

## SPRINGTIME FOR HARRIS AND IRELAND



The party  
picked the right  
man for the job

I'm not even sure  
they picked the  
right Simon!



### Helen McEntee's future

### Profile: Simon Harris

### Young Blood: Mark Mehigan

### Don't mess with Big Phil Hogan

### Jeffrey Donaldson undone



ALSO: Derek Richardson's scrum; Ronan Collins's Russian connections; Ballet Ireland's Israeli step; Catching up with Johnnie Cooke; Virgin TV's 'Vanishing Triangle'





# WHY ARE WE SUBSIDISING A BROKEN FOOD SYSTEM?

Consuming a vegan diet reduces our environmental impact significantly more than cutting down on flights or driving an electric car<sup>1</sup>. How?

The global food system emits a third of GHG emissions (38.4% in Ireland), uses 70% of the world's fresh water and causes 80% of river and lake pollution. Most of the harm is caused by animal agriculture which uses 77% of global farmland yet it only produces 18% of the world's calories and 37% of the total protein<sup>2</sup>.

A vegan diet results in 75% less GHG emissions, water pollution and land use, 93.5% less methane emissions, and cuts the destruction of wildlife by 66% and water use by 54% when compared to non-vegan diets.<sup>3</sup>

1 Poore, J., & Nemecek, T. (2018). Reducing food's environmental impacts through producers and consumers. *Science*, 360(6392), 987-992

2 ibid

3 Scarborough, P., Clark, M., Cobiac, L. et al. Vegans, vegetarians, fish-eaters and meat-eaters in the UK show discrepant environmental impacts. *Nat Food* 4, 565-574 (2023).

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## AFFAIRS OF THE NATION

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## EU 'WAR ECONOMY'

LAST OCTOBER *The Phoenix* quoted an impeccable authority on western political and military strategy – the *Economist* magazine – which warned that the imminent retreat of the US from the Ukrainian war with Russia would require the EU to fill this military vacuum: “Europe... has committed as much weaponry as America and far more financial aid. Yet it needs to step up further... Europe will eventually need to carry more of the burden. That means beefing up its defence industry... Pray for a speedy victory, but plan for a long struggle.”



Dame Richardson

The same *Phoenix* article (see edition 6/10/23) quoted foreign minister Micheál Martin who, after a meeting of EU foreign ministers in Kyiv that week, predicted the war would last up to five years and that Ireland would provide more military training for Ukraine. This includes his highly inventive secret weapon, the “non-lethal” rifle training (unique in the annals of warfare).

Later that month Dame Louise Richardson, chair of Martin’s pet project, the forum on security policy, happily and coincidentally endorsed Martin’s long-held opposition to the triple lock in her report on the forum’s deliberations. Even though the forum’s panels were stuffed with her fellow travellers from the West’s military, academic and intelligence ranks, Dame Richardson could hardly propose abolition of Irish neutrality (although her report derided at some length this long-held Irish foreign policy principle).

But despite stating that the forum was not

designed to make policy prescriptions, she did just that, recommending the abolition of Ireland’s triple lock, which demands endorsement from government, the Dáil and the UN Security Council for foreign missions.

On securing Dame Richardson’s approval, Martin moved fast and the following month, November 2023, he announced plans to scrap the triple lock. In January this year he said he would legislate to get rid of the triple lock “without delay”.

A fortnight later, on February 9, 2024, it emerged that Ireland had previously signed up to yet another Nato partnership entity, the Individual Tailored Partnership Programme (ITPP), a sister of Nato’s Partnership for Peace (PfP) – that masterful euphemism for western warmongering.

The *Irish Times* described the ITPP as “more streamlined and efficient” than previous Nato PfP arrangements but, when it was first proposed at a Nato meeting in Madrid in June 2022, Martin denied that it eroded Irish neutrality.

He also said then that he had proposed that a citizens’ assembly should hold a “reflective,

*Continued on page 4*

**THE MINTED** *Comer family, who made hundreds of millions of euro from the building sector, has had its fair share of stumbles in the racing world, most notably the suspension of tax exile Luke Comer’s training licence for three years by the Irish Horseracing Regulatory Board (IHRB). Last month, it was Luke Comer Jnr who was unsaddled in Navan District Court and he attracted some online attention.*

*Racehorse owner Comer Jnr (who has not had a winner since September 2020) appeared in court as a result of prosecution by the agriculture department, which was initiated after the decomposed carcasses of nine horses were found on his lands at Summerhill in Co Meath. Luke Jnr’s barrister said his client knew nothing about the matter and was “greatly taken aback”.*

*Happily for Comer, the charges were struck out when he agreed to pay a €20,000 donation to the DSPCA.*

*Not everyone was happy with the outcome and Amy Lynam, a well-known figure in horseracing marketing and daughter of trainer Eddie Lynam, went on X to tweet: “An absolute disgrace. The court’s findings should result in his licence being revoked by the IHRB.” With the bowler hats now examining the case, Comer Jnr will be hoping that Lynam doesn’t get her way.*

## DEREK RICHARDSON’S SCRUM

THE FORMER owner of bust English rugby union club Wasps – Derek Richardson – is keeping his lawyers busy. As has been reported, he is suing his legal advisers, Kennedys Law, over the demise of his Wasps club in 2022 with debts of £95m. Another front in his legal campaign features Mark Robertson and the Hottinger Family Office, names that will ring a bell with fans of Goldhawk.

Having sold his 123.ie insurance business to RSA for big bucks, Richardson chucked a large slice of his windfall into Wasps and oversaw the then Premiership club’s move to Coventry. When the crowds and sponsorship failed to materialise, however, the business was benched.

Richardson paid a heavy financial price for his involvement in the project and has since claimed that his advisers – who helped create a complicated ownership structure that involved a Malta-registered entity called Moonstone – had come up with a scheme that somehow ended up actually disadvantaging him.

It will be recalled (see *The Phoenix* 9/3/18) that the then parent of Hottinger, ArchCo Ltd, was actually registered in Malta. Both law firm Kennedy’s and the Hottinger wealth management outfit (which has an office in Dublin) have been named in separate proceedings.

On the same day that Richardson filed his case against Kennedys Law and its former partner, Robert Dawbarn, he also filed a claim against Hottinger Private Office Ltd and its CEO, Mark Robertson, alleging breach of fiduciary duty. The most recent activity here was a replying affidavit dated March 21 last.



Derek Richardson

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**CORRECTIONS:** When errors occur, it is the policy of this publication to have them corrected in the immediately next edition.  
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Continued from page 3

informed debate” about neutrality – an idea he dropped quickly when one of his perceptive, highly paid advisors told him that such a meeting would denounce Government efforts to abandon the triple lock and neutrality.

Instead we got Dame Richardson’s forum, which was stuffed with hand-picked military “experts and practitioners” who, she said, were largely in favour of abandoning the triple lock – *quelle surprise*.

Equally unsurprising has been an increase in *Irish Times* militarist exhortations to arms with opinion columns and a recent editorial that said: “The way forward need not entail Nato membership, but there are huge resource implications Ireland must face up to.” This was in an editorial that was exultant about formerly neutral Sweden joining Nato.

Recent Cassandra-like warnings of IT political editor Pat Leahy bear an interesting comparison to that of the *Economist* last October, with Leahy stating that “the EU is preparing for war” and the European defence industry is “on a war footing”. This is because the EU is “producing armaments for the EU’s – and Ukraine’s – defence quicker and more efficiently”.

Further evidence of the lemming-like rush to WWII to be facilitated by the looting of EU states’ coffers came last month after a meeting of EU leaders. There, proposals were agreed for the imminent release of extra billions for the Ukrainian war effort and a separate “war economy” involving the European Investment Bank and the European Central Bank. European Council president Charles Michel said “the continent is now living in a war economy”.

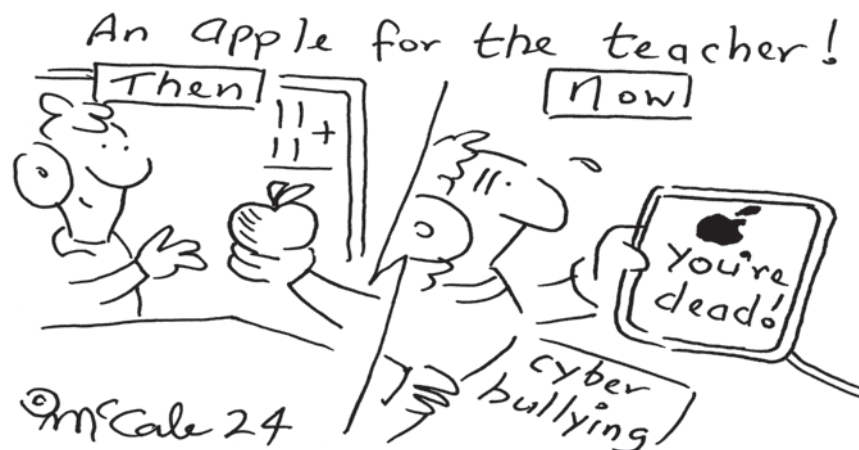
Leo Varadkar and Paschal Donohoe both utilised the novel non-lethal, military ploy to justify their welcome – on behalf of Irish people – for this statement about a war economy and rearmament of the EU.

**THE ANTICIPATION** that Limerick’s first directly elected mayoral contest would be a bottomless borefest may turn out to be quite mistaken and Goldhawk will be keeping a watchful eye for some interesting debates between two of the candidates in particular.

Social Democrats councillor Elisa O’Donovan swore in 2021 that she would make it her business to take out Limerick city’s Green TD, Brian Leddin, at the next general election following some abusive comments he and others made about her on a WhatsApp group the TD had set up.

Leddin himself described O’Donovan on the chat as “unhinged” and “craving attention”. But other comments on the same WhatsApp group were even more aggressive and various female political rivals were described in abusive terms, with O’Donovan described as a c... in one message.

The row spread to the Green Party



after Leddin delivered an apology that was deemed as inadequate by the Soc Dem councillor. Meanwhile, some Greens, including deputy leader Catherine Martin and TD Neasa Hourigan, expressed dissatisfaction with their party’s response to the issue.

Neither of O’Donovan nor Leddin are considered likely to be in contention for the mayoralty but the general election could see a different story. The votes of the Greens, Soc Dems and Labour are interchangeable in Limerick City and it looks as though it will be the Soc Dems’ turn next time out.



Elisa O’Donovan

## DON’T MESS WITH BIG PHIL

SIMON COVENEY’S flight from Cabinet – before he could be pushed – had as much to do with former EU commissioner Phil Hogan as incoming Taoiseach Simon Harris. Not that Harris needed much persuasion by his unofficial advisor because while Harris was the only Cabinet member to back Coveney against Leo Varadkar in the 2017 leadership contest, the two later became mutually disenchanted.

Coveney should have realised that the Harris demand for ministers to declare they would run at the general election was a tactic to flush him out as the expectation has been that Coveney was looking for an alternative occupation and only biding his time before exiting to a plum job, possibly abroad. *Phoenix* readers will recall that, as far back as 2022, they were the first to learn that Covetous had bought a splendid new residence in Cobh in an early indication of his intention to either run in Cork East at the next election or that he was “preparing to leave politics altogether” (see edition 17/6/22).

However, the memory of Coveney’s eager reaction to Hogan’s crisis in 2020, when he was caught doing a Dominic Cummings-type tour of Kildare shortly after he attended that Oireachtas golf dinner in Clifden, has

not been forgotten by Big Phil. Then, while Hogan blamed party leader Vlad and then taoiseach Micheál Martin for failing to stand by him, he reserved his real spleen for Coveney.

In the public recrimination about one Covid rule for ordinary folk and none for the elite, Coveney’s rhetoric about Hogan was vituperative. In a seemingly unending, relentless monologue on Cork local radio, Covetous emphasised and repeated how “one rule for some people and another for everybody else” had made people understandably “furious”.

Big Phil never fails to clock those who appear to be undermining him but he also perceived that, in this case, it was all part of Coveney’s goal of landing a job on the EU Commission – his job! And indeed there was a view at Government level that the impending vacancy in Brussels could be filled by Covetous until Ursula von der Leyen insisted on a woman.

Combined with other political circumstances, the fact that Big Phil was waiting in the long grass for Covetous meant there was only one likely outcome for Harris’s Cabinet problem this week.

At a less-elevated altitude, the race to succeed Coveney in Cork South-Central will likely see councillor Shane O’Callaghan and senator Jerry Buttimer competing with former Cork lord mayor Des Cahill and councillors Deirdre Forde and Una McCarthy. While O’Callaghan is front runner, one of the two female councillors will also have to be selected.

But the most interesting battle will likely be between Cahill and Buttimer. The latter, who attended the Golfgate dinner, was denounced by party ‘colleague’ Cahill, who said that “any politician who attended this dinner is simply not fit to hold any public office” – not to mind a seat in Leinster House, one supposes.



Phil Hogan

### Correction

Marian Harkin TD wishes to make clear that she has never been a member of Fine Gael as mistakenly stated in *The Phoenix* of March 22, 2024.



## AFFAIRS OF THE NATION

## VIRGIN'S 'VANISHING TRIANGLE'

THE OMENS weren't good when *The Vanishing Triangle*, backed with moolah from the taxpayer, failed to appear in the autumn schedule for Virgin Media Television (VMTV) last year without explanation. Now that the production from Annemarie Naughton and Ivan Kavanagh (along with assorted other producers) has belatedly appeared on Irish screens, the critics have, predictably perhaps, put the boot in.

The subject of the six-part series would have raised eyebrows from the off, given that it is a fictionalised dramatic account of the very sensitive topic of the real-life disappearance of a number of young women in the Leinster area in the 1990s. Nevertheless, VMTV – currently demanding an annual €30m from the taxpayer for its public service broadcasting – picked the show up in 2022 as a co-production, brokered by the company's then head of content, Bill Malone, who exited three months later.

Having vanished from VMTV's autumn 2023 schedule, the series (starring *Normal People*'s India Mullen and Allen Leech of *Downton Abbey* fame) finally arrived last month. According to Pat Stacey in the *Indo*, it proved "as risibly unconvincing in its detail as it is misjudged in its storytelling. It shamefully piggybacks on the real-life tragedy of missing and murdered women, and the grief, pain and suffering endured by their loved ones."

Over at the *Irish Times*, Ed Power noted: "*The Vanishing Triangle* isn't specifically based on any of the missing person cases in Leinster in the 1990s. But it shamelessly upcycles them into a gaudy whodunnit that is simultaneously dull, ludicrous and crass."

What some people might find equally crass is the oodles of public money that followed the initial 2018 development loan from funding agency Screen Ireland (SI), when the project was titled 'Missing, Presumed' – the same title as the book by outspoken former garda Alan Bailey about the disappearance of

the women. Bailey also acted as an advisor to the VMTV production.

The end title sequence records the generosity of the Irish taxpayer through SI and the Section 481 tax break. Some €2.4m of the near €8m series budget was targeted to come from the Section 481 tax break, while the end credits also acknowledge that *The Vanishing Triangle* is "co-funded by the European Union".

The balance of the budget, on top of the major backers in the US (Paper Plane Productions) and UK (87 Films), is made up of pre-sales to mainly public broadcasters such as SBS for Australia, SVT for Sweden and VRT for Belgium, as well as the likes of Acorn in the UK.

Lots of public backing and public interest then but not so much quality control in this "hokey thriller... that leaves a deeply unpleasant taste".

## RONAN COLLINS'S RUSSIAN CONNECTIONS

LAST MONTH a US-backed nursing home operator, which surfaced in 2016 with big plans to take a chunk of the market here, was placed in examiner-ship, having previously emerged from another rescue package. The Irish director and investor (10%) in Passage Healthcare International (Ireland) Ltd (PHII) is the busy Blackrock Co Dublin-based finance expert and lawyer, Ronan Collins, who also turns out to be involved with some interesting Russian entities.

While it is unclear at this stage whether PHII will emerge intact from its latest rescue attempt, at least Collins has plenty to keep him busy, including Lukoil Capital, an Irish finance subsidiary of the giant Russian PJSC Lukoil. The Irish Lukoil Capital was incorporated in 2021 to raise funds for its Moscow-headquartered parent and Collins is listed as a director here since April 2022.

Like all Russian companies, PJSC Lukoil has been the subject of international sanctions in the last couple of years. A note in Lukoil Capital's 2022 accounts states that

the Irish outfit "is part of a Russian group and is inherently exposed to developments in Russia".

For those interested in intrigue, Lukoil has been the source of more than its fair share of conspiracy theories. Last month, the oil and gas giant's vice-president, Vitaly Robertus, died "suddenly" at the age of 54. He was the fourth Lukoil exec to die since the Ukraine war kicked off.

Five months ago, Lukoil chairman Vladimir Nekrasov (66) died "suddenly", as did 60-year-old senator and close ally Vladimir Lebedev, who suffered a heart attack.

In September 2022, former Lukoil chairman Ravil Maganov (67) fell from a window in Moscow's Central Clinical Hospital, while four months earlier a former Lukoil senior manager, Alexander Subbotin (43), was found dead.

