



WHITHER KATE O'CONNELL?

THE RE-ENTRY of Kate O'Connell to national politics via a place on Fine Gael's general election ticket in Dublin Bay South (DBS) is not a given, despite new Taoiseach Simon Harris's effusive welcome home for the former TD.

The storyline surrounding the period in which La Kate was consigned to a political nunnery since she lost her seat in the 2020 general election has been that she was the victim of political

and personal vengeance at the hands of then party leader and taoiseach Leo Varadkar. However, O'Connell's problem with FG members in DBS is at least as problematic as her difficulty with Vlad, despite her public taunts about his "choir boys singing for their supper" and the like.

Revealing the special talent for media spin that O'Connell and her team have developed, they put out tales of beastly behaviour towards her by Vlad's fans in the local organisation, including the dreadful taunt that she was some sort of intrusive culchie parachuted into Dublin 6 and 4.

The reality is that most of the hostility to O'Connell came from fans of the publicly pulverised former housing minister, Eoghan Murphy, rather than Vlad's people. Protective of Murphy and resentful of O'Connell's disregard for their boy after he had done so much to help her win a seat in 2016, they insisted on selecting councillor James Geoghegan instead of O'Connell to run in the 2021 by-election created by



Kate O'Connell



James Geoghegan

Murphy's flight from politics.

In the event, that turned out to be a disaster for new party favourite Geoghegan in DBS – Labour's Ivana Bacik won easily – and even some of O'Connell's detractors began to wonder if she would, after all, be the best candidate to win back a seat in DBS, which is Sir Garret FitzGerald's old constituency and where there is now not a single FG Dáil deputy.

Two aspirant party TDs – councillors Emma Blain and Punam Rane, from the Dáil constituencies of Dublin Rathdown and Dublin West, respectively – moved into DBS for the local elections and are now standing in Dublin City Council areas. Each has done this with a view to taking a local council seat and then lobbying party HQ to be added to the DBS ticket with Geoghegan, thus contributing to the gender quota and perhaps even taking the single Dáil seat that will surely go to FG.

This looks like very bad timing given the possible resurrection of La Kate's political career and while both 'transferred' councillors have been working hard locally, this may not be enough to prevent Harris and the party's national executive from

adding O'Connell to the ticket.

This initiative, however, will face the opposition of Geoghegan, the two potential councillor/Dáil candidates and many local members. Is Harris willing to risk a resentful local membership in revolt against O'Connell should she be added on without their approval?

Meanwhile, there are whispers that another constituency – Dublin Rathdown – may turn out to be the constituency whose burghers will be represented by O'Connell. Minister Josepha Madigan's resignation from national politics leaves FG with a difficult job of retaining its two Dáil seats here, even though it goes from three seats to four at the next election.

Councillor Maeve O'Connell had been expected to accompany newly enhanced minister Neale Richmond – an eager fan of new leader Harris – at the next election in Dublin Rathdown but there are doubts about her ability to retain the second seat here.

Could Kate ride into Rathdown and save the day?

HELEN OF NAVAN SURVIVES

MUCH MYSTERY and knowing punditry surrounded the survival of Helen McEntee as justice minister given all the indications that persuaded most people to believe she was a goner. However, it was not so much the political permutations, geography, gender, ideology and so on that proved most crucial in the end.

Neither was it political circumstances and parliamentary party factors that led former justice minister Frances Fitzgerald – she who possesses the wise, shrewd head that has allegedly guided Taoiseach Harris since he was in short trousers – to persuade the new leader to keep Helen *in situ*.

The original plan was to install Peter Burke – and decidedly not Jennifer Carroll MacNeill – in justice for a variety of reasons, many of which were splashed all over the media in the days before the Cabinet was determined and announced.

McEntee had made a public and media pitch to be retained as justice minister but not many believed that this was going to influence Harris. Neither did many view the political influence of the McEntee clan as being of huge weight inside the Blueshirts, as has since been claimed.

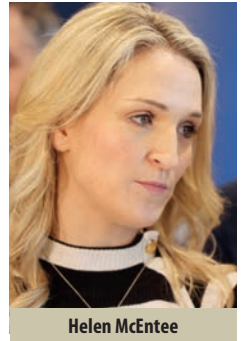
However, as the days passed the existence of one particular individual in the McEntee operation – a non-family person – became significant, namely Caroline

Murphy, wife of RTÉ programmer Sean O'Rourke and a press advisor to former justice minister Charlie Flanagan from 2018 to 2020. When Fiach Kelly relinquished the post of press advisor to McEntee, Murphy was appointed to replace him and her knowledge of the justice department was regarded as crucial.

