



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 went 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?