It has not been established if there is any link between the sudden deaths but conspiracy theorists point to the early call by the Lukoil board for the Ukraine conflict to end as soon as possible, expressing its sympathy with victims of "this tragedy".

The good news for Collins is that none of the deceased parties were ever directors of Lukoil's Irish entity.

Separately, the Dublin lawyer is also a director of Moscow Domodedovo Airport (which has been targeted by Ukrainian

drones) and another Russian financing subsidiary here called IMH Capital, linked to the provision of a loan to PJSC 'KOKS' in Russia.

Meanwhile, the Circuit Court has now installed Diarmuid Guthrie as examiner of PHII on foot of a petition from the company, which is almost 90%-controlled by Washington-based US moneybags Andy Turner, former chairman of pharma giants Actavis that was involved in a \$66bn inversion deal with

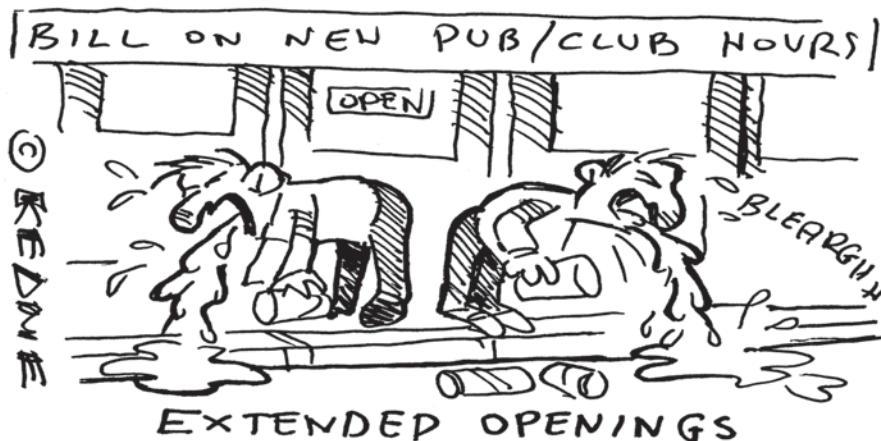
Allergan. Back in 2017, an optimistic Collins had told the *Business Post* that PHII intended to "improve the stock of nursing homes available in Ireland" and said the company was "looking to launch our pharmacy business here also".

At the time, it was understood that PHII was in the process of acquiring around 10 homes but things haven't worked out as planned and in November 2022, on foot of significant losses, the company entered the Scarp rescue process for small-to-medium-sized companies.

It "successfully exited the Scarp scheme" a month later, having effectively written off €2.5m owed to creditors, including the Revenue, but now it's back to square one for Collins and his fellow directors – all of whom are still alive and well.



Vladimir Putin and Ravil Maganov





**AFFAIRS OF THE NATION**

**BRITISH AGENTS AND DUBLIN BOMBS**

MAY 17 next will mark the 50th anniversary of the Dublin and Monaghan bomb massacres. One of the key figures in the Dublin leg of that operation was Robin 'The Jackal' Jackson of the UVF. He collected three devices from James Mitchell's farm at Glananne, Co Armagh, and drove them in his poultry van to the Coachman's Inn, in north Dublin, where they were distributed to his accomplices.



Drew Harris

The massacres are being investigated as part of the UK's Operation Denton. It is hoped this will clarify whether or not Jackson and any of his associates were MI5 or RUC special branch agents.

Campaigners on behalf of the victims of the Glananne gang have been waiting decades for the truth. In 2010, then PSNI assistant chief constable Drew Harris wrote to them advising them that an investigation into the wider questions raised by the activities of the group was not going to take place.

The Historical Enquiries Team (HET), however, began to look at aspects of the gang's activities. The team was operationally independent from the PSNI and had its own finances.

In 2010, however, Harris brought the HET under his control as head of the PSNI's Crime Operations Branch and he removed investigative functions from HET officers. Henceforth, they could no longer arrest and question suspects. He also took control of its budget and closed down a unit that was cross-referencing disparate HET investigations for links, patterns and systems that might indicate UVF collusion with the NI state.

In 2014, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Policing found that the HET was lacking in independence when examining cases where the state was implicated.

The families took the PSNI to the High Court in Belfast. In 2017, Mr Justice Treacey criticised the PSNI for an "extreme" abuse of power, adding that "the state [was] not genuinely committed" to addressing the concerns of families of the Glananne gang's victims.

In November 2014, Harris (now deputy chief constable) found himself in the witness box at an inquest into the killing of six people by the RUC. Senior coroner John Lecky pointed out to Harris that the PSNI's engagement in the disclosure process had lasted "longer than the second World War".

The PSNI unit responsible for control of the files relating to collusion was the Legacy Support Unit (LSU). It was responsible for redacting sensitive information prior to its release to the victims' families. Harris was in control of the LSU and all of the unit's key staff were former RUC special branch officers.

In 2018, Harris became the Irish government's choice for Garda Commissioner. The public was assured that there was no possibility of a conflict of interest in the appointment.

No one was ever convicted for the 1974 bombings during which 34 people died. An Garda Síochána maintains that the files on the massacres are still open. It is not known if Harris – introduced to the Smithwick Tribunal as the PSNI link man with MI5 – took the opportunity, while working for the RUC or the PSNI, to peep into their files to see if Jackson was a British agent.

**INTERNMENT WITH TRIAL**

THE WALL of silence by southern media on the recent acquittal of dissident republicans Colin Duffy and Harry Fitzsimons is in marked contrast to the sensational headlines that many carried at the start of this case back in December 2013. Following a gun attack on a convoy of PSNI Land Rovers Duffy, Fitzsimons and Alex McCrory were charged with a range of offences including preparing and directing terrorism, membership of the IRA etc. Duffy received appropriately lurid headlines in the *Irish Times*, *Irish Independent* and elsewhere in December 2013.

The prosecution's case was based on covert video footage and audio recordings from a public park in Lurgan gathered by MI5 the day after the gun attack (see *The Phoenix* 14/7/22). Over a decade later in Belfast Crown Court, the senior judge ruled that the recordings did not meet the standard to secure convictions. The trial was one of the longest running ever in Northern Ireland.



Colin Duffy

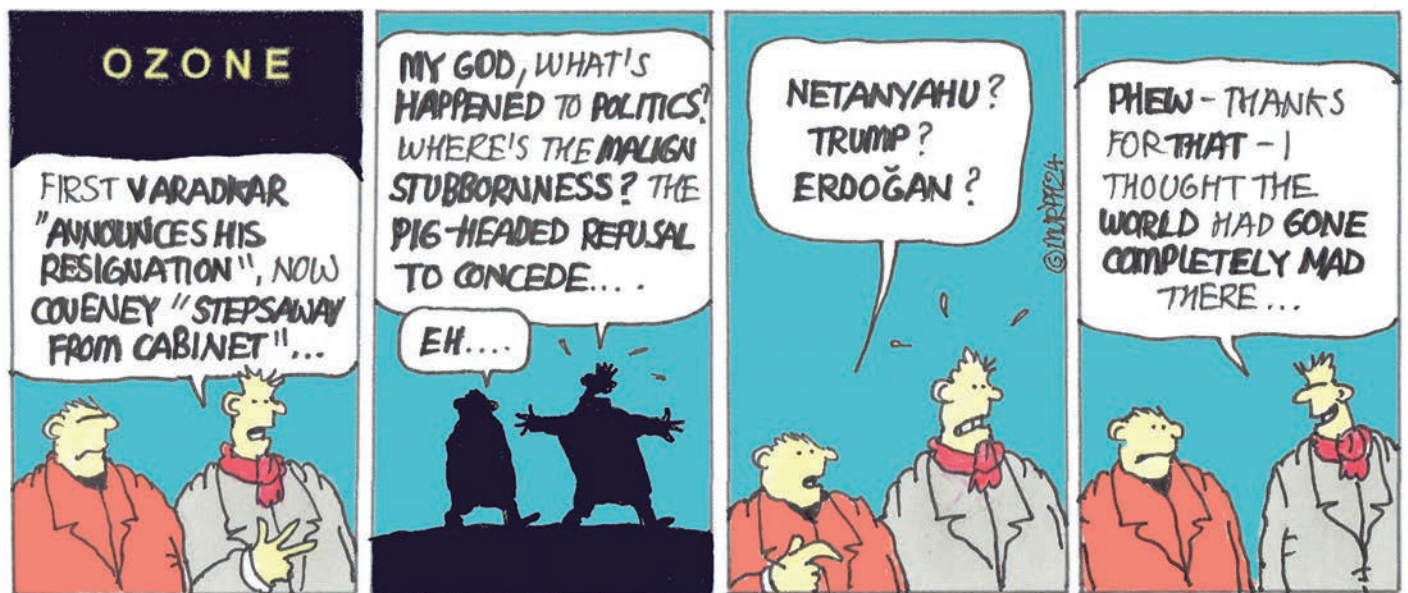
This is not the first controversial case involving Duffy. In 1995 he was convicted for the killing of retired UDR man John Lyness outside his home in Lurgan in June 1993. Lyness was gunned down by two assailants who fled the scene on racing bikes. Duffy's conviction was later quashed after a key witness in the case, Lindsey Robb, was deemed to be unreliable.

Robb had given evidence anonymously, only being identified as Witness C. When Robb himself was convicted, later in 1995, for his role in acquiring and smuggling guns on behalf of the UVF, Duffy was released – after three years in prison.

In 1997 two RUC constables on patrol were killed in Church Walk, Lurgan, the last RUC fatalities before the second IRA ceasefire. Duffy was charged with their murders but the case was dropped due to insufficient evidence.

In March 2012 Duffy was again back in court, facing two murder charges. Two British soldiers had been shot while collecting pizza outside the Massereene barracks in Antrim earlier that month. Duffy was also charged with five counts of attempted murder and one of having a firearm and ammunition. Almost three years later, having been denied bail throughout the case, the judge acquitted Duffy on the basis that there was insufficient evidence to convict him of the murders.

If you include the 27 months that Duffy spent on remand in relation to his most recent case, he has spent almost a decade of his life in custody even though there are no convictions against him.





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## AFFAIRS OF THE NATION



## MONEY TO BURN

WITH EUROPEAN and local elections fast approaching, many candidates to the right of Fine Gael are declaring their intention to stand with the Irish Freedom Party (IFP), Ireland First (IF), Independent Ireland, the National Party (NP), Irish People Party and a variety of right-wing independents. And there is no shortage of money swirling about in these circles.

A recent article by Alex Kaplan for US-based website Media Matters for America, which analyses conservative media misinformation, gives an insight into some of these candidates' fundraising activities. The article exposed how leading NP member Keith Woods (the pseudonym of Roscommon native Keith O'Brien) is raising funds online, as well as the white nationalist content and conspiracy theories that Woods has been publishing to generate this income.

Until recently Woods sought support for the content he was creating through donations to his account on crowdfunding platform BuyMeaCoffee. Kaplan revealed that Woods had raised more than €25,000 through that platform and cited some troubling comments accompanying such contributions, ie "hail victory". Another contributor thanked Woods for turning them into a "classical fascist".

For years Woods also ran a YouTube channel. He has made over €500 using a feature on YouTube called Super Chat, which allows viewers to pay content creators to highlight their comments during a livestream.

Days after Kaplan's article appeared, BuyMeaCoffee removed Woods's account, explaining: "This page has been removed due to inappropriate use of this service."

Woods didn't take this well, posting on his Telegram and X accounts that Kaplan was an "anti-white activist" and a "Jewish journalist" whose article had resulted in the closing down of his main source of donations.

Two of Ireland First's candidates for the European and local elections are also raising money on BuyMeaCoffee. Philip Dwyer, who is standing for IF in the Dublin constituency

for the European election and Tallaght Central for the locals, has raised €2,445 on the platform, with donations ranging from €5 up to €250. Over a quarter of the donations were from wholly anonymous donors who are described on the site as 'someone', while many others are only identified by first names or nicknames. It's also impossible to tell what country the donations come from.

The IF candidate for Ireland South in the European poll and Fermoy in the local elections is Derek Blighe. He has accumulated over €5,000 between his BuyMeaCoffee account and a GoFundMe fundraiser for the European elections, with one contribution of €1,000 on the former platform.



Derek Blighe

The IFP has opted to carry out all its online fundraising on GoFundMe for the upcoming election campaigns. Party leader Hermann Kelly is running in the Midlands North-West constituency and has raised €2,435 so far on the platform.

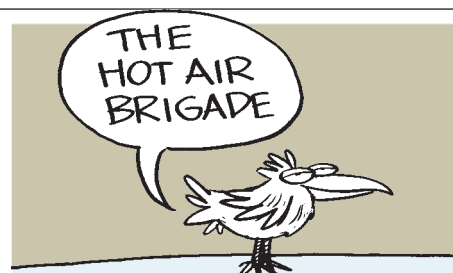
Over €1,000 of Kelly's donations on the site are noted as anonymous and four of those – valued at €500, €125, €100 and €100 – are at or above the threshold for

anonymous donations. As with the donations on BuyMeaCoffee, there is no indication on GoFundMe of whether some donors are contributing multiple times or where they come from.

Goldhawk recently highlighted Gript Media's contribution of the maximum amount allowed, €18,000, to the European Conservatives and Reformists Party (ECR), a European Parliamentary party whose constituent parties include VOX from Spain; Fratelli d'Italia; Sweden Democrats etc (see *The Phoenix* 8/3/24). In addition, the Edmund Burke Institute (EBI), of which Gript deputy editor Gary Kavanagh is a director, also donated €18,000 to the ECR in 2022 and another €18,000 in 2023.

Subsequent to our article, Gript editor John McGuirk claimed the €18,000 Gript paid to the ECR was for sponsorship of an ECR conference at the Lyrath Estate in Kilkenny. Gript was not mentioned in the event programme or subsequent publicity.

The EBI's financial statement for 2023 notes an income of €90,758 from donations, just marginally down from the €90,821 it raised in 2022. Many of the new Irish right-wing formations will wonder if any of the largess Gript and the EBI have doled out to the ECR over the last two years will be donated domestically in 2024.



We firmly believe in the unifying power of music, enabling people to transcend differences and foster meaningful conversations. We feel it is our duty to create and uphold this space, with a strong hope that it will inspire greater compassion.



Bambie Thug

**Statement from nine Eurovision contestants, including Bambie Thug, explaining their reason for not boycotting the contest over Israel's involvement, *Irish Independent***

Look, I think this is potentially a billion dollar idea but it could also be a zero. **Dermot Smurfit Jr covers all the bases for his latest online venture, *Irish Times***

For the first time, Pierce's all-white aesthetic is interrupted with inky blue garments, furthering the otherworldliness in the collection with a sense of duality: light and dark, air and water, peace and anger. **Victoria Brunton on Róisín Pierce's latest fashion range, *RTÉ Guide***

Beetroot wears its smoky mantle with gravitas and aplomb, as dill-brightened pistou and creamy goat's cheese, zippy with lactic tang, enervate the earthy tuber and an excellent, rustic cracker completes a super dish. **Joe McNamee, *Irish Examiner***

They said they really, really wanted me. They kept on at me, and still I said no, because I was scared. I don't want to be a celebrity, it's a fake world. I have no desire. I like music and staying under the radar. **Louis Walsh on his reluctant appearance on *Celebrity Big Brother*, *Sunday Independent Life Magazine***

For the artwork in Kraftwerk, my latest collection for Dunnes, inspired by the music of the electronic band, I razorbladed the paint so it looked like the sound desk moving. **Artist and designer Helen Steele, *Irish Independent Weekend magazine***

Varadkar did not just represent a new Ireland, he was not just a mere signifier of a new political reality. He brought it with him. **Finn McRedmond, *Irish Times***

I left it a day before texting him "best of luck with whatever you throw your hat at next Leo, you've given a great tenure and service and should be proud of yourself". He replied a couple of days later with a clasping hands emoji as a 'thank you'. No, thank you, Leo. **Eugene Masterson, *Sunday World***

Simon Harris may be the man of the moment, but it is Michael McDowell who channels the spirit of the age. **Colin Murphy, *Sunday Independent***

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





## AFFAIRS OF THE NATION



## COLOMBIA 3 MINING PROFITEERS

“ACTIVIST LUKE Holland has authored this report for *Prime Time*...” This was the rather odd introduction, read by Sarah McInerney, to an excellent and harrowing report last week from the notorious Cerrejón mine in Colombia. Describing Holland as an activist was apparently RTÉ’s way of distancing itself from this damning exposé of its fellow semi-state, the ESB, which has burned millions of tonnes of “blood coal” from Cerrejón at Money-point power station in Co Clare.

This was the most hard-hitting coverage to reach a mainstream Irish audience about Cerrejón, an open-cast mine as big as Co Louth, which has been the site of environmental devastation, displacement of indigenous communities and human rights abuses.

Years of pressure from campaigners – and some politicians – shamed the ESB into ceasing its purchase of Colombian coal in 2018. One of its new sources of coal was Russia but, following Putin’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022

and the introduction of sanctions, the ESB quietly resumed buying coal from Cerrejón. Now the company has again promised not to buy coal from Colombia.

