care, compassion, professionalism, safety, reliability, innovation, ethical practices and employee development, Lifeline Ambulance Service aims to be the preferred choice for transportation. Setting the standard for excellence in the industry, it seeks to make a positive difference in the lives of those it serves while ensuring the highest quality of care and support. www.lifeline.ie

Expanding Horizons: Sandoz's Strategic Move in Ireland

In a bold strategic move, **Sandoz Limited**, the world's largest generic and biosimilar company, has acquired the remaining shares in **Rowex Ltd**, a prominent supplier of prescription and non-prescription medicines in Ireland. This acquisition marks the culmination of a successful 30-year joint venture between Sandoz and Rowa Pharmaceuticals, solidifying Sandoz's position in the European market and highlighting its potential for standalone growth.

With its base in Bantry, Co Cork, Rowex Ltd brings decades of expertise in developing pharmaceutical products to the table. Sandoz plans to capitalise on this expertise by continuing to invest significantly in the business, with the aim of launching more affordable medicines to meet patient needs and create additional highly skilled jobs. Importantly, all staff at Rowex Ltd will remain with the company, ensuring continuity and stability in operations.

Diane DiGangi Trench, Country Head and General Manager for Sandoz UK & Ireland, commented: "We are delighted to expand fully into

the Irish market after a long and successful joint venture. We have ambitious plans to grow the business and see a huge opportunity for the Irish healthcare system to have better access to more affordable medicines."

Brigitte Wagner-Halswick, owner of Rowa Pharmaceuticals Ltd, reflected on Rowex's remarkable journey over the past three decades: "Rowex Ltd started operations in 1993 and has grown to be a significant presence in the Irish markets providing high-quality and cost-effective medicines to healthcare professionals and patients. I am excited for the future of the company and I would like to wish Sandoz and all the team at Rowex Ltd every success in the years to come."

This acquisition not only strengthens Sandoz's European foothold but also underscores its commitment to pioneering access for patients worldwide. With a portfolio of over 1,500 products addressing a wide range of diseases, Sandoz continues to lead the way in delivering affordable healthcare solutions to millions of patients globally.



John Paul Keane's connections

THE LUXEMBOURG-based Irish financier **John Paul Keane** has been attracting a fair degree of media attention as a result of teaming up with one **Conor McGregor**. He has also had strong business connections in the past with another Irish millionaire, **Michael Enright**, who has had mixed fortunes since cashing in his hugely profitable logistics business.

Since last month, Keane is *in situ* as a director of the Notorious's McGregor Sports and Entertainment operation, three of the entities associated with the MMA moneybags's Forged Stout Irish beer companies as well as the firm behind McGregor's Black Forge Inn in Dublin 12.

With an address in Ueber-syren in Luxembourg, Keane's LinkedIn page describes him as co-head of the wealth management division of Quintet Bank and, when it comes to wealth management, it can be assumed McGregor can do with all the help he can get.

The financier formerly headed up the key clients division at HSBC and before that was *in situ* at the Wychwood Capital Partners family office in Luxembourg.

In Ireland, the Squire of Cregg Castle, Michael Enright, is also associated with the Wychwood name and the shares in his Wychwood Properties Ltd are held by the Luxembourg-registered Wychwood Capital

Partners. (Keane was a director of Wychwood Properties in Ireland from 2014 to 2015.)

The last accounts for Wychwood Props show property stock and work in progress valued at over €25m at the end of 2022

Enright was behind the haulage firm, Walsh Western, which graduated to the logistics business Syncreon that was eventually sold for huge money to Dubai-based DP World, netting the Enright family including Michael's son, **Brian**, a significant pay day. Keane also popped up on the board here between 2013 and 2015.

For a couple of years, Keane was a director of Michael



John Paul Keane

Enright's Cregg Castle Stud in Co Limerick, which is, in the fashion of attention-avoiding suits with deep pockets, controlled by a company called Cregg Central ULC in Tortola in the sunny British Virgin Islands. Cregg Castle Stud has bred a number of notable horses, including *California Spangle*,

runner up in the 2002 Hong Kong Derby.

Apart from his significant property and bloodstock interests, Enright also decided to throw a fair few bob into the renewable energy sector, as one of the backers of New World Energy Systems (NWES), where Wychwood Capital Partners registered a charge in 2019.

While NWES backed an array of ventures, the energy punt proved ill-conceived and by the end of 2019 it was sitting on accumulated losses of €23m. In 2022, the company was liquidated.

