



## 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



Micheál Martin

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.

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.

## AFFAIRS OF THE NATION

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.