

AFFAIRS OF THE NATION



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

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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 SofCo – 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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AFFAIRS OF THE NATION

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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

AFFAIRS OF THE NATION

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

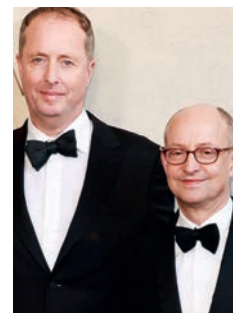
"WE NEED to actually invest in developing our own stories," declared movie producer Ed Guiney, pointing out that there "just isn't enough investment in television drama in Ireland" in a *Mail on Sunday* article headlined, "Strike while our Oscars are hot!" As one half of high-flying Element Pictures, 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

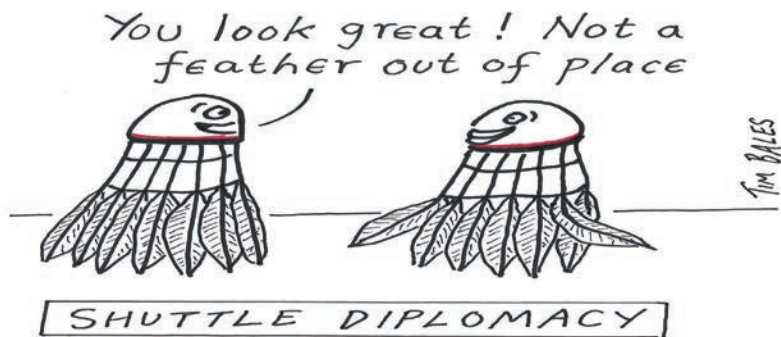
While there are many reasons for relocating to the tax haven, including a greater level of protection from prying hacks, the move predated the sale of 51% of the bulk of the Element business to the giant Fremantle Media Group for €55m. The latter has an option on the remaining 49% that will surely be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