Maurice Gillen's bum note

A NUMBER of companies that were controlled by the king of Galway's nightclub scene during the boom, **Maurice Gillen**, are



"Don't forget the clocks spring forward tonight so we lose an hour of sleeplessness."

to be wound up next week, long after the wheels came off the operation.

For decades, including the good old days, Gillen and his former business partner, **Declan Farrell** (who exited in 2016), were behind some of the more popular venues that operated under various names in Galway, including the likes of Central Park, Halo and Electric, as well as Biteclub restaurant. Having been rocked by the economic crash, by the time that Covid was threatening to upend the whole sector Gillen's business was already in a ton of trouble and in no position to withstand the carnage that hit in 2020.

It has taken quite some time for Gillen's shuttered businesses to be formally liquidated but almost two-and-a-half years after the doors were closed on Abbeygate Street, creditors' meetings are to be held for three separate companies, with a lot of red ink on the dance floor.

The trading entity for Gillen's hospitality group is Block Party Development (BPD), which was previously known as Central Park (Galway). The last accounts filed here only cover the year to the end of 2019 and were signed off on March 6, 2020, exactly a week before the first shutdown was imposed and the director's report makes it clear that the business was not going to survive.

Gillen highlighted the "significant challenges" encountered in the previous 12 months and noted that "the fall in business and profitability has continued again this year despite the changes implemented by the company". The owner referred to rising insurance costs, increasing competition and "a declining marketplace principally caused by changing attitudes to social

interactions".

Having recorded a deficit in the year to June 2019 of €880,000, BPD was sitting on accumulated losses of €1.1m. As a result, the auditors included a note under the "material uncertainty" heading, highlighting conditions "that indicate the existence of a material uncertainty that may cast significant doubt about the company's ability to continue as a going concern".

Another problem for the group was the fact that outstanding bank loans stood at around €3.8m, albeit secured on the various properties, while Gillen himself was owed a hefty €1m, with €650,000 of this treated as a subordinated loan. Farrell, meanwhile, was still owed over €½m at the end of June 2019.

The various Abbeygate properties were put on the market in early 2022 and immediately before Christmas last year a number of them were acquired, presumably helping to clear the way for the winding up to take place. The same month, Imro registered a judgment against BPD for €18,000, so the music rights organisation will be among the secured creditors on the list being drawn up by number-cruncher **Mark Gibbs** of DHKN, who is to be installed as liquidator.

Also being wound up on March 25 is BPD's holding company, Universal Leisure Holdings, which was listed for striking off last month, and the ultimate parent entity, EGT Entertainment Holdings (100%-owned by Gillen). The June 2019 accounts for EGT show accumulated losses topping €2m and loans outstanding to its sole shareholder of €¾m.

These figures too were signed off a week before the 2020 shutdown when it was noted: "The directors are monitoring the growing threat of the coronavirus



Electric nightclub



and assessing its impact on its trading subsidiary's business and wider economy should it become a pandemic."

The rest is history.

Colm O'Cuilleain's visible thread

A FIVE-bed pile in Rathmichael D18 has come on the market with a price tag of €2.8m – steep for sure but not quite Hamp-ton level. The owner here turns out to be **Colm O'Cuilleain**, who made quite a killing when selling out of both the advertising and telecoms games. He was also an early investor in the Hailo taxi app, now known as FreeNow, and was *in situ* as the business's European managing director for a few years.

O'Cuilleain initially made his name as a heavy-hitter in the advertising sector and was for-



Colm O'Cuilleain

merly managing director of the big David Allen firm (subsequently part of JC Cadeux), before overseeing the Irish expansion of outdoor company Maiden.

While O'Cuilleain is understood to have done rather well for himself from the various business exits, he had already acquired the large 5,400 sq ft house on one acre in the Ballybride Glen development by the late 1990s, before the property boom really kicked in in earnest.

Ballybride Glen is described by the *Irish Times* as "a development of spacious, elegant homes in an area that is staking its claim as being south Dublin's answer to the Hamptons".

Presumably it will attract plenty of attention from well-heeled Dubliners seeking some wide open spaces.

In the last few years, O'Cuilleain has

been focusing his attention on an AI-based outfit that is trying to make money out of getting rid of gobbledegook. Not surprisingly, perhaps, this is proving a rather



"My computer didn't crash, but I did."

expensive business.

O'Cuilleain is a director and shareholder of a company called VisibleThread, which was founded because "complexity acts as a thief in every department of every organisation. It robs opportunities, eats time, and builds barriers to trust".

