

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.