

AFFAIRS OF THE NATION



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,

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**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.



Derek Richardson

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.

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e-mail: [goldhawk@thephoenix.ie](mailto:goldhawk@thephoenix.ie)



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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”.

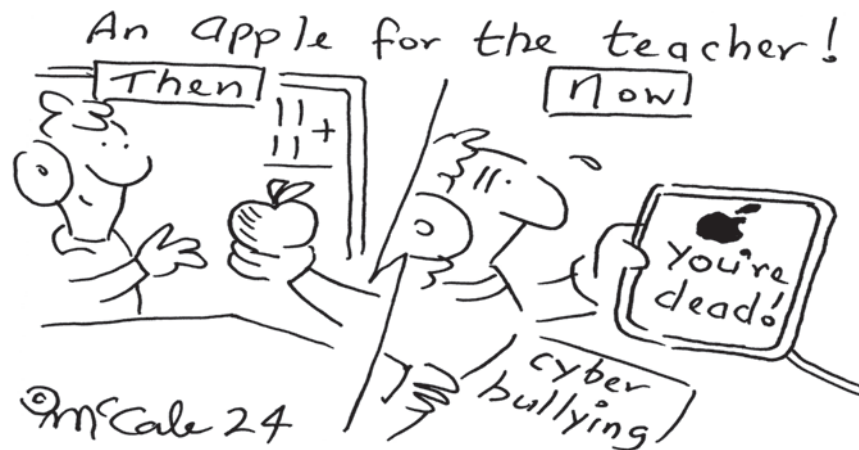
Leo Varadkar and Paschal Donohoe both utilised the novel non-lethal, military ploy to justify their welcome – on behalf of Irish people – for this statement about a war economy and rearmament of the EU.

**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

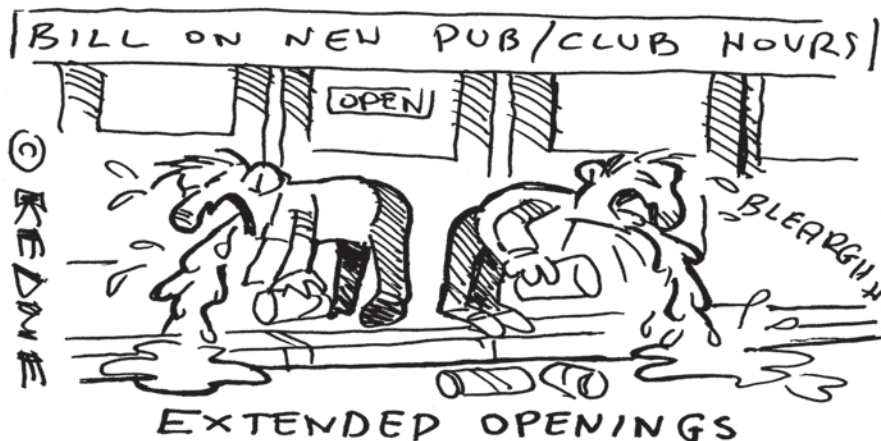
Allergan. Back in 2017, an optimistic Collins had told the *Business Post* that PHII intended to "improve the stock of nursing homes available in Ireland" and said the company was "looking to launch our pharmacy business here also".

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

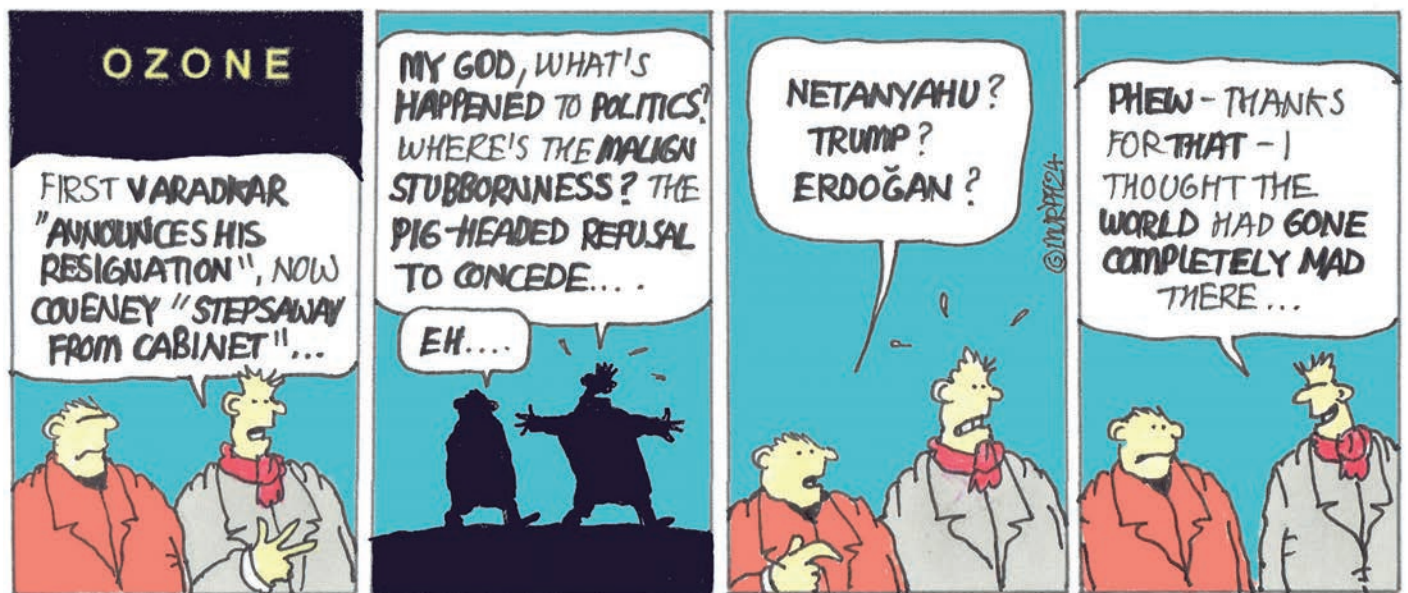
This is not the first controversial case involving Duffy. In 1995 he was convicted for the killing of retired UDR man John Lyness outside his home in Lurgan in June 1993. Lyness was gunned down by two assailants who fled the scene on racing bikes. Duffy's conviction was later quashed after a key witness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