In short, VisibleThread claims to make business communications clearer and puts quite a premium on this activity, claiming that the company's software "leads to better business outcomes".

This all sounds lovely but reducing the levels of corporate bullshit is a hard process to put a value on. The firm was founded by CEO **Fergal McGovern**,

who was previously behind something called SteelTrace, while the COO is the recently arrived **Laura Mathews**. O'Cuilleain, meanwhile, has been on the board since 2009.

The 2022 accounts for VisibleThread show that the company managed to drop €1.7m that year, leaving shareholders sitting on accumulated losses of over €5.5m. Helpfully, the directors explain this away by noting that VisibleThread invested €4.3m in "human capital" during 2022: "The directors believe this investment of time and resources is integral to company development as well as customer satisfaction and retention."

So, that's alright then.

Round two at Fota Island resort

JUST ONE month after a settlement was reached in the high-stakes legal poker game between China-based businessman **Yuzhu Kang** and his former associate, Fota Island-based **Xiu Xianj Kelly**, over ownership of the valuable Fota Island hotel and golf resort, the parties are back in the ring. The high-profile directors who exited the business when the brown stuff hit the fan must be glad to be out of the picture.

The original case kicked off in May 2020 when Kang sued Kelly (aka **Julie Kelly**), her son, **Tuo Du** of the same address, and three companies, including Xiu Lan Holdings (XLH), the holding company.

Kang's case was that there had been a conspiracy to defraud him and he was asking the court to decide who were the legal owners of the companies that purchased Fota resort for €60m on the instructions of Nama in 2013, as well as other assets such as the Kingsley Hotel in Sunday's Well, which cost €6m.

As part of the settlement arrived at almost three days into the hearing last month, Kang has been declared 100% owner of XLH and both Kelly and Du have already stepped down as

directors, with Kang joined by Carrigtwohill-based **Haili Yang**. As a result, Kang (who hails from Hebei province in China) is now the owner of Fota Island Resort and the other properties in the portfolio.

After Kang lodged his 2020 proceedings, Kelly maintained that she was the person who in fact owned the Fota resort and that Kang's name had only been used as a "front" to keep her identity as owner secret. These claims have since been dropped.

Although the settlement avoided an estimated 12-week-long hearing in court, the legal eagles involved will still have had plenty to celebrate given the multiple motions and submissions involved since 2020, no less than 30 orders and a couple of judgments.

The meter, however, is ticking once again thanks to the filing of another set of proceedings last week, seeking freezing orders against both Kelly and Du, who are being sued by three compa-

nies – Xiu Lan Hotels Ltd, Xiu Lan Riverside Hotel Ltd and Xiu Lan Payroll and Management Services Ltd – from which the two defendants resigned last month.

The three entities are all owned by Kang through his Seychelles-registered Empower Growth Ltd, with Xiu Lan Hotels being the vehicle that operates as Fota Island Resort and Xiu Lan Riverside Hotel trading as the Kingsley Hotel.

In the proceedings to freeze assets, Kang is claiming that Kelly and Du defrauded the hotel companies of €1.85m, the bulk of which, he alleges, is accounted for by artworks and furniture transferred to the hotels by the defendants last year at grossly exaggerated values. The claims have been denied.

The two Kang hotel companies had featured some familiar names among the directors, at least up until around the time the litigation kicked off. For example, from February 2015 to August 2020 **Rose McHugh**



Rose McHugh

was *in situ* on both boards. She is currently a director of Bank of America Europe, Irish Life and Imro, and is chair of the Crawford Gallery having previously served on the board of the listed Origin Enterprises plc. State gigs included Bord na Móna and chair of Bord Iascaigh Mhara.

Jerry Carey, squire of the impressive Hyde Park House in Montenotte and who is probably best known in political circles for his long stint as a trustee of Fine Gael, was also a director of Xiu Lan Hotels and Xiu Lan Riverside Hotel from 2015, remaining on board until May 2021. Carey made his moolah courtesy of the €21m sale of his Irish Business Software operation to the giant Xerox in 2010.

He invested a chunk of this in property and is a significant landlord through Trrumi Ltd, which rents out apartments in Mahon and Cork city centre. A minority stake here is held by Jerry's wife, **Patricia**, and one property added to the portfolio last summer is the couple's Hyde Park House abode. This had been put on the market in 2021 with a €2.2m price tag but, surprisingly, land registry records show that it was acquired by Trrumi in July 2023 for €1.9m.



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