One thing not mentioned on *Prime Time* was that, as well as buying this coal, Ireland has served as a tax haven that has deprived Colombia of tens of millions in tax revenue. For two decades all global sales of coal from Cerrejón were handled by the Dublin-based Coal Marketing Company (CMC), availing of Ireland’s 12.5% tax rate. In 2017 CMC – owned by the three multinationals that own the mine, Glencore, Anglo American and BHP – paid €9.2m in tax here on revenues of €2.3bn. In 2022 Glencore bought its two partners out of the mine and CMC, and has now moved the latter’s operations to Switzerland.

Holland reported that the people whose water, air and human rights have been affected by the “violent extractivism” at Cerrejón told him they were dying so people in Europe “can live in comfort”. This also serves as an apt summation of the respective relationships that poor and rich countries have to climate breakdown. Moneypoint had been due to close in 2025 but, because Ireland’s energy demand is going up rather than down, that closing date has been pushed out to the end of the decade.

**THERE’VE BEEN some high-profile interventions in the long-running battle to prevent Canadian firm Dalradian digging up the Sperrin Mountains in Tyrone to mine billions worth of gold. Last year campaigners were outraged to discover, via a freedom of information request, that King Charles’s rep-**

**resentative in the county, Robert Scott – aka Lord Lieutenant of Tyrone – had been lobbying northern secretary Chris Heaton-Harris on behalf of Dalradian. Scott described the proposed mine as “environmentally sound” – possibly unaware that the company had already been found to have polluted waterways before any mining has begun.**

**Weighing in on the other side is comedian Kevin McAleer, who told Belfast Live that “environmentally responsible gold mining” was “a contradiction in terms”. McAleer, a Tyrone native who played boring Uncle Colm in *Derry Girls*, presciently summed up campaigners’ fears**



Kevin McAleer

**when he said the ecological disaster at Lough Neagh, which is facing ecosystem collapse due mainly to intensive agriculture, shows that the north’s authorities are not up to the task of environmental protection.**

**Save Our Sperrins has been campaigning against the mine for 10 years and is gearing up for a public inquiry in September. At a pre-inquiry hearing last week, observers were aghast at the inability of civil servants and their barristers to answer basic questions. It was a shambolic affair that seemed to add weight to campaigners’ claims that the Department for Infrastructure plans to rubber-stamp the Dalradian project.**



## DONALDSON UNDONE

WHEN THE news broke at 1.00 pm on Good Friday that DUP leader Sir Jeffrey Donaldson had been charged with historical sex offences including rape, there had already been a fair amount of crisis management at play behind the scenes. Charges had been preferred on Thursday evening and Donaldson and his wife, who was charged with aiding and abetting his alleged offences, had been bailed to separate addresses – in Donaldson’s case to his apartment in Greenwich, London. But the information was withheld until after an emergency meeting of the DUP officer board on Good Friday morning.

At that meeting, to steady the ship, DUP deputy leader and East Belfast MP Gavin Robinson, was appointed interim leader.

It’s obvious that there had been collaboration between the PSNI and the British government, including the prime minister. The information would also have been given to MI5. The best evidence of



Jeffrey Donaldson

their teamwork is that sometime on Thursday evening, the prime minister appointed and swore in Robinson as a privy counsellor. He would then have been told on confidential privy counsellor terms what was happening in the Antrim police station. He may even have been given Donaldson’s resignation letter.

At any rate, Robinson’s elevation was a clear signal from the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) to the DUP officer board to move swiftly on Good Friday morning to prevent melt down in the DUP.

Minus Donaldson there are 11 members on the officer board, three of them – Lord Dodds, Sammy Wilson and Carla Lockhart – were opposed to the deal Donaldson struck to return to Stormont; a couple of others are late converts. The NIO’s fear was that those opposed to the deal would use Donaldson’s departure to rally opposition in the party. The unanimous appointment of Robinson by lunchtime on Good Friday put paid to that concern.

Nevertheless, the degree of choreography fuelled outlandish conspiracy theories among the DUP’s doubters and more

vociferous opponents in the hardline TUV that the NIO had blackmailed Donaldson into accepting the deal in January – so much so that on Easter Sunday the PSNI issued a statement making clear that its enquiries began only in March and warning social media warriors about contempt of court.

Despite that, the DUP is not out of the woods yet. The interim leader, Robinson, will have to be formally elected and ratified by

the 130-strong party executive, many of them rank-and-file members deeply unhappy with what they call “Donaldson’s deal”.

In January the executive backed the deal but the voting was not revealed. Informed sources say it was by 53%. It is now accepted that Donaldson’s claims that the Irish Sea border is gone and there are “zero checks” are false. Checks are running at over 5,000 a month and border posts are being built.

Robinson was one of the three who negotiated the deal with the British. The other person, apart from Donaldson, is Emma Little-Pengelly, Donaldson’s nominee for deputy first minister.

A protégée of Donaldson, she was co-opted to the assembly to replace him when he decided to remain in Westminster. She is not universally popular in the party, to say the least. A photo-op playing camogie with Michelle O’Neill won’t help either. It could be a torrid executive meeting reminiscent of the uproar in 2021 when Arlene Foster was defenestrated.

On the plus side for the party, it’s difficult to see a credible leadership contender other than Robinson. While he’s low profile, taciturn and embodies what the late-English comedian Bob Cryer called ‘charisn’tma’, Robinson, a barrister and former mayor of Belfast is clever, respected in the DUP and a heavyweight in every sense of the word.

On the minus side for the party, Donaldson intends to “strenuously” contest the charges so the saga will play out over months. He’s likely to have to resign as an MP. A by-election would be another headache though the British could delay that. Testing times for unionism.



## HELEN McENTEE'S FUTURE

**JUSTICE MINISTER** (as we speak) Helen McEntee has been pleading via the media and in person with her former rival and now leader, Simon Harris, not to sack her from justice. But while Simon may wish to come across as a magnanimous victor and retain her in Cabinet, the particular post he has in mind for Helen of Navan comes with a distinct whiff of *schadenfreude*.



Helen McEntee

Time was when McEntee appeared to be the Fine Gael future, with one of the top three or four jobs in Cabinet as justice minister, with party leader Leo Varadkar and special advisor Brian Murphy having her back then and into the future. Also, a splendid general election in 2020 saw Helen retain her Meath East seat, while her own sense of *schadenfreude*, if any, would have been satisfied with the defeat of her constituency rival, Regina Doherty, who is now leader of FG in the Seanad. Thus, many in FG then saw McEntee as the leading candidate among the next generation of potential party leaders.

At the same time Harris, the real threat to Helen's ambition, was transferred sideways (or downwards) from health to the barren political wasteland of higher education and science where, it was hoped, his far-too-prominent profile would be diminished. However, this somewhat contrived department provided Harris with the time and opportunity to traverse the country cutting ribbons and developing the best set of party contacts since that of his new mentor, 'Big Phil' Hogan. And we all now know how

Harris declined to waste that opportunity.

That Simon managed to transform this effective demotion into a springboard to the leadership is now recognised. And McEntee will perhaps realise that the only other alternative is to be demoted to the ranks of junior ministers. But if Harris does put Helen into higher education, the symbolic underlining of their respective fortunes in the leadership stakes will be hard to ignore. Apart from anything else, it will also highlight the failure of one of the most calculated and ambitious campaigns ever to create a party leader and taoiseach.

Harris will understand the optics for McEntee in this situation and know that some in the party will dislike such a move. But given the backlash against the justice minister's liberal programme and his limited options in Cabinet, Harris could, of course, argue that it has to be education or the high road for Helen.

Meanwhile, Doherty is looking more cheerful by the day as she has been an effective supporter of Harris for some time and is likely to be the sole FG Dublin candidate in the EU elections this summer. But another female FG minister, Josepha Madigan, who presumed (as did many others in the party) that she would easily see off rivals Doherty and senator Barry Ward in the convention for that candidacy, has also crashed and burned. Madigan came not first nor even second in that three-horse race and recently resigned from politics altogether.

## IVANA BACIK'S NEW GENERATION

**LABOUR LEADER** Ivana Bacik recently deployed her considerable legal and verbal skills to exonerate the party's local election Ringsend candidate, Carol Reynolds, who had said that Ireland had "too many immigrants" who regarded Ireland as "Treasure Island". Reynolds had been interviewed for a video by far-right, anti-immigrant campaigner Gavin Pepper, in which they both discussed the local Shipwright pub and saying – incorrectly – that it had been earmarked for use by international protection refugees.

Bacik said that Reynolds would continue to be Labour's election candidate in the area following an internal party inquiry into the "edited" video, which had "misrepresented" her views. Bacik also referred to the coercion

and intimidation by the far right of those who are inexperienced in dealing with the media. Given Nolan's comments about "Treasure Island" and the view that "there's a lot of people moaning in the area – which I totally agree with – that the immigrants coming in are not actually immigrants", it is hard to see how her contentious remarks were misrepresented.

Reynolds has worked in the Dáil – most recently with TD Duncan Smith – for many years and is well known in the Labour family. She later retracted her remarks, saying they did not represent Labour's values or her own.

Back in Ringsend a rival candidate said wryly that the episode would not do Reynolds's election prospects any harm at all. But the entire controversy was a downer in the period surrounding Labour's conference.

Bacik herself earned her reputation as an anti-racist politician 20 years ago when Labour was in a lather about how to confront then justice minister Michael McDowell's referendum restricting the citizenship rights of Irish children



Ivana Bacik

born to immigrants. Then Labour leader Pat Rabbitte wanted to play for time and avoid declaring against the referendum until it was necessary. In the meantime, Rabbitte said he wanted to restrict the public debate about whether there should be a referendum and also its timing.

Bacik and a fiery TD called Michael D Higgins led a large crowd of angry members at a meeting of the parliamentary party and its national executive, and the leadership was told to stop pussyfooting around and declare outright opposition *post haste*.

In debate about immigration, Bacik sometimes refers to the immigrant status of her grandfather, Charles Bacik, who came to Ireland just after the second World War and whose family "made a huge contribution to our society". Charles owned four glass factories in Czechoslovakia but they were seized by the bloody communists when they took over the country in 1945. He left for Ireland and became a co-founder of Waterford Crystal. Not quite a tent in Mount Street but something of an upheaval for the family.

Bacik raised another parallel or comparison with former party leaders at conference when she made the ringing declaration that "housing is the civil rights of this generation". This evoked the memory of former party leader Eamon Gilmore's slogan that gay marriage was the civil rights issue etc. There are many Labour or ex-Labour members who campaigned for gay marriage but who later came to the conclusion that social issues were used to cover the denial of some more fundamental issues – whether or not they were civil rights – such as health, food on the table and, yes, housing.

Bacik's clichéd adaptation of the slogan did not impress some of those who were politically crucified back in the days of the austerity junkies that then dominated her party.





## AFFAIRS OF THE NATION

KATE O'CONNELL  
THE DISRUPTER

THE CLEAR desire of Simon Harris to add Kate O'Connell as a 'partner' to councillor James Geoghegan on the Dublin Bay South (DBS) general election ticket is going to upset a number of Fine Gael members and their political calculations.

The primary person to be discommoded is Geoghegan, scion of the most distinguished legal family in the state, who has shed the lustre that surrounded him before he bombed at the DBS by-election in 2021, losing to Labour's Ivana Bacik in a constituency previously known as Blue Heaven.

The talk will be of Kate and Simon going for two seats in Sir Garret FitzGerald's old area but the world knows that one seat is the best FG can reasonably target here. Worse, it could well be that Kate, not James, is the one who will take the seat, especially as many women who voted for Bacik and Green Party leader Eamon Ryan may be looking for an assertive woman to support next time out.

Others who will resent the imposition of the garrulous O'Connell on their patch are the DBS members who have to knock on doors and canvass for their candidate(s). The notion that Leo Varadkar was the one who blocked



...That's the closest...you know who...will ever come to having his name on that door...

Kate's triumphant return to save the DBS Blueshirt seat is only half true. Many party members in DBS have neither forgotten nor forgiven the impertinent culchie who gave cheek to her 'betters' in the party in the not-so-recent past. However, if Simon and HQ add on Kate, there is nothing the membership fodder can do about it.

Spare a thought also for councillor Emma Blain, who had expected to be the added candidate. Blain left her local council area – Glencullen-Sandyford – in the Dáil constituency of Dublin Rathdown to run in

the local electoral area of Pembroke in the Dublin City Council area. Now that the wind is blowing in Kate's favour, Emma can hardly pack her bags and return to Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown county council.

Nor can Blain take advantage of Josepha Madigan's exit from politics to step into the Dáil constituency of Dublin Rathdown (it goes from three seats to four at the general election) as originally intended. This is because councillor Maeve O'Connell is now seen as Madigan's likely replacement in this constituency.

## MARTIN TO PROVOKE MORE REFERENDUMS?

MICHEÁL MARTIN'S move to legislate for the abolition of the triple lock would run into political, constitutional and even EU legislative trouble, judging by statements uttered by Martin himself and inter-governmental declarations made to facilitate a 'yes' vote in two EU referendums.

The Dáil heard Sinn Féin's Pearse Doherty remind Martin last November that a decade earlier he had defended the triple lock, telling the then Fine Gael/Labour coalition government: "The current policy works and it has complete popular legitimacy. There is no reason whatsoever to change it. Such a change will impress no one in Europe and it will contribute nothing to international peace. Instead of sniping at our neutrality, the government should acknowledge what we have achieved because of it and set out a policy to strengthen rather than to undermine it." Sterling stuff, but then Martin was in opposition at the time.

However, Doherty also reminded Martin that the programme for government signed up to by the Fianna Fáil leader when negotiating to get into Government says: "The Government will ensure that all overseas operations will be conducted in line with our position of military neutrality and will be subject to a triple lock of UN, Government and Dáil Éireann approval."

That statement is equally strong and very clear about the link between neutrality and the triple lock.

The real problems about abolishing this safeguard, however, may be far more compelling than Martin doing political somersaults and could involve all sorts of legal actions at home and abroad. Goldhawk is indebted to Anthony Coughlan, a seasoned campaigner against EU federalism and vari-

ous treaties designed to create same, for his analysis of what Martin's proposal means for EU treaties voted on in the past.

Coughlan points out that a national declaration issued by the Irish government at the 2002 Seville European Council meeting induced Irish voters to support 'yes' to the



Micheál Martin



Anthony Coughlan

ratification of Nice Treaty 2, having rejected Nice Treaty 1 the year before. The declaration said that Irish Defence Forces' participation in overseas operations abroad requires "(a) the authorisation of the operation by the Security Council or the General Assembly of the United Nations, (b) the agreement of the Irish government, and (c) the approval of Dáil Éireann and in accordance with Irish law".

The European Council then declared that it "takes cognisance of the National Declaration of Ireland" and that Ireland intends to associate this declaration with its ratification of the Nice Treaty should the referendum be passed – which it was, on the assumption that this declaration was genuine.

When the Lisbon Treaty was rejected, its

second iteration in 2009 involved the referendum commission, chaired by Mr Justice Frank Clarke, sending information to all voting households. This included a reference to the declaration (quoted in the enclosed information booklet) on the triple lock, saying it "will be associated with the instrument of ratification if Ireland does ratify the Lisbon Treaty".

This the Irish people did, given once more a trusting electorate that believed the assurances of the government, which included Martin at the time.

Recent commentary on Irish foreign policy, neutrality and the triple lock (the latter underpins neutrality) is driven by the western states, Britain and the EU's main powers. The West sees China, Russia and other emerging rival powers as the enemy and as a bloc that will have to be confronted militarily. Irish complicity would hardly make much difference to the balance of military forces across the globe but our credibility as a non-aligned, neutral country would, if we could be persuaded to join up, be a symbolic victory for the generals and the industrial military complex in the West.

However, the accompaniment of the triple lock declaration in the two EU treaties mentioned above and the clear impact it had on both referendum 'yes' votes, is very likely to provoke legal and constitutional actions by individuals or parties. And just what does the government think President Michael D Higgins will do when asked to decide whether to refer the constitutionality of a bill to abolish the triple lock to the Council of State? Can we expect another referendum, this time on a subject – neutrality – for which the polls have repeatedly shown there is much support?



## HUGH O'CONNELL'S LONG GOODBYE

HUGH O'CONNELL'S exit from Mediahuis, where he was deputy group political editor working for the *Sindo* and *Indo*, came at a good time for the Aawrish edition of the *Sunday Times*, which has poached him (five years after Mediahuis poached him from the then *Sunday Business Post*).

However, relying on the strict terms of his contract, O'Connell was compelled by the competitive Belgians to work out a lengthy period of several weeks before being allowed to walk away from Talbot Street.

Nevertheless, a new Fine Gael leader and Taoiseach, local and EU elections and a possibly imminent general election means that the *ST*, which has been denuded of experienced political correspondents in the last year or so, is now better prepared for the convulsions ahead.

The flood of political hacks out the door of the *ST* was basically down to a slashing of editorial costs at the newspaper, so why did the Mediahuis journalist leave that newspaper group for a much less stable entity with a reputation for very tight editorial budgeting?

One reason is that the deputy group editor of *Indo* titles is to become political editor, *numero uno*, at the *ST*'s Irish edition, something that apparently appeals greatly to Hugh. Oh, and he is also to receive a salary and package worth slightly in excess of €100,000, despite the parsimonious regime at the North Wall HQ of the *ST*.

The irony here is that while many hacks in the 'quality' media scorned the *ST*'s somewhat down-market political and current



Hugh O'Connell

affairs output after the upheavals at its Irish edition, the same process may be about to happen at Mediahuis titles. Cost cutting is the order of the day at Talbot towers and has been for some time. Thus, requests for a raise or parity with comparable salaries elsewhere are now out of the question at Talbot Towers.

The political culture at the Irish *ST* is equally ungenerous but O'Connell comes from a newspaper group where the FG outlook is predominant in the newsroom. And he is married into a family where the political world view is equally blue — his wife is sister to Kate O'Connell and another sister, Mary Newman Julian, was an FG general election candidate in Tipperary in 2020. (Hugh, of course, is an independent-minded journalist and strives to present political analysis and news objectively.)

It's not as if it would present a difficulty in the *ST* if any of its journalists were to the right of centre, as the daily *Times* and the *ST* in the 'mother country' are both regarded as a Tory party read for the faithful. The chaps in London regularly foist the Whitehall view of the world on the Irish edition — especially when it comes to intelligence, security and foreign affairs matters — and is given to telling Paddy what his duties are in these areas.

**RECENT SUGGESTIONS from the *Sunday Independent* and interpretations by others that the BBC Two's programme, *The Secret Army*, shows Martin McGuinness was an informer have their origins in the late Sean O'Callaghan's book, *The Informer*. There, MI5 informer O'Callaghan, or his handlers, put such words about McGuinness in the mouth of fabled IRA commander Brian Keenan.**

**In his book, O'Callaghan himself went on to question the view of McGuinness as an informer but pitting himself (a self-confessed informer) against the alleged opinion of the revered (by IRA members) Keenan probably strengthened the allegation.**

**If McGuinness really was in the grip of MI5, then he was the most ineffective agent the British ever recruited. Despite his continuous presence on the IRA army council and his role as chief of staff for various periods, he failed to avert or tip off his handlers about events he had to have known about, such as the Brighton bomb that nearly killed Margaret Thatcher; the massive arms supplies from Libya; the mortar attack that nearly wiped out the British cabinet; the Hyde Park bombing; the Canary wharf bomb; and a continued stream of attacks that preceded or ran parallel to IRA/British government talks.**

## LIBERAL MEDIA DEBATES FAR RIGHT

APPEASEMENT IS a notion that some media columnists are using and debating right now in the face of a right-wing backlash against so-called 'woke' politics and legislation to criminalise hate behaviour. Two pundits that appear to have taken a different stance on how to confront this rush-to-the-right are *Irish Times* columnist Justine McCarthy and her *Sunday Times* equivalent, Alison O'Connor.

Writing under the (slightly misleading) headline "Political stampede to the right can only be good for democracy", McCarthy told *IT* readers last week that Fine Gael "should keep on going back to its home habitat on the right". She argued that there is a substantial conservative block in Ireland that needs to be catered for as otherwise much of this constituency will opt for extreme right-wing, undemocratic politics.

McCarthy reckons that FG is the largest in a block of three groups that includes Independents led by Mattie McGrath and the Healy-Raes and also, one presumes, Michael McDowell's putative alliance.

McCarthy lashed Sinn Féin for its feeble flight from socialism in recent times and put it "in theory" on the left along with the Social Democrats and Labour, while Fianna Fáil and the Greens are, she argued, in the centre.

The real point of her argument is that, unless there is a clear right-wing party or grouping in the Dáil, the ugly right — like the Blueshirts in the 1930s, perhaps? — will mop up this section of the population.

Just two days later O'Connor appeared to respond to McCarthy, consciously or otherwise, when writing under the headline, "It's pointless to appease anti-woke brigade that won't compromise".

While both writers appeared to support the anti-hate bill, O'Connor also said: "The prevailing mood of those shouting the loudest is to never reach a point of satisfaction, regardless of efforts made to satisfy."

In other words, the hard right will not fly away if it is appeased; rather, it will come back for more.

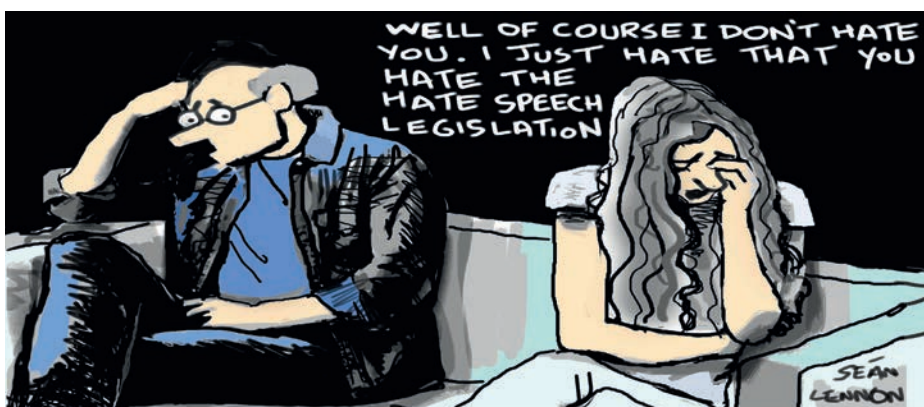
The Government's recent proposal to adopt measures in the EU Asylum and Migration Pact is a direct result of the argument circulating in the Government/Leinster House bubble recently, which says that these measures, along with other measures restricting immigration, will cut the ground from underneath the far right.

The currency of this argument was greatly enhanced by a recent poll taken by the European Council on Foreign Relations, which said there would be a surge in far-right or right-leaning political parties in the imminent EU elections.

We shall soon see the results of these attempts to deal with the recent phenomenon of serious racism in Ireland.



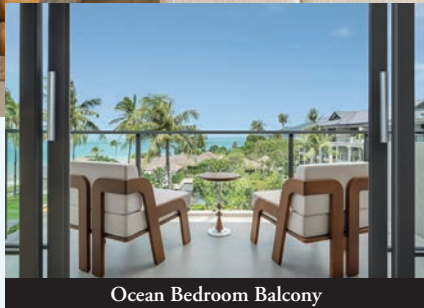
Justine McCarthy





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The Gin Run Bar at Night



Snowfish with Salsa Verde



Salt Society Lounge Area





# Simon Harris

HOW DID 37-year-old Simon Harris beat off heavyweight contenders Paschal Donohoe and Simon Coveney, as well as Helen McEntee and other ambitious souls, to take the Fine Gael leadership and the job of Taoiseach within 24 hours or so? Harris not only blew away these pretenders but frightened them off the pitch before the game began, thus taking the prize with a bye. But a harder question is: how will Harris avert a thrashing at the next general election, with poor poll figures and a demoralised membership that appears to be out of touch with even its own supporters?

Looking back since the formation of this coalition Government in July 2020, the wonder is that there was such a surprise at Leo Varadkar's recent 'shock' resignation and the total unpreparedness of all the presumed contenders to succeed him – all bar Harris, that is. It's not as if FG's saviour, Varadkar, looked like an unassailable leader in 2020, having led the party to a very bad general election result – down to 35 seats from 50 – followed by a blundering public spat with then chief medical officer Tony Holohan about the latter's demand for strict anti-Covid measures. And a Garda investigation into the FG leader leaking a confidential document concerning Government negotiations with GPs was most unedifying.

Ironically, it was the pandemic that resurrected FG's polling rates after the general election and before the formation of the coalition Government. But while Varadkar and then health minister Harris also benefited personally from their apparently measured and reassuring public manner, this was not enough to protect the acting taoiseach from the other controversies. His stock declined significantly while that of Harris soared (see *The Phoenix* 12/3/21) in a major revival after his spell as health minister since 2016.

Only his prominent role as Minister for Health in the Repeal the 8th referendum saved Harris from the dispiriting fate of successive health ministers in this period and nobody seemed to care that he pledged to "oppose any legislation to introduce abortion in Ireland" before the 2011 general election. Another irony was that Micheál Martin insisted on taking the health department in the coalition (and housing), so confident was he that Fianna Fáil would sort out these major problems.

Instead, when Stephen Donnelly was appointed health minister in June 2020, his performance compared unfavourably with Harris's smooth, reassuring, caring etc role dealing with Covid up until then – another PR win for Simon while those around him in Cabinet floundered. As Goldhawk wrote at the time, by early 2021 Harris had become a "contender for the top job".

Another feature of the FG Cabinet tier at this time, just over a year after the general election, was that big beasts Paschal Donohoe and Simon Coveney had shrunk to that of yesterday's leadership contenders – Donohoe because he had been director of elections in 2020 and had failed, as finance minister, to loosen the exchequer strings before the election; Coveney because he had become boring and presumptuous in the eyes of his parliamentary party and also because, a short time later, he had blundered embarrassingly in the fiasco over the special envoy UN job-that-wasn't-a-job for former minister Katherine Zappone in 2021.

What really underlines the shock of the body politic, including the mainstream media, when Varadkar resigned was that the evidence of the taoiseach's political decline was plain to see more than three years ago, even if most of the highly restrained political correspondents were unable to see it or declined to write about it.

As early as February 2021, former junior minister John Paul Phelan provoked gales of laughter when, describing the efforts of Varadkar and Coveney to bluff their way through a parliamentary party meeting, he described their long-winded speechifying as "the Fine Gael

equivalent of a punishment beating" (see *The Phoenix* 4/6/21). In time, alienating Phelan would have consequences for the party leadership.

In August 2021 Goldhawk referred to FG as rudderless under Varadkar but explained that the status of the party's heavyweights – Coveney and Donohoe – had also declined.

A month later, word spread inside FG that Big Phil Hogan (that vengeful political brute who had been deposed from his EU Commission post with much assistance from Varadkar) was meddling in party matters – and Phil is the very last person a nervous FG leader would want to be so doing. At this stage Hogan had whispered in party circles that Heather Humphreys would be a good interim leader while waiting until the next generation of contenders matured. He later settled on Harris, of course, as the man that would deal with the impertinent Varadkar, whom he had helped to become party leader in 2017.

The point here, initially, was not so much that Big Phil was selecting Heather or Simon as the next leader but that the unforgiving ex-commissioner was aware that Varadkar was most vulnerable at this early date – mid 2021.

## POOL OF TALENT

In April 2022, Goldhawk referred to "mounting anger among members at all levels of the party about Varadkar's lackadaisical leadership" and demands for a change in style, presentation and personnel. But the same article (see *The Phoenix* 22/4/22) argued that the reason then tánaiste Varadkar was not facing a leadership crisis was that none of the available pretenders were regarded as either up for it or up to it. The view was that the next leader would have to come from the next generation.

With Donohoe and Coveney being edged out of the much-vaunted 'pool of talent' available to the party as leaders, a new dynamic – or rather, paralysis – began to assert itself, with Harris seen as not quite ready but more likely than the others to become leader; junior minister Peter Burke was highly capable but had not yet sat at the Cabinet table; and Helen McEntee was not regarded as leadership material. Meanwhile another would-be leader, Jennifer Carroll MacNeill – programme manager to three ministers – was emerging as a potential leader, although she had to wait until December 2022 to become a junior minister.





## AFFAIRS OF THE NATION

There were further squalls in the parliamentary party in 2022 and discontented ex-ministers such as Phelan (again), Charlie Flanagan (repeatedly) and Paul Kehoe expressed their criticisms with abandonment. But it was not just the demoted, disgruntled ones that were complaining – senator Martin Conway also pitched in at parliamentary party meetings.

Still, media coverage of a major political party with a failing leader and continued (if usually discreet) back-biting against him virtually ignored what looked like a real leadership crisis. Would this anaesthetised media approach have been the response had the same circumstances surrounded FF in recent years? Think Bertie Ahern, Albert Reynolds and Charlie Haughey. Or was the mainstream media so paranoid about Sinn Féin's growth that it was afraid of destabilising the coalition?

### 'DONE DEAL'

Last year saw Varadkar assume his post as Taoiseach once more but it did not see any improvement in FG's poll ratings, which have remained at around 20% on average since then. However, this period did see Harris ram home his advantage on all fronts and it was noted (see *The Phoenix* 13/1/23) that "in recent years he has cultivated party members the length and breadth of the country".

Four months later Goldhawk argued that the ascension of Harris as party leader was "virtually a done deal" and that he was ahead of any other contenders "by a country mile". This view (see edition 19/5/23) was based partly on the members' perception that, despite a high-powered PR campaign behind McEntee, she had not lived up to the image of a modern, female leader.

Her decision to go with the liberal, feminist programme did not help this campaign. Nor did the decision of her supposed mentor, Varadkar, to enlist Harris as her replacement in justice when she went on maternity leave last year, allowing her rival to create the impression that he had done more in six months in justice than she had in two-and-a-half years. Was this another example of Varadkar losing his drive and attention to political detail because of his personal crisis over the previous two years or more?

The problem for Harris in the last year was his fear of moving prematurely against the party establishment. This was in spite of the alternative fear that not moving quickly could see the emergence of new contenders such as the impressive Burke and the also impressive if over-ambitious MacNeill. Neither had any Cabinet experience but, if matters proceeded unchallenged, they might acquire such experience if FF/FG plus a third force managed to forge another coalition in the next 12 months.

If MacNeill comes over as ambitious it's because she is, but her short period making phone calls to sound out her chances – very short given the response – was because Harris's rise to the leadership was most unwelcome. She will know that, barring some

cataclysmic event, Harris is leader for the long haul and at 43 – six years his senior – Jennifer's chances of Cabinet membership are most uncertain given FG's likely general election results shortly. Thus, she was the only contender to hit the phones last month in the day or so after Varadkar resigned.

One view among the victorious Harris circle was articulated by the rhetorical question: why did no one else want to be leader of this great party?

The reasons Harris won the leadership are many. They include his incredible work rate, his communications skills, and Varadkar's personal and political implosion. But the absence of any opponent also helped.

Harris did not have a super team of west wingers staffing the phones to muster support and those he did have included relative non-entities such as ex-junior ministers Colm Brophy, Paul Kehoe and Phelan (vingince, bejaysus, for the punishment beatings) and also Conway. Naturally, Big Phil is also taking some not-so-small credit for Harris's victory, while EU candidate and former minister Regina Doherty was also instrumental in promoting his leadership before and during his 24-hour leadership blitz.



Regina Doherty

Much speculation about who will be in Harris's Cabinet centres on one or two male politicians such as Burke and Brendan Griffin, who look likely to replace Coveney and Varadkar. But these are mere details compared to the real problem that faces Harris and FG.

### MCDOWELL'S ALLIANCE

Another political development neglected by the media has been the cunning plot being hatched by Michael McDowell and right-thinking (very right-thinking) colleagues. McDowell is deploying the play book designed by Shane Ross and Finian McGrath in the 2016-2020 coalition, which saw a clutch of six or so independent TDs negotiate a series of ministerial and other positions within and without Cabinet.

That Independent Alliance had the sparsest of political programmes but in 2024 McDowell knows where the political space is – somewhere between right-but-polite FG and the far-right rabble.

The latter are unlikely to take a single Dáil seat at the next election, whatever about the local elections, but McDowell is already talking to half a dozen or more sitting TDs about forming a new alliance and more will likely follow.

Harris has indicated a shift to the right for his new FG but there is only so far that he can move the relatively broad church that is his party. The Progressive Democrats were a more cohesive force in Irish politics and the comparisons with McDowell's new group are not exact but they do exist. One of these is that the PDs inflicted much more electoral damage on FG than FF and helped to keep them out of power for years.

What can Simon and a rattled FG do about McDowell other than parlay with him about coalition formation post-election?



## Bog Cuttings

### SWINGING SIXTIES

AN INTOXICATED woman found by gardaí carrying an auctioneer's sign appeared before Belmullet District Court charged with a public order offence. The court heard that on April 30, 2023, gardaí observed Elaine Joyce (32) of Drimurla, Newport, walking down Ballina Road in a drunken state. When they approached, the defendant – who was brandishing an auctioneer's sign – became belligerent and refused to provide her details to the officers. When pressed, she told them to "fuck off". Joyce told the court that, on the night in question, she had been attending a 60th birthday and, while walking home, one of her cousins acquired the sign. She said they were "messing" and "hitting each other" with the sign when gardaí arrived. Expressing her remorse for her actions, Joyce added that she no longer drinks alcohol socially after conceding that it can make her "too stubborn". Judge Fiona Lydon ordered the defendant to carry out 80 hours of community service in lieu of two months in prison. *Western People*, submitted by reader

### A GIANT TOOL

A 24-YEAR-OLD man who ran down North Main Street, Cork, waving a pitchfork in the early afternoon of July 3, 2023, was sentenced to three months in prison following a recent sitting of Cork District Court. Sergeant Gearóid Davis told the court that, on the date in question, gardaí were alerted to a theft that had occurred in Scott's Tools. The defendant, Daniel Mulroy, of 78 Highfield Park, Ballincollig, had entered the shop and stolen a pitchfork, which he carried with him while running through the middle of Cork away from Scott's Tools. Mulroy was also charged with a number of public order offences related to public intoxication on separate dates. Upon hearing that the defendant was pleading guilty to the charges of public intoxication, Judge Dorgan said: "People are entitled to walk down the street without having someone run along with a pitchfork, in fairness." *Cork Evening Echo*

### RUINED HIS LIFE

TULLAMORE DISTRICT Court heard the case of a man who was arrested for a number of public order offences after an altercation with gardaí. On March 3, 2024, officers received reports of a man "roaring and shouting" in Arden Vale, Tullamore. On their way to the scene, the defendant, Belkacem Bouchentouf (53) of 19 Arden Vale, Tullamore, arrived at Tullamore Garda Station in an agitated state. Sergeant Justine Reilly told the court that Bouchentouf was extremely intoxicated and acting in an aggressive manner, telling gardaí to "fuck off" and accusing them of ruining his life, leading to his arrest. The defendant, who has previous convictions for public order and road traffic offences, told Judge Andrew Cody that he couldn't explain his actions despite proclaiming to be a "psychologist". Judge Cody imposed a two-month sentence suspended for a year. *Offaly Express*

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



# Mark Mehigan

WHILE HE remains unknown to a large swathe of the country, the multi-talented Mark Mehigan has his fingers in all sorts of pies. He's an 'agony uncle' on *Image.ie*, where his biography describes a "comedian and podcaster, author, Instagram matchmaker, aspiring Cilla Black, dating series host and dating columnist". Recently, however, he has been attracting attention courtesy of a relationship with RTE's golden girl, Doireann Garrihy, and so, inevitably, Mark now has a book out.

Mehigan's engagement to Garrihy has given the 34-year-old posh boy from Foxrock a big upgrade in the public profile stakes among a certain coterie, which is something that had eluded him – but not for the want of trying.

The loud and lairy Jack of all trades has started to feature more prominently online and in the mainstream media thanks to the publication last month by Gill Books of *This Is Not a Self Help Book... But It Might Just Help You*. Falling into the increasingly popular (for publishers anyway) recovery genre, it deals with Mehigan's alcoholism, drug use, panic attacks and eventual sobriety. The former St Michael's College alumnus has already had whirls to promote it on Brendan O'Connor's RTE Radio 1 show and in the *Irish Times*.

Curiously, Goldhawk can't unearth any reviews of the book but it is safe to say that the, er, work, is probably best suited to devoted fans of Mehigan. Over the 300 pages, he treats readers to the minutiae of his rise to mediocrity, tales of drink- and drug-fuelled high jinks, and his ultimate decision to become sober in October 2021.

The book is written in the same frantic and frenzied tone with which listeners to his podcast will be familiar. A tolerance for self-absorption is strongly recommended for would-be readers.

One familiar name flying the flag for the book is, of course, Garrihy, who began dating Mehigan in November 2022. Given that the book is centred around his personal story and he has a pretty modest 57,000 Instagram followers (compared to Doireann's 326,000), Gill Books must have been thrilled with Garrihy's support.

Indeed, the 2FM and *Dancing With The Stars* (DWTS) presenter was chosen to interview Mehigan for Eason's "in conversation" event at The Sugar Club last month, with the admission fee set at €30 a head. It was win-win all around, as Eason and Gill got Garrihy's star wattage and there was little danger of her asking awkward questions.

Mehigan is now a staple feature of Garrihy's social media and he turns up regularly on her podcast, *Doireann and Friends*. Her unbridled adoration for "bae" and the stream of inside jokes between them can, unsurprisingly, be hard to stomach.

The couple met because Mehigan's cousin, Jon Jon Mehigan, was producing Garrihy's breakfast show on 2FM and she attended one of his comedy gigs. They are now engaged and Mark has moved into his fiancée's house in the Dublin suburb of Castleknock.

Meanwhile, the future Mrs Mehigan's promotion of her "bae" on social media continues to give him quite the leg-up towards achieving the fame he has clearly long coveted. (When Mehigan was interviewed by former 2FM pre-

sender Louise McSharry for her podcast, she opened by informing listeners that it hadn't "gone down well" when she told Mehigan she wasn't familiar with him until he started going out with Garrihy.)

Mark initially fancied himself as a musician and, aged 18, moved to Brighton to do a songwriting course but dropped out after a year. Having been briefly involved in an internet channel called Balcony TV, Mark returned to Ireland. Through connections in the music scene here, Mehigan was invited to set up a Saturday club night by the co-owner of Andrew's Lane Theatre, Anthony Remedy.



Mark Mehigan

In 2012 he was involved in a business called Brooklyn Zoo, which threw hip-hop parties and appeared to be quite successful for a time. (The business filings were made by the legal firm Pearse Mehigan & Co.) Mark apparently made "crazy money", which was splurged on boozing and five-star hotels.

He admitted to arriving at the airport drunk on a couple of occasions and jetting off with a pal to the first place available and he told the *IT* that he had "thousands of euro" stashed under the bed at that point.

Mehigan met former Westlife star Mark Feehily backstage at the Oxegen festival and "badgered" him with songs and demos, which paid off when Feehily flew him, then aged 22, to New York to write music for a solo album.

After that promising start, Mehigan looked to push ahead with his own solo career, which stalled when the release of an EP with a Scottish label called Numbers never materialised.

He then switched hats to pursue a comedy

career, having been recording monologues in a "deadpan" version of himself on Facebook in 2014, which had started to attract attention.

When Mark's music career failed to take flight, he handed his CV into production companies and creative agencies. One short-lived job was as head of an electronic robot costume company, which Mehigan says he left before he could get sacked for his drinking binges.

Aged 27 and with an embellished CV containing fictitious qualifications, references and work experiences, Mehigan landed a job at BBC Comedy. The woman doing the background checks was disarmed when he promised her tickets to a non-existent Westlife gig and he was soon installed at the Beeb, creating social media campaigns for scripted comedy programmes such as the *Gavin and Stacey Christmas Special* and *This Time with Alan Partridge*.

In 2019, the *Mark Mehigan's Sunday Roast* podcast was established, charging subscribers from €4 to €16 per month. It covered subjects under titles such as 'Tight People are the Worst' and 'Influencers Doing Charity Work'. After a few months, the podcast was bringing in more than the BBC job and brands were taking an interest in sponsorship. Mehigan duly decided that his future was in comedy and he moved back to Dublin in February 2020, just before the Covid pandemic hit.

Mark now has a new podcast on the GoLoud app, *Mark Mehigan's Weekly Roast*, which features Mehigan "navigating his way through modern Irish life, whilst lightly roasting every aspect of pop culture. [It] promises to be the perfect blend of comedy and sincerity, combining his storytelling skills, captivating stand up talent & viral social roasts".

It features listeners sharing voicenotes with Mehigan, often using voice-altering devices to disguise their identities. In the recent round-up of the, er, "best of" bits from the show's first season, a segment was devoted to difficult co-workers. One contributor talked about his colleague sniffing the seat of a female co-worker's chair when she left the room, while another discussed his colleague picking scabs off his head and placing them in a little receptacle on his desk.

Meanwhile, there is presumably more mileage to be wrung out of the 'journey to sobriety' tale and, of course, there is a book to flog. The forthcoming nuptials with Garrihy should garner a lot of attention and pulpy magazine covers, thus keeping Mehigan's mug in the public eye.

When it comes to the fame trajectory, however, as Garrihy's star continues to rise, our hero may have to settle for always being the bridesmaid.





## SMOCK ALLEY'S BAD REVIEW

WITH DUBLIN City Council (DCC) preparing to take over Smock Alley Theatre (SAT) in Temple Bar, the board of the linked Gaiety School of Acting next door will be hoping that the planned changes don't impact on their coffers.

Fans of Goldhawk will not be surprised that SAT is in a financial mess. It will be recalled (see *The Phoenix* 21/9/18) that the directors reported at the time that there was "a significant chance that Smock Alley Theatre will not be sustainable". Fast-forward to the accounts for 2021, which showed the accumulated deficit standing at €173,000.

Moreover, the auditors highlighted "significant uncertainties" and stated that they were "unable to obtain sufficient appropriate audit evidence to provide a basis for an audit opinion on these financial statements".

It was reported by the *Dublin Inquirer* that DCC is now preparing to take over the running of the venue and create a Dublin Municipal Theatre to operate out of the building, which has been leased from Temple Bar Cultural Trust since 2008.

The SAT board was chaired until the start of this year by banker-turned-financial consultant **Brendan Lynott** (ex-PTSB) and includes number cruncher **Gerard Dempsey** (ex-Diageo), Goodbody legal eagle **Danielle Fleming**, actor **Mark Lambert** and charity boss **Fiona O'Malley**.

A long-time director was SAT's founder and communications consultant, **Patrick Sutton**, who was the face of Smock Alley for decades. He was also the driving force behind the

Gaiety School of Acting, from which he stepped down as head honcho last month after 30 years.

The rather profitable Gaiety School – which is now run by UK theatre director **William Wollen** and chaired by Element Pictures group head of business affairs **Mark Byrne** – is closely tied to SAT, as is clear from the theatre's last accounts. The auditors state that, at the end of 2021, no less than €208,000 was owed by Smock Alley to Singman Ltd, the parent company of the Gaiety School.



*Brendan Lynott*

## EN POINTE!

THE DECISION by **Anne Maher's** Ballet Ireland (BI) to withdraw a piece choreographed by Israeli **Ohad Naharin** from its Bold Moves programme raised eyebrows, given the predominantly conservative character of artistic companies dependent on the state for funding.

The move was a provocative

one from BI, which is chaired by the former MD of Irish Times Training, **Una O'Hare**. Other members of the establishment on the board are the recently arrived legal eagle **Jeremy Erwin**, a partner at the big Hayes Solicitors firm; and **Graham Reid**, the head of markets for consultancy giants EY Ireland.

Also arriving on the dance floor last year was senior civil servant **Róisín Cahillane**, who is principal officer at the Department of Transport, having previously served in the Departments of Health. *In situ* since 2022 is **Leo Moore**, global director of creative systems at Facebook parent, Meta; and **Karen Lowey**, ex-marketing director at EY Ireland.

BI has long been a favourite of the Arts Council's and this year has been allocated almost €½m in funding. While the Merrion Square Mafia has not expressed an opinion on the Gaza invasion, it will be interesting to see where it stands on its clients taking action. (In January, the Arts Council of England introduced a controversial policy on funding, with implications for individuals who make political statements.)

Some delicate footwork may be required.



## APPEALING BEHAVIOUR

THE REVELATION last month that the IHRB had been described by consultants in 2021 as "not fit for purpose" was dismissed by the agency on the grounds that the new chief executive, **Darragh O'Loughlin**, has strengthened governance. Now O'Loughlin is preparing to fill the brand-new role of head of racing regulation and integrity.

Topping the list of responsibilities for the position is "management of referrals and appeals to ensure robust and efficient case management including preparation of cases, establishment of hearing panels and presentation

of disciplinary cases".

The requirement for applicants is to be legally qualified with at least five years' experience. Judging by the referrals committees' hearings in the week leading up to last month's closing date for applications, whoever gets appointed will need to be on their toes. No less than three of the four cases before the appeals panel were reversed.

In the first challenge, **Peter Allen** (chairman), **Nick Wachman** and **Paddy Molony** reversed the decision of the **Finbar Cahill**-chaired referrals committee, which also included **Mary Cosgrove**, **Anthony Byrne** and **Liam Walsh**. Allen *et al* agreed with all nine riders who had appealed a finding that they had erred in their judgement in a Dundalk contest.

In the second case, before Allen, Wachman and Molony, the panel again agreed with jockey **Wayne Hassett** that the **Robert Dore**-chaired committee – which also featured **John Tyrrell**, **Henry Lappin**, **Anthea Smyth** and **Paul**

**Deegan** – had got it wrong when giving him a 20-day ban at Dundalk racecourse.

The other amended appeal was heard by a panel chaired by **Peter Law** and including **John Murphy** and Byrne (who had been one of the race-night stewards at Dundalk that had wrongly penalised the nine jockeys). The trio agreed with rider **Philip Byrnes** that the stewards – **Frank Kenny** (chairman), **Laurence McFerran**, **Joe Collins**, **Rupert Macauley** and Deegan – had erred in their finding at Navan and, therefore, overturned his four-day ban.

There was yet another reversal for the stewards the following week, following a high-profile decision by the referrals committee, chaired by barrister and RTÉ board member **Susan Ahern**, to suspend a six-month training ban for **Tony Martin** after his horse, *Firstman*, had tested positive for lidocaine. The IHRB immediately lobbied in an appeal on the basis of leniency, resulting in a finding from the (retired judge) Peter Kelly-chaired panel that three months of the suspension should kick in next month.

*MEYDAN RACECOURSE Dubai was the location on*

*Saturday afternoon where the spotlight really shone on Rebels Romance.*

*Ballydoyle's champion, Auguste Rodin, who had been so impressive at Dundalk under regular work rider Rachel Richardson, could only look on as Charlie Appleby's charge showed them all the way home in the Longines Dubai Sheema Classic.*

*Visibly disappointed that all good things come to an end, Aidan O'Brien said: "The race was a bit of a non-event. It was just one of those where it didn't happen."*

*Another Ballydoyle stalwart who "needed a change" has also been making waves. Seamie Heffernan, the best second jockey in the world, departed the training operation after nearly 30 years to pursue a freelance career.*

*With Heffernan being one of the oldest riders in the weigh room, a changing of the guard in Fethard was always inevitable.*

*Not content to dismount quietly, however, Heffernan rode a winner later on Saturday afternoon for his old friends, John Magnier and Paul Shanahan, when Shandy, trained by Fozzy Stack, won at Cork.*



*Darragh O'Loughlin*



## CORRECTING CHRISTINE DAVIES

THERE WAS some bad news for the glamorous **Christine Jane Davies**, owner of the sprawling Ballybla House and estate outside Ashford in Co Wicklow and sister of loaded Irish Georgian Society president **David Davies**.

A recent planning decision means Christine will have to find another way to generate “additional sources of income”.

La Davies applied for planning permission to retain an unauthorised two-bedroom house (described by planners as being “out of character” with the existing estate) that was constructed adjacent to Ballybla House itself for use as tourist accommodation. The plan, however, was shot down by the council as it was deemed in breach of the County Development Plan.

Christine duly lobbied in an

appeal, in which the consultants, The Smith Partnership, claimed that she was seeking to “regularise” the cottage, “as constructed on site”.

In support of her appeal, a letter signed by Davies noted: “The events of recent years have highlighted the need for farms such as Ballybla to diversify and find alternative and additional sources of income.”

She described Ballybla as a “fantastic location” for agri-educational activities, due to the “remarkable diversity of habitats for potential guests to study, explore and enjoy”.

There was, however, no reference to the failure to obtain planning permission before erecting the single-storey house. Indeed, council planners had also highlighted “a large collection of farm buildings and other structures near the subject site”, which, they claimed, “do not appear to have the benefit of planning permission... The planning officer is concerned that any permission may lead to the consolidation of unauthorised

development.”

Davies’s appeal was lodged in late 2022 and was initially set to be decided by the end of May last year but well-ventilated controversies at An Bord Pleanála (ABP) resulted in a major backlog. As a result, the decision was well over six months late in being delivered.

The bad news for Christine when it finally arrived is that her appeal was rejected for a variety of reasons, with ABP noting that it was not satisfied that the unauthorised house

is located in an established tourist facility and the retention of the property would be “contrary to proper planning and sustainable development in the area”.

A headache for Davies now is the next step she will have to take, given that there is no planning permission in place for the two-bedroom house and that retention permission has been refused, at a minimum for tourism use. As a result, the owner of Ballybla House could yet be forced to demolish the unauthorised property and end up shelling out a fair few bob rather than

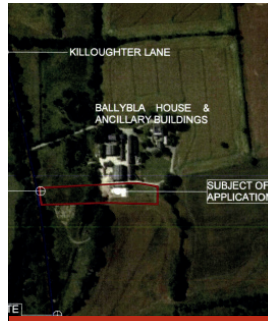
generating any “additional sources of income”.

*THE ASSOCIATION of Irish Racehorse Owners (AIRO) has just published its annual report for 2023, showing income of €270,000, the majority of which (€169,000) was made up of members’ subscriptions. Nevertheless, the company, which boasts one employee (Regina Byrne) managed to post a loss of €15,000.*

*One of the interesting aspects of AIRO’s spending is the moolah lashed out under the heading of ‘Awards Expenses’. This relates to the annual AIRO bash, which last year was held once again at John Magnier’s swanky Cashel Park Hotel.*

*According to the accounts, that blow-out in Tipperary cost AIRO a handsome €54,000. Recipients of the accolades presented on the night included Swiss-based tax exile JP McManus and fellow moneybags, the Aga Khan, Sue Magnier and Barry Connell.*

*As was the case last year, the awards themselves were sculpted from wire and resin, and were designed and made by British artist Linda Hoyle, which might disappoint some Irish artists hoping for a juicy commission.*



Aerial view of Ballybla farm

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## KILLIAN POYNTON'S HIGH NET WORTH CLIENTS

GREEN BIRD Ltd, a company catering to the needs of so-called "high net worth individuals", has found itself on the end of a judgment from the dreaded Revenue. Established by **Killian Poynton** – who hails from the **Bewley** family – and his Russian wife, it looks like the pandemic scuppered the couple's big plans, although the ink was already red by the time Covid struck.

Certainly, Poynton talked a good game when he discussed Green Bird's *modus operandi* and excess was the theme when Killian was interviewed by former presidential candidate **Seán Gallagher** in Howth Yacht Club for the *Sindo* a few years back.

At the time, Poynton claimed that private clients contacted him from all over the world, notably Europe, the US and Russia. Indeed, he once organised a birthday surprise for "the wife of a wealthy Russian client", which apparently involved renting a famous French stately home (Château le Vicomte) for a weekend and bringing in "a top Michelin chef", as well as flying in the woman's favourite band "all the way from the Maldives to entertain the couple over dinner on a balcony".

This was followed by a

fireworks display "and as a finale to their trip, Killian had thousands of butterflies specially flown in, which were released into the air on the couple's last night".

Obviously, it would require very deep pockets to avail of such extravagant treatment but then money was no object for clients of Green Bird, who included "the king of Saudi Arabia and his entourage", who stayed at the king's palace outside Cannes.

Those exclusive environs would be familiar to Killian, who boasted of having a Green Bird office in the Mediterranean city. He originally moved to France to manage his golf course management company in Cannes, where he met his wife, **Natasha**, and established Green Bird.

This seems to be **Natasha Bespalova**, although the only name that appears on company documents for Green Bird is that of **Natalia Strawbridge**, who is listed as originally sharing an address with Poynton in Les Ardrets, near Grenoble in the

south east of France. At the time Green Bird was set up, Strawbridge was described as a UK citizen, although since a move by her and Killian to a villa in Theoule-Sur-Mer, around 15km from Cannes, the nationality of both directors (and equal shareholders) has been listed as French in Companies Office documents.

Presumably, Natasha's Russian connections have come in handy and

Ruskies previously represented a significant share of Green Bird's business. For example, in his *Sindo* interview, Poynton recalled a "challenge" when he had to find a rare orchid as a present for "the wife of one of his wealthy Russian clients". Happily the intrepid Killian was able to deliver and even managed to have the flower called after the man's wife. Wow!

Poynton also told the *Business Post* in a separate interview that he planned to open offices in New York and Dubai and that his company's success with its demanding, minted clients was down to the fact that "we don't

take no for an answer".

Arranging private jets and yacht charters for the rich and famous sounds pretty glamorous and the two Green Bird directors were able to pay themselves a combined €377,000 in 2019, despite the company losing €216,000 that year. The last accounts filed only cover the year to the end of 2020, which were signed off in December 2021, when the pandemic was still having a significant impact on the high-end travel and hospitality services offered by Killian.

A note in those accounts from auditor **John O'Gorman** states that Green Bird dropped €62,000 in 2020, leaving it with net liabilities of over €1/2m at the end of the year: "These matters indicate the existence of a material uncertainty that casts significant doubt as to whether the company can continue as a going concern."

Moreover, it was stated that "the company has decided to temporarily cease trading".

At that time, the Revenue was owed almost €470,000 and now judgments have been registered against Green Bird by the taxman for a humble €33,000. That wouldn't even get your favourite band flown in from the Maldives.



Killian Poynton



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# Irish Independent

## That Simon Harris ard fheis address

THANK YOU all for choosing me as your new party leader. As you know, I've been even busier than usual recently, rushing around sorting out problems that have been left on my plate – thanks a bundle, Leo.

We face growing challenges, in housing, Sinn Féin, immigration and Sinn Féin. And some people out there will be only too ready to criticise me for my political principles, whatever they



are. But rest assured that I will bring forward a raft of new sensible gimmicks to reset our great party.

You are all probably asking: are there going to be any radical changes?

Well, the answer is, yes and no! Yes there are, and no there aren't. But the main thing is that I intend to hit the ground running.

(Delegates rush to bar.)

### Those new refugee accommodation proposals



Coalition will continue to fabricate housing stock

Leo Varadkar denying he was shown the door

Fine Gael struggling to remain a big tent party

Roof about to cave in on the Greens

No room for sentiment

Fianna Fáil desperate to shed Micheál Martin

### WHITE HOUSE GROWING MORE ANNOYED OVER GAZA

The White House has, in recent days, indicated a hardening of its stance against Israel's alleged genocide in Gaza.

"It's a very serious cause for concern and is keeping us all up at night," confirmed a spokesman for the administration. "Indeed, the President took half an hour to get to sleep last night and was cranky all the next morning. Israel must bear full responsibility for that!"



The spokesperson said that "Blinkin is going over there to wag his finger in the faces of whoever shows up at a crucial summit aimed at ending this human catastrophe before Christmas, or even sooner if everyone is dead.

"Thankfully the President did eat a full breakfast this morning so all is well for the time being anyway," he added.

### LET'S END ALL THIS AIMLESS SPECULATION

THE FAI's search for a new Republic of Ireland manager has dragged on too long so, over recent weeks, our ace sports journalists have indulged in an orgy of idle speculation about the identity of Stephen Kenny's permanent successor and the timing of his appointment. This hastily filled vacuum reflects very poorly on the FAI blazers.

Readers are aware that no story is too wild for our well-in-



formed hacks to repeat and hype, no ridiculous prediction too bizarre to be splashed across the back pages.

Even in the absence of a shred of evidence, the intrepid journo have been able to deliver the story, any story.

**Inside:** Is Luis Rubiales the right man for the job?

**Also:** Prince Harry and Meghan double act looks a winner for FAI (That's enough speculation – Ed.)

SIMON HARRIS  
**IRISH WISH**



"Vacuous"  
MARY LOU MCDONALD

"Mercifully short!"  
Pearse Doherty

**THIS SPOTLIGHT-CHASING DREAMER WAS STARTING TO WORRY THAT HE'D ALWAYS BE THE BRIDESMAID BUT NEVER THE BRIDE. NOW, AFTER YEARS SPENT TOURING THE COUNTRY LOOKING FOR LOVE, HE HAS FOUND OUT THAT SOMETIMES THE WILDEST OF DREAMS CAN COME TRUE...**

### DUBLIN & DERRY RESURRECT RIVALRY



We're heading for an Easter mass –

– Brawl!



## All-purpose announcement for departing Fine Gael TDs

After a lifetime of public service since I was elected in 2020, the time has now come for me to seek a cushy job in either Brussels or the private sector. Unfortunately, throughout my time in the Dáil, there has been a coarsening of debate, with sickening abuse on social media – much of it directed by me towards my numerous political enemies.

Other deputies, meanwhile, have had no recourse except taking to their various anonymous accounts or savaging opponents



in off-the-record briefings to their media pals. The fear is that such a climate could lead to political visionaries like myself no longer seeking a career in politics, despite the massive salaries and pension perks on offer.

I am not looking for sympathy, merely pointing out that if high-calibre individuals no longer seek political office, we could end up with a frightening scenario where vital areas such as housing and health are a mortifying disaster.

(That's enough FG TDs – Ed.)

## World leaders react to Simon Harris taking over



The arm waving. Talking about the flag. References to blood and a great country. His speech to Fine Gael was straight out of my playbook. I predict great things for this man.

– Vladimir Putin



What? Leo's gone? Fiddlesticks. What



size socks does the new guy wear?

– Justin Trudeau

I would like to extend my sincere congratulations to Kamala Harris as he takes over as leader of the Black and Tans in Ireland.

– Joe Biden

## Hate speech bill 'still alive', says McEntee

THE MINISTER for Justice has resisted calls to ditch the upcoming hate speech legislation, saying people do not feel safe in the country at present.

Ms McEntee told reporters: "I myself thought it was perfectly safe to bring in another vote-winning populist law – but following the recent referendum debacle, the Shinners and other enemies are now confusing everyone by raising awkward questions about what the word 'hate' actually means."



Meanwhile, incoming taoiseach Simon Harris accused Sinn Féin of cynically changing their minds on the new bill.

"They've done a shameless U-turn – unlike the Government, which always listens closely to people's concerns before making essential adjustments to crucial legislation.

"I'm proud to say that we've successfully managed to persuade voters to stand firm in their view that we are hopelessly out of touch with public opinion."



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### NEW UNIVERSITY OF LIMERICK COURSES

#### Media

How many times has the college been in the news in past fortnight?

#### Advanced mathematics

Just how do you overpay for a housing scheme by €5 million?

#### Geography

Can anyone find all these people declining to appear before public accounts committee?

#### Video game design

In-depth study of the ground-breaking PAC MAN.

## FINE GAEL PRAISE DUP

Senior figures within Fine Gael have thanked the DUP for taking attention away from Leo Varadkar's surprising decision to step down due to the shocking manner of Jeffrey Donaldson's resignation.

Said one FG source: "We were all left reeling by Leo's decision, with many questioning the stability of the coalition. However, we were

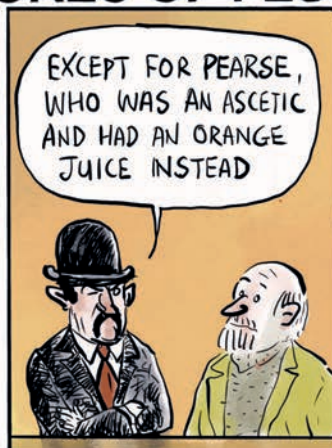
relieved to see that, as ever, we could count on the DUP to one-up us in a far more spectacular manner. Issues surrounding leadership within Fine Gael seem small fry in comparison.

"We would therefore like to express our sincere gratitude for their unfailing talent for self-immolation."

## LOUIS'S BIG BROTHER STRUGGLES

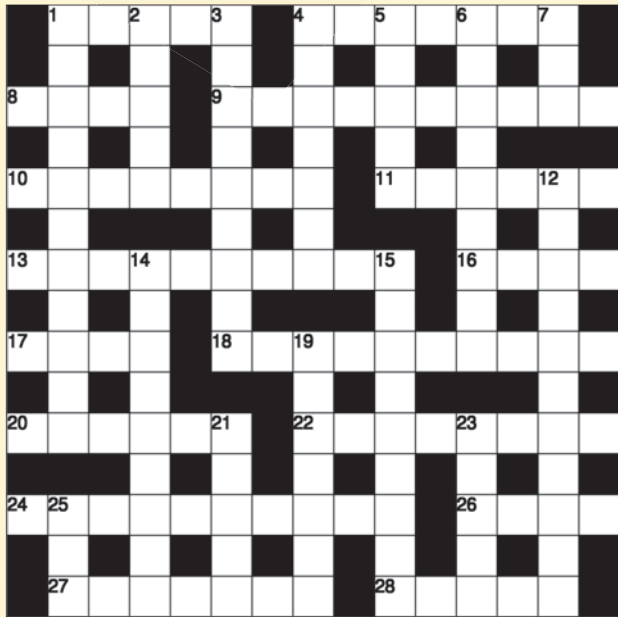


## THE ADVENTURES OF FESTY O'SEMTEX





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Crossword by Procrustes

**ACROSS**

- 1 Non-Christian god accepts silver, at least symbolically. (5)
- 4 Crashed car, wrecked boat, but can still do amazing tricks in the air! (7)
- 8 It sounds like you have run out of money while looking for a sexual connection in Piccadilly Circus! (4)
- 9 Incorrectly turned a flu, though mild, into such a claim for a very serious illness? (10)
- 10 By the sound of this, being cagey in short, wait for the answer. (8)
- 11 When involvement is extreme, ticks can make you sick. (6)
- 13 Beyond where commuter gets on or off, a very short section of line, is for going nowhere at all! (10)
- 16 I'm going around the boundaries of Islam's holiest city looking for a holy man. (4)
- 17 Locate old man from across the ocean and across the centuries in mountain cavern. (4)
- 18 Drunken antipodean takes part in wild party-time in Rome. (10)
- 20 By god, but when it comes to haute couture you'll find me clothed in hers! (6)
- 22 For country music, rewrite part also where Beethoven's Sixth Symphony comes in. (8)
- 24 Is miser not so upset at having to send children to one such school? (10)
- 26 That blooming girl is just not quite our type, almost but not quite. (4)
- 27 Army dining hall in a position with a view straight across - or, it is said, vice versa - to Calabria. (7)
- 28 Principal Brexiteer, though mixed up, hasn't lost his marbles yet, but may if Greece gets its way. (5)

**DOWN**

- 1 Coming in to a little money, wild sibling shows it to continue to be trying. (11)
- 2 Wind up suddenly with nothing but keen enthusiasm. (5)
- 3 There's dastardly, wicked intent in our safe-breaking efforts. (9)
- 4 Read three short articles on mine explosion, leading to severe blood-loss, which, in turn, leads to this. (7)
- 5 See Giro leader in ride to high pass in mountains stage. (5)
- 6 Dancer is treated like queen initially in Mayo town. (9)
- 7 Sounds like Essen is symbolically the place where you can find it. And also in Cornwall. (3)
- 12 By using it I can see that before the race I have a fairly good poker hand. (11)
- 14 Does Matt seem a little upset with the other 14 guys wearing the same jersey at the Aviva? (9)
- 15 Could risky hero be torn apart there - by minor member of K9 unit? (9)
- 19 At session of AA, topic being dissected is not alcohol, nor, indeed, any kind of drink, but food. (7)
- 21 It upsets us, his fishy foreign food. (5)
- 23 Go up around, beat the rest and find it's due. (5)
- 25 Shows resistance to the first three letters of the French song, The Mountains of Mourne. (3)

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LAST ISSUE'S WINNER: Richard Booth, Harmonstown, Dublin 5

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



**VARADKAR RULES OUT IRISH JOB**

Departing Taoiseach Leo Varadkar has ruled himself out of the running for the job of Irish soccer boss. One of the few public figures not to have been linked with the role, Varadkar said fans shouldn't expect him to be taking the position any time soon.



"I have no desire to take over another. Certainly, I became an acknowledged expert on the game when I was minister for sport - I particularly enjoyed Ireland beating New Zealand by 50 runs in Semple Stadium - but the role doesn't interest me at the present time. I'm holding out for something bigger in Europe - perhaps Real Madrid?"

"I've already helmed one bunch of journeymen on the road to oblivion," said Vlad.

**GUINNESS DRINKERS 'PAYING IN ADVANCE' AMID FEARS OF SUDDEN PRICE RISES**

Guinness consumers have taken to placing down-payments on future drinks to avoid the risk of being hit with fresh and unexpected price hikes by the time they are poured, according to a new survey. The drastic development comes after mega-rich distributors Diageo announced an unexpected and unpalatable increase in its range across Ireland's boozers for the



third time in just over a year. "Diageo are so unpredictable these days, who's to say there won't be another price hike during that lengthy wait for a pint of stout to settle," said a worried Guinness imbibers in a Dublin hostelry. "You can't predict when the kick in the arse will come and I can't afford to risk it. I fancy one for the road. Would you like to buy a kidney?"

**GAA APOLOGISE FOR DUBLIN V DERRY INCIDENT**

The GAA would like to apologise for the distressing scenes that occurred between Dublin and Derry. It has been brought to our attention that viewers were forced to sit through some 90 minutes of football before an almighty brawl broke out. This is unacceptable and we unreservedly apologise to all fans of mass violence who were forced to wait such a preposterous amount of time.

Scribble Box



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**Evie Hone** HRHA (1894–1955)  
Composition



**Roderic O'Connor** RHA (1860–1940)  
Villas near the Sea, Cassis (1913)



**William Scott** CBE RA (1913–1989)  
Still Life with Frying Pan and Eggs (1973)



**Louis Le Brocqy** HRHA (1916–2012)  
Study Towards the Image of  
Samuel Beckett (1996)



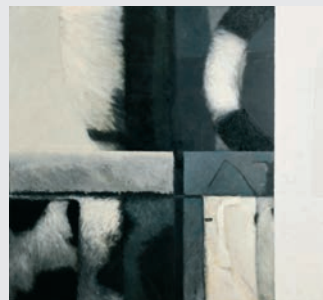
**Genieve Figgis** (b.1972)  
Portrait of a Lady (2013)



**Andy Warhol** (1928–1987)  
Ladies and Gentlemen II.135 (1975)



**Donald Teskey** RHA (b.1956)  
Union Hall, West Cork (2019)



**John Shinnors** (b.1950)  
Estuary Forms – Limerick



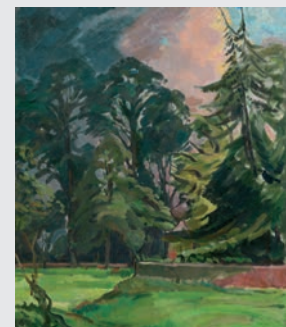
**Liam O'Neill** (b.1954)  
The Final Furlong



**Jack Butler Yeats** RHA (1871–1957)  
A Good Winner (1900)



**Sir William Orpen** RHA (1878–1931)  
Portrait of Mrs. Jessie Wertheimer  
(née Trautz) (1904)



**William John Leech** RHA ROI (1881–1968)  
Summer in the Park (c.1910)

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## Myles O'Grady puts lid on BoI share price

IT WAS pretty eyebrow-raising that when Bank of Ireland (BoI) released its full-year results for 2023, showing pre-provisional and pre-exceptional profits that had almost doubled to €2.4bn, the share price actually fell. This seems ridiculous given that, at the current share price of just on €9.50, the bank is capitalised at only €9.9bn. On top of this, BoI announced healthy dividends and a share buy-back scheme with a combined value of €1.15bn. Nevertheless, the share price has been slow to shift, in part thanks to the decision of the rather frank CEO, Myles O'Grady, to talk things down at his bank.

Admittedly, BoI's share price is no longer boosted by Francesca McDonagh's X-factor and short-term outlook, with the far more measured and lower-profile O'Grady running the show. He also managed to take quite a bit of the shine off the results by (sensibly) putting aside €540m in additional provisions to cover future potential loan losses.

O'Grady forecast reduced profits for 2024 on foot of several expected reductions in the European Central Bank's (ECB) base rate this year, which did little to impress the market.

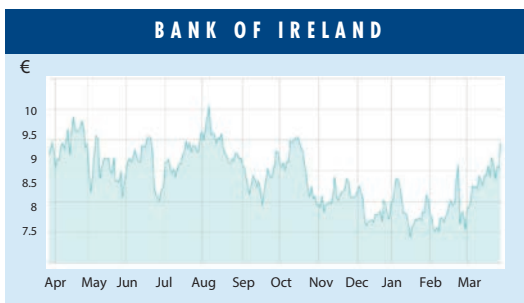
The problem for BoI was simply that much more was expected following the increase in the ECB base rate from -0.5% to 4.5%, which alone should have doubled returns.

O'Grady, however, had a big problem; he was severely curtailed with regard to the bank's variable mortgage rate because McDonagh had hiked it up to a very chunky 4.3% during her regime, even when ECB base rates were at nil and the average mortgage rate in Europe was running at 1.5%. In Ireland, mortgages were on offer at 1.9% from the likes of Ulster Bank, so O'Grady simply could not increase BoI's rate, given that it was already well ahead of the market when he took the reins at the end of 2022.

The market had also set its expectations at the upper end when it came to guesstimating BoI's returns, in large part due to the €8bn loan book that was acquired from KBC at the beginning of 2023, while also factoring in a significant contribution

from the Davy acquisition. The latter, however, doesn't seem to have delivered, with its dealing desk losing out on foot of CRH and Flutter decamping from the Dublin market.

The picture was not improved when AIB released its results just over a week later, showing pre-provisional and pre-exceptional profits of an eye-watering €2.73bn, well over double the



previous year's figures. This was despite the fact that AIB benefited from only a few months' contribution on foot of the acquisition of Ulster Bank's €6bn performing tracker loans portfolio.

On top of this, AIB boss Colin Hunt did not provide anything like the level of provisions O'Grady insisted on, resulting in a pre-tax profit that was almost 16% ahead of BoI. This is despite the fact that AIB is a much smaller bank with a loan business worth €66bn compared to BoI's €80bn, while the former now boasts a market capitalisation of €12.3bn, almost 25% ahead of BoI.

Despite AIB outperforming BoI at the bottom line, it is interesting to note that, following the acquisition of KBC's €8bn Irish residential loan book, BoI is no longer a laggard in the Irish housing finance market – the



Myles O'Grady

inevitable result of McDonagh's harsh interest rates, which were more profitable in the short term but inhibited any organic growth.

Impressively, BoI is now the market leader here, with its €32bn Irish mortgage book representing a 41% market share, which is a long way ahead of the 23% market share under the *ancien régime* in 2021. While the KBC book is the major factor here, O'Grady has also been delivering organic growth.

There was significant erosion in BoI's variable mortgage book because of McDonagh's policy here. Large numbers of mortgage holders switched out and this loan book fell 36% from €2.5bn in 2021 to €1.6bn in 2022. In many cases, customers switched to more competitive fixed-rate mortgages inside BoI, which grew over the two years to €2.5bn, aided by the fact that internal switching is dramatically easier and cheaper than moving bank as it avoids significant legal and administration costs.

Furthermore, since AIB's variable mortgage rate passed the 4% mark at the beginning of last year, BoI has been able to more than double its variable mortgage book to €3.6bn by the end of last year. This was simply because O'Grady took the sensible decision, as base rates soared, not to further increase the lofty variable rates imposed by McDonagh.

Whatever about the increased competitiveness of BoI's interest rate regime, the most striking

aspect of last year's returns is the huge money the bank has earned on the €42bn of surplus cash on which it is sitting.

In the first half of 2022, BoI's surplus liquid assets actually cost it €28m because it had to lodge this with the ECB at negative interest rates. By contrast, in the second half of last year this surplus cash actually earned BoI €867m, an interest rate the equivalent of 4.09%. This was actually higher than the interest the bank earned on its big €80bn loan book, which earned a rate of 3.99%.

### CREDIT BALANCES

Taking the year as a whole, BoI earned €1.5bn interest on the surplus cash it deposited with the ECB during 2023.

It is worth highlighting the fact that BoI is sitting on €88bn in customer credit balances and deposits, which last year only cost it €41m in interest, or just under 0.05%. This represents a huge endowment bonus that BoI gets from its deposit customers, whose money is earning a pittance, while the bank makes €1.5bn by depositing half of this with the ECB.

On the non-performing loan side of the business, BoI has now got these loans down to €2.5bn,

*Continued on page 26*

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.



# Aryzta's recovery now baked into share price

A COMPANY that has effectively disappeared off the radar here is Aryzta, which is not surprising given its Swiss quote, but there remains significant Irish interest. Although the group ended up a “shambles”, according to executive chairman Urs Jordi, the good news is that the ship has been steadied and is steaming in the right direction, with more progress to come.

Aryzta's convoluted history is well known, dating back to the former IAWS structure, which was transformed by Philip Lynch in the 1990s. His successor, Owen Killian, who took over in 2003, significantly overreached, however, and he resigned shortly after Gary McGann was installed as chairman in October 2016.

McGann then brought in Kevin Toland, whom he knew from Dublin Airport Authority, but the two boys duly managed to walk the business into more trouble, leading to a shareholder revolt in September 2020 that ousted the board and brought Jordi in to fill the roles of chairman and temporary CEO.

Impressively, Jordi has not only steadied the ship but has set it on a pretty remarkable course, with the whole business being transformed over the last three years. At the end of the current year, Jordi plans to bring in a permanent CEO to take over from him.

Aryzta still has a large number of Irish shareholders, although it is now quoted only in Switzerland on foot of Killian's strategy for taking over the big Swiss Hiestand group. This was done by reversing the IAWS group into the target company and changing the name of the enlarged group to the unusual Aryzta (a name that is derived from the Latin for arista, which is the apex of a wheat grain).

Lynch had hugely expanded IAWS before handing over the reins to Killian in 2003, only for the latter to aggressively expand the group through the takeover of US operation Otis Spunkmeyer in 2006 and the reversal into Heistand in August 2008. This was followed by buying Honey Top Foods in the US in 2011, the German Klemme group in 2013, the Pineridge and Cloverhill bakeries in Canada and the US respectively in 2014 (these latter two for a combined very chunky €730m), and also Group Hubert in France.

The initial phase of McGann and Toland's rescue plan had been to sell off some of the more problematic US bakeries at the

beginning of 2018, notably the Cloverhill operation in Ohio, before establishing a three-year restructuring plan in May 2018, aimed at delivering €200m in savings over the period.

The boys then proceeded to dispose of the group's UK Delice de France business for a sum so small that it was not even disclosed. In 2019 they also sold off the bulk of its stake in the 1,000-outlet French frozen foods retail operation Picard for €156m (with a further €91m on foot of a special dividend income). The 49% shareholding in the latter company had originally cost Aryzta just on €450m to acquire in 2015.

As Moneybags had reported by then (see *The Phoenix* 30/11/18): “Since the appointment of Gary McGann as chairman of Aryzta in December 2016, the share price has fallen from €40 to its current



€1.20, a drop of 97%. This is one of the single worst episodes of equity destruction of any Irish company.”

In 2022, Moneybags noted: “The five-year chairmanship of Aryzta is the gig that Gary McGann may best be remembered for. He oversaw a huge equity destruction, with the share price dropping from €40 when he went in as chairman in December 2016 to 46c, after turning in a €900m half-year pre-tax loss shortly before he exited completely. This share price drop of just on 99% was effectively a full write off, representing €5bn up in smoke.”

It was into this carnage that the new regime emerged after the successful shareholder revolt at the EGM in September 2020, when Jordi found himself at the helm. He had a background in the par-baked confectionary business



Urs Jordi

and had run the group's European business from 2008 to 2013.

Jordi brought in the experienced Gordon Hardie, ex-CEO of the big Goodman Fielder bakery group in Australia, as well as Heiner Kamps, a bakery executive who had previously run his own chain.

Jordi took charge of a group that had dropped €1bn in the year to August 2017 and €500m in the following 12 months to August 2018. In 2019, Toland and McGann nearly broke even but in the year to August 2020 the loss recorded was €1bn.

What still rankles with the many Irish shareholders was the hugely damaging fundraising the two boys carried out in September 2018, courtesy of a heavily discounted rights issue on a 10-for-one basis. This raised €800m at

80c a share when the shares in the company had been trading at €8 a share. Happily for Toland and McGann, the 90% dilution had little personal impact given their tiny shareholdings in Aryzta.

Strikingly, in Aryzta's most recent 2023 annual report (which covers a 17-month period), Jordi confirms that, when he took over at the end of 2020, “the group was in a shambles”.

## OVERSTRETCHED

Despite the damaging September 2018 €800m rights issue fundraiser, Aryzta was severely overstretched financially and probably operationally too. In 2021, Jordi decided to sell off the group's South American business, mainly centred in Brazil, for €150m and the company's remaining North

*Continued on page 26*



These endless bills! - This one is for simply being alive!

## Stocks &amp; Shares

*BoI continued from page 24*

which represents just 3.1% of the total €81bn advanced and is well under the ECB's 5% guideline.

Despite putting aside much more than AIB last year, however, BoI's total loan loss provisions only come to €1.2bn, representing just 46% of the €2.6bn of non-performing loans. Back in the early 1980s, Irish banks, as a matter of course, always covered non-performing loans in full, which looks like a far more sensible position and one that the likes of BoI and AIB should be aiming to return to.

What probably unseated the market most was O'Grady's blunt honesty regarding BoI's net interest income. He said it will fall by 5%-6% in the current year, which will represent a near €200m drop in income. With costs expected to rise by 5% and the loan book by an even more modest figure, this will drive the return on equity down from over 17% last year to 15% in for 2024.

So, despite significant dividend payouts and a chunky share buy-back programme in play, this scenario has made it hard for investors to get excited about BoI shares. Presumably, the Patrick Kennedy-chaired board was happy enough with the CEO's downbeat delivery.

O'Grady confirms that he is

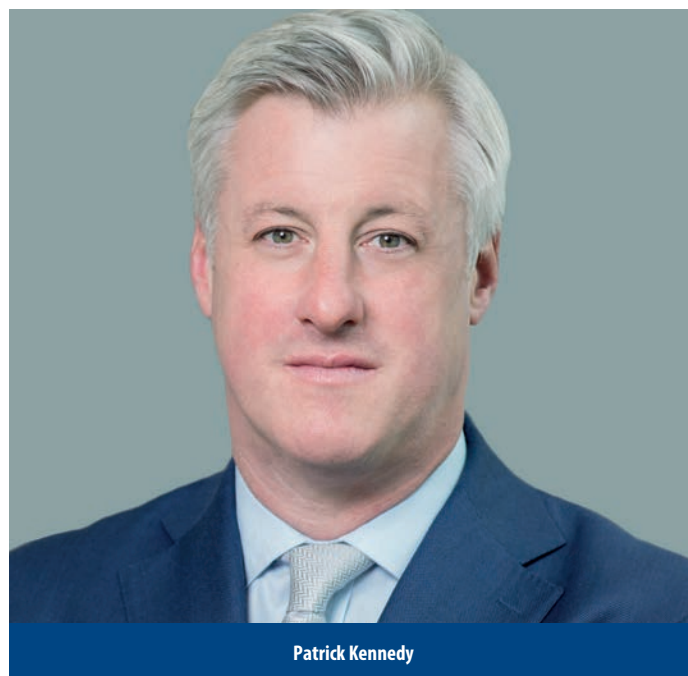
only one year into his so-called "refreshed strategy", which is "built on the three pillars" of strong relationships with customers, a simpler business and a more sustainable company. "It is guided by our purpose, which is to help customers, colleagues, shareholders and society to thrive," he said.

The CEO supports these claims with his group's exceptional profits last year – which were primarily driven by the step-change in the ECB's interest rates – stating that BoI is "outperforming our 15% target" on return on equity.

Overseeing a very significant increase in the dividend to 60c does have an impact in that it represents a healthy dividend yield of almost 6.3% on the shares at their current price of €9.45. This is not, however, the main driver of a share price but rather the prospect of increasing returns – the opposite of the forecast that O'Grady delivered.

Moreover, the pessimistic CEO's forecasts make 2025 look even less enticing, as O'Grady believes that ECB rates will fall 2.75% by the end of this year and, therefore, will not make as significant an impact next year. (Many market observers believe a 1.5% drop is a more accurate forecast of the ECB's intentions this year.)

At €9.45, BoI shares are on a price/earning multiple of over



Patrick Kennedy

five times and this goes up to a prospective p/e of six in 2025, depending on the interest rate reduction adopted by the ECB. In the meantime, BoI intends to pay out significant dividends, which means that, in the short to medium term, it is hard to see any convincing grounds for the bank's shares failing to maintain current levels, although they may not get back to the €10.70 they hit just over a year ago.

Clearly, the shares are unlikely to ever return to the €20 hit in 2006 as a result of the billions of shares that were issued to the likes of Prem Watsa in 2015 at 10c a share – the equivalent after consolidation of €3 a share. He duly dumped all of these and tripled his money in the process, but the dilution impact has been immense. In today's consolidated form, BoI shares would have to hit €600 to return to the 2006 value.

*Aryzta continued from page 25*

American interest for €850m.

This allowed the new management structure to focus on Aryzta's big European and smaller Far Eastern and Australian operations. Jordi has delivered on this front and, on the back of sales of €1.75bn in the 12 months to the end of July 2022, the group turned in pre-exceptional operating profits of €90m, delivering dramatically improved trading margins of just over 5%.

## INNOVATION

To bring Aryzta into line with the calendar year, the latest trading period reported on covers 17 months to the end of December 2023. In this period, Jordi turned in sales of just over €3bn, which is the equivalent of €2.1bn on an annualised basis and represents an equivalent 21% increase in sales.

What is more significant is that Jordi turned in an operating profit of €220m for the 17-month period to return trading margins of a much more respectable 7.3%. On an annualised basis, the operating profit works out at €155m, up 73% on an annualised basis from the preceding year.

Jordi has not just restructured and simplified the business but brought in innovation and new product development. Last year these represented 14% of turnover. Meanwhile, Aryzta is targeting 5% growth and 10% trading margins in the group's 26 bakeries throughout Europe and the Far East.

Jordi has overseen selective expansions such as the doubling of its bakery capacity in Malaysia in 2022 and a doubling of its production capacity for sourdough specialist breads in its Grangecastle bakery in Dublin for the UK and Irish markets. Most recently the group has announced the construction of a new €40m bakery in Perth, Australia, with the capacity for 220 million burger buns per annum.

Jordi predictably admits that Aryzta will not be achieving the recent rapid rate of progress in the years ahead but targeting 5% expansion pa should increase margins all around.

The executive chairman is also significantly reducing the very expensive hybrid debt funding instrument that had hit €1bn, but has now been halved to €500m, with plans to reduce this further by increasing the level of conventional debt. The group's total debt



Heiner Kamps

is down from €1.1bn in July 2022 to €1bn in December 2023.

For now at least, Aryzta finally looks to be in safe hands. From a low of 0.42 Swiss Francs (CHF) in June 2020, the shares gradually recovered, increasing to CHF1.00 in June 2022 and are currently trading at CHF1.65.

On the basis of earnings per share, this puts the shares on a price/earnings multiple of almost 17, which seems fair.

Obviously, these shares are

never going to get back to the heights reached before the wheels really came off following that 90% equity dilution exercise in September 2018. As a result of this rights issue, Aryzta's shares at CHF1.65 currently should be the equivalent of CHF17 in an undamaged state.

This is still quite the recovery and it looks like Jordi has further to go, although obviously most of the pre-September 2018 Irish shareholders are still suffering massively.





Seapoint  
Clinic

COMMERCIAL PROFILE



## Create A Beautiful, Natural-Looking Smile...

Founded more than 15 years ago, the hugely successful **Seapoint Dental Clinic**, originally based in Blackrock, has just invested €2m in a new, state-of-the-art practice in **Beacon Court, Sandyford, Co Dublin**.

THE PRACTICE is in the unique position to be at the epicentre of advances in cosmetic and biomimetic dentistry, with composite bonding, teeth whitening and orthodontic treatments, such as Invisalign being among its most in-demand treatments. The team are passionate about dentistry and combine current research with proven knowledge and years of clinical expertise, which allows them to combine their skills to offer patients the very best experience that is individually tailored while never compromising on quality.

Dentistry has evolved significantly since the inception of Seapoint Dental Clinic. Not so long ago cosmetic dentistry was very much considered a luxury. Now however, an entirely new mindset exists around this field. Recent research by Kelton Global has shown that 30% of people surveyed say that a person's smile is the first thing they notice about them and 38% said they would opt out of a second date with someone because of crooked teeth. Simply put, a nice, wide smile has never been more in fashion.

The benefits of a beautiful smile also go well beyond being perceived as attractive. Research has shown that not only can it help enhance your career, but discoloured or broken/missing teeth can even inhibit your career success.

Dr Clodagh Myers, dentist and director of the clinic, notes the rising demand for cosmetic dentistry and attributes this in part to the rise of social media: "With direct access to influencer profiles, who all appear to have 'the perfect smile', shifts in people's self-



image have created a surge in both male and female patients seeking cosmetic treatments. These range from lunch hour whitening treatments, to diamond clean hygiene, to the Invisalign and minimally invasive composite bonding."

### Natural-Looking Results

Seapoint believes in producing natural-looking results, where only you and your dentist know of any work completed, and is committed to restoring people's confidence in dentistry by providing the time and care to achieve the best possible results.

A traditional approach to correcting misaligned teeth involves aggressive tooth preparation to create the ideal archform before placing porcelain veneers.

"There has been a paradigm shift away from this," reports Dr Myers. "One of the most popular treatment packages we offer is called the ABC package, where the patient's teeth are aligned, usually using Invisalign. Then we brighten or whiten the teeth, using a combination of our one-hour whitening

and home kit. Finally, we complete treatment by placing some composite bonding on any teeth that have chipped or worn edges to achieve a natural, long-lasting result. None of the natural teeth have been compromised and the result looks completely natural, which is what our patients want.

"With the use of intraoral scanners and sophisticated 3D imaging software, the ability to show patients what their teeth will look like when the treatment finishes has transformed the patient experience. They can see what their smile will look like after clear aligner treatment to straighten their teeth, before commencing treatment, which has led to increased case acceptance," continues Dr Myers.

Digital smile design concepts are used to produce a mock-up of a potential smile design and can be transferred to the mouth using the trial smile concept.

"This really helps educate patients and allows them to appreciate the parameters involved in the creation of a beautiful smile, as a huge barrier to patient acceptance used to be 'fear of the unknown'. For example, a 50-year-old man does not want Hollywood white teeth, so now he can not only achieve a natural result, he's involved in the process every step of the way," Dr Myers concludes.

The ethos on which Seapoint Dental in Blackrock was founded has withstood the test of time. By blending innovative dental practices with compassionate expertise, the clinic consistently delivers an exceptional patient journey. Seapoint at the Beacon strives not only to emulate this, but to build on this to bring the patient experience to the next level.

Visit [www.seapointclinic.ie](http://www.seapointclinic.ie)  
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telephone **01 284 2570** for information.



## Noel Moran's car trouble

THERE WAS a potentially expensive setback in the High Court last month for **Noel Moran** of Noel Moran Recovery, when his damages claim against a company called Blackstar Management, concerning the towing and storage of vehicles on behalf of An Garda Síochána, was booted down to the Circuit Court. This was on the grounds that Moran was unlikely to be awarded damages beyond the latter court's €75,000 limit.

The case kicked off in December 2022 when Moran lodged his claim in the Four Goldmines, seeking over €¼m on foot of al-



Derek Dalton

leged breaches of a contract with **Derek Dalton** and **John Paul Kelly's** Waterford-headquartered Blackstar. This provided for Noel Moran Recovery to provide towing services and storage of vehicles in the capacity of subcontractor to Blackstar, which had secured the contract from the gardaí.

While the gardaí charge motorists a fee of €35 or €50 per day for seized vehicles, the deal (signed in Co Mayo) with Blackstar provided for Moran to paid €5.70 per vehicle per day, or €163 per quarter for long-term storage.

The contract was renewed annually and, significantly, could be terminated without cause on one month's notice.

Immediately before Christmas 2020, mid-pandemic, Blackstar served notice of termination of the agreement, at which point there were around 30

vehicles (and a fishing trawler!) in storage at Moran's premises. Blackstar claims that it offered to pay the long-term storage rates



on all the seized vehicles for the relevant quarter to the end of January 2021 but Moran was not interested.

He described the termination letter as "completely unfounded and untrue" and sought immediate payment of over €25,000 on foot of an invoice that was issued in January 2021. Judge **Garrett Simon** noted that from this point the "parties appear to have been stuck in an impasse".

High Court proceedings were issued by Moran in March 2022 claiming breach of contract and wrongful termination of contract and seeking damages of €263,000, which represented fees

he claimed he was due for storage of the vehicles post-termination of the Blackstar contract. In turn, Dalton and Kelly claimed this demand was "extortionate".

The figure was based on a daily fee of €35 or €50 per vehicle over the period of storage from the end of 2020, with additional fees accruing daily. No breakdown of the €263,000 was provided by Moran, however, and Simon referred to the "outlandish nature of the claim", which included €31,000 for a single 2010 registered car, a sum that greatly exceeded the value of the vehicle.

The judge also noted there was "no credible basis" for the

## Heavy going for Foley and Parkin

"WE'RE NEARLY like family and I treat him like a brother," was a recent remark by the minded founder of Clipper Logistics, **Steve Parkin**, about his advisor, **Joe Foley**, owner of Ballyhane Stud in Co Carlow. It has come as quite a surprise then that the boys have suddenly parted ways, ending a near 20-year business arrangement.

The split has been described as a "breakdown" in the relationship that started back in 2004, when Parkin sold *Captain Rio* to stand at Ballyhane Stud, and they maintained both a personal and business relationship thereafter.

A recent statement released by Parkin's Dullingham Park Stud reads: "Due to unforeseen circumstances, *Space Traveller* and *Sands Of Mali*, formerly at Ballyhane Stud, have been relocated to stand the remainder of the 2024 season at **Micheál Orlandi's** Starfield Stud."

Subsequently, however, Foley announced: "As *Sands Of Mali* is a partnership horse, he will remain at Ballyhane where his book has been increasing significantly due to highly encouraging reports of his first crop of two-year-olds."

It looks like the lawyers are saddling up here and, if so, Foley may need deep pockets. He has made a fair few bob at Ballyhane Stud, which he owns with his wife, **Jane**, and is the current chairman of the Irish European Breeders Fund.

Financially, however, Foley is not at the races when compared to Parkin. Having purchased a second-hand van many moons ago to set up his own company, Clipper Logistics, the latter remarkably sold the business to New York-based GXO Logistics for a reported £965m in 2022.

In recent years, the English moneybags has purchased Newmarket's Dullingham Park Stud, Branton Court Stud in Yorkshire and his stud farm in Rathbride on the Curragh. Well-known for his runners under the 'Clipper Logistics' and now 'Clipper' banners, Parkin also formed the Bronte Collection Syndicate, which consists of 15 business pals, including English cricket

star **Jonny Bairstow**.

Ironically, their biggest success to date was the win by *Golden Tricks* in the €300,000

Irish EBF Ballyhane Stakes at Naas Racecourse last season.

Parkin's main investment company is the Leeds-headquartered Knaresborough Investments Ltd, which in turns controls Branton Court Stud LLP.

The accounts for the latter boasted accumulated profits at the end of March 2023 of a thoroughbred £75m.

More impressively, Knaresborough Investments, 100% owned by Parkin, was sitting on a surplus at the end of March 2023 of a whopping £146m and held investments valued at £95m.

Parkin also controls Rathbride Investments Ltd, the Irish company that owns the English millionaire's Irish stud in Kildare. A charge was registered in 2019 against this entity by Bank of Ireland, secured on the lands

that are leased to Rathbride Investment by Brampton Court Stud and Knaresborough Investments.

Last month, Joe Foley stepped down as a director of the Irish company and an associated venture, Rathbride Equine Ltd, with Parkin's man, **David Hodgkin in situ** here, recently joined by Waterford-based number cruncher, **Michael Donnelly**.

The scale of Parkin's wealth suggests the new tie-in is very good news indeed for the owner of the 95-acre Starfield Stud outside Mullingar, Micheál Orlandi (who is married to **Sile Hayes**, Irish Thoroughbred Marketing's UK marketing manager). Despite intensive marketing and promotional gimmickry, the trainer has had limited success with any of the stallions he has stood so far under his own Compas Stallions banner.

Orlandi is also in business with ace hype merchant **Jack Cantillon** and that pair will hope that their latest stallion, *Far Above*, will improve the quality of their current stallion roster.

The arrival on the scene of Steve Parkin should ease any concerns Orlandi has been having lately.



Steve Parkin



suggested daily rate charged of €35 or €50 and made an order remitting the proceedings to the Circuit Court's western circuit. Moreover, when ruling on the subject of legal costs, Simon found that it had not been "reasonable" for Moran to have commenced the proceedings in the High Court, with costs for the motion therefore awarded to Blackstar.

That positive outcome for Kilkenny-based Dalton and Kelly – whose interests include Store-All Logistics and Imperial Developments – is not the only good news the boys have had recently. The parent company of Blackstar Management is Blackstar Capital, where Dalton has a controlling 65% stake, with Kelly holding the balance. According to the accounts signed off earlier this year, the holding company was sitting on accumulated profits of €5.3m at the end of April 2023.

Looks like working for the boys in blue can be a pretty profitable business.

**A MOBILE network data firm marked out as a future star player in the sector, Equiundo Ltd, has just had its connection cut and is to be wound up next week. This is bad news for the taxpayer.**

**Equiundo, which was set up 20 years ago by its controlling shareholder, chairman and CEO, Cyril Murphy (formerly a Nokia engineer), boasted that it could "deliver operational efficiency to mobile operators through congestion-eliminating and cost-reducing network management solutions", which sounds rather useful.**

**According to the last accounts filed for Equiundo, which were signed off a year ago, the writing has been on the wall here for some time, with the accumulated deficit at the end of 2022 standing at just on €2m, following a loss for the 12 months of €230,000.**

**In a note under the heading**

**of "going concern", it was stated by Murphy that "the deficiency in assets is being supported principally from financing in the form of convertible preference shares of €1m with Enterprise Ireland and convertible loan notes [€550,000] with Kernel Seed Fund" (the partner for Bank of Ireland's early stage equity fund).**

**The Enterprise Ireland shares had been due to be redeemed back in 2020 but there were insufficient reserves to facilitate the transaction. Nevertheless, when the accounts were signed off on March 31 last year, Murphy et al were confident that, despite the losses, "forecasts to the end of 2024 forecast that the company can return to profitability in the current year".**

**It hasn't turned that way and the taxpayer has been stuffed for €1m.**

## Catching up with Johnnie Cooke

ELSEWHERE IN this issue (see p19), Goldhawk takes a look at an operation called Green Bird, which was established by one **Killian Bewley Poynton** to provide concierge services to super wealthy clients who don't have time to organise things themselves. It also turns out he had a loose connection to troubled celebrity restaurateur and caterer, **Johnnie Cooke**, courtesy of the latter's business partner, **Rene Hendriks**. These days the latter two boys are labouring under the label of restricted director, something Cooke is getting used to.

Poynton is a director of something called Greenbird Beverage Company that was set up in 2019. A 30% stake is listed as being held by a restaurant company called Victrix Ltd, which was established in 2018 by Dutch hospitality consultant Rene Hendriks and **Lorena Hendriks Eden**. The latter ended up as 100% shareholder at the end

*Brief Cases on page 30*



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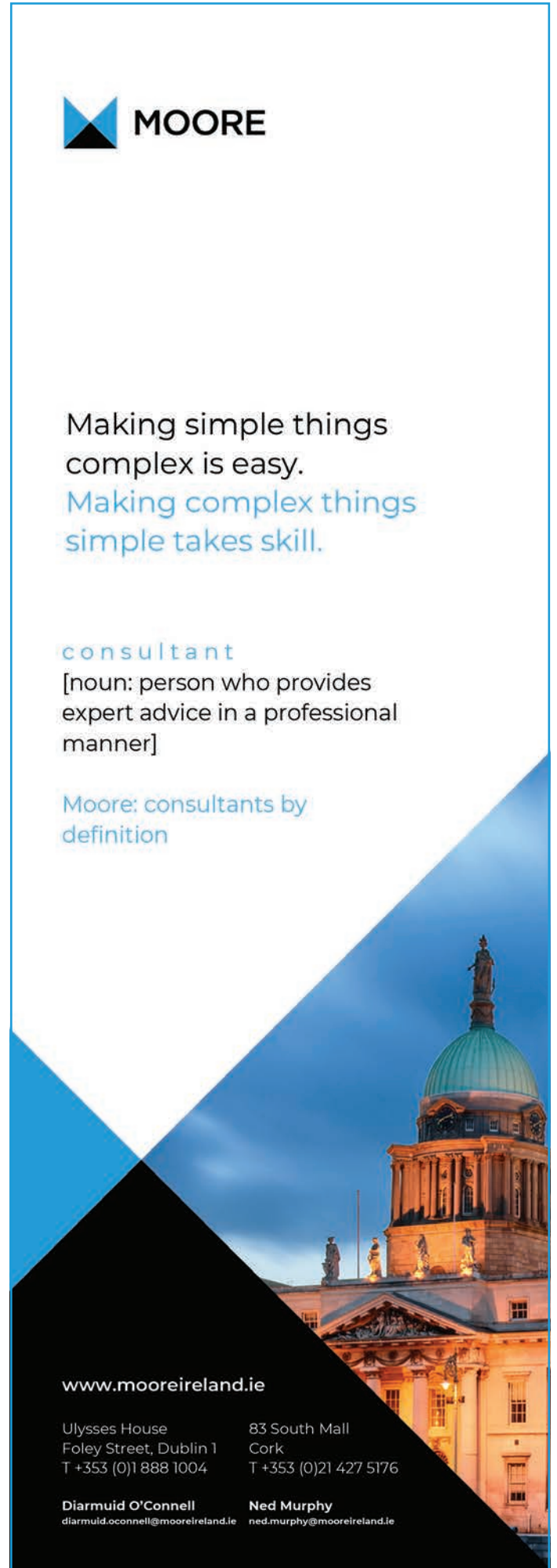
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Brief Cases continued from page 29

of 2022 but last year resigned and was replaced by chef **Lisa Hendriks**.

Lisa Hendriks was also appointed a director of Sherardia Ltd last year, replacing Lorena Eden. Both Johnnie Cooke and Rene Hendriks were also *in situ* here as directors from 2018 to 2020 and 2022 respectively (and equal 50% shareholders at one stage) when the company traded as Juanito's on Drury Street D2, before a sister restaurant called Mercado 52 opened on nearby South William Street. Both businesses have since closed their doors.



Johnnie Cooke

The last accounts filed for Sherardia cover the year to the end of August 2022, when accumulated losses stood at a not-so-tasty €623,000, with creditors owed over €1m, including €710,000 due to the Revenue. A note in the accounts stated the company was insolvent and had been ineligible for the Employment Wages Subsidy Scheme, presumably in relation to its tax status.

Hendriks stepped down as a director at the time he was restricted under Section 150 of the Companies Act for his part in the running into the ground of JC and Deb Ltd, where he had partnered with Cooke.

The latter was also restricted, which was his second rodeo. He had previously fallen foul of companies legislation back in 2005 in relation to the companies Cherby Ltd and Cooke's Event Company Ltd, when Judge **John MacMenamin** described his conduct as being "so incompetent as to amount to irresponsibility".

JC And Debs registered the business name Cooke's at the start of 2016 just as he rebounded into the spotlight with his restaurant in Brown Thomas, which was followed by a much-hyped restaurant-cocktail bar in Dundrum Town Centre.

Hendriks took a 10% stake in JC And Debs, with Johnnie holding 85% of the shares.

More interestingly, 5% of JC and Deb ended up in the hands of a company called Peralto Ltd,



"Okay kids, you'll have to cut down on social media and rely more on television to raise you."

which turns out to be an entity controlled by **Fiona Nagle** (once better known as Mrs Breifne O'Brien) and her partner, Sandycove-based moneybags **Jim Mountjoy**, who happens to be worth an estimated €65m.

The venture did not pay the kind of dividends that Mountjoy had been used to and, having built up losses of an impressive €583,000 by the end of 2018, JC and Deb ended up in the compost bin, owing unsecured creditors over €860,000, according to the latest filings by liquidator **Padraic O'Malley** of JW Accountants last January.

He secured the restrictions under Section 150 of both

Cooke and Hendriks, although the winding up has not yet been concluded as a result of ongoing "legal proceedings which the company is party to".

These days the irrepressible Cooke is to be found at yet another new establishment, Avant Cafe in Terenure, Co Dublin, which is good news for his assorted fans, who include the *Indo's* restaurant reviewer, **Katy McGuinness**.

Just before last Christmas she visited the eatery for brunch, exclaiming: "Chef Johnnie Cooke's signature dishes are back on the menu and they're as good as I remember."

Johnnie does tend to make an impression.

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