There are various reasons why McEntee was elevated to the position of justice minister in 2020, as the profile published in *The Phoenix* (see edition 1/7/22) outlines. As stated there: "McEntee's loyalty to Varadkar and Murphy [Varadkar's chief of staff, Brian Murphy] was regarded as vital as Vlad was acutely aware of the UDI tendency at justice where some officials really do believe they are the permanent government. Having the trusty McEntee *in situ* suited the Taoiseach down to the ground, providing him with a regular supply of real, unvarnished information from the department from the most obedient of ministers."

Fitzgerald, as ex-justice minister, knew what a minefield that department could be. More specifically, she knew what an independent fiefdom it could sometimes behave as and how ministers could become prisoners or victims of the scheming mandarins or permanent government that some civil servants regard themselves.

Incoming Taoiseach Harris certainly did not want to become prey to this tendency



Helen McEntee



"Personally, Figgis, I'm all in favour of your new gender identity, especially as we can now pay you 30% less."

AFFAIRS OF THE NATION

that exists in all departments, but especially justice, and was quickly apprised of the view that even the capable Burke could become a cropper there before he became fully familiarised with the area. Thus, a team comprised of Murphy and McEntee, who had much combined experience of the department, was seen as a safer bet.

THE COALITION parties have continued the sharing (among themselves) policy of divvying up Seanad seats if and when they become available – a policy that also includes telling northern unionists to feck off.

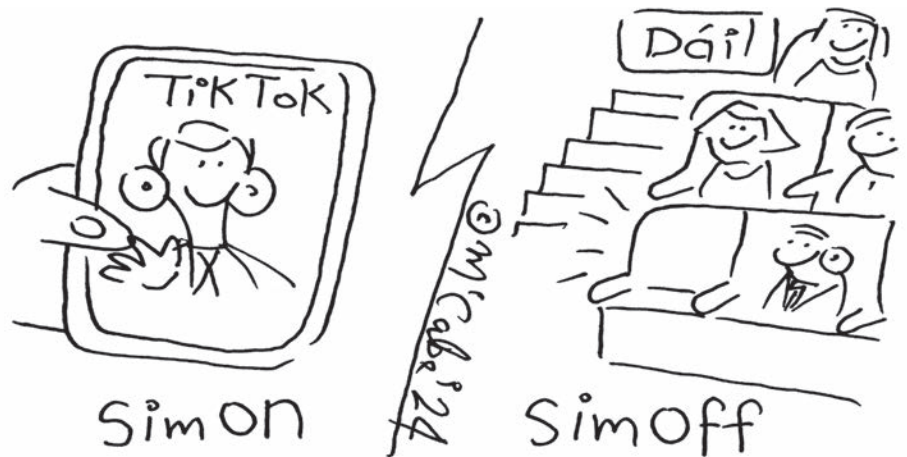
When senators

Michael D'Arcy (Fine Gael) and Elisha McCullion (Sinn Féin) resigned in 2020, the two by-elections in 2021 saw FG and Fianna Fáil combine to ensure that their respective candidates, Maria Byrne and Gerry Horkan, were elected by "their peers" (ie their parties' TDs and senators).

Last year SF senator Niall Ó Donnghaile resigned due to ill health and another



Mal O'Hara



by-election was called. This time the third coalition party, the Greens, got to fill the vacancy and its nominee, Mal O'Hara, was duly elected with the tacit support of FF and FG and no opposition (it was pointless).

O'Hara and Green leader Eamon Ryan immediately made statements about the Greens being an "all-island" party but the reality of this Seanad carve-up is a little more prosaic.

For a start, Malachai O'Hara is a former Green councillor who lost his seat in last year's local election in the Castle area. But Mal is also leader of the party in the north,

which helps to explain why he has been gifted the €76,000-plus salary for senators.

As well, Ian Marshall, a moderate northern unionist and ex-president of the Ulster Farmers' Union, had won a Senate by-election in 2018 with the support of then taoiseach Leo Varadkar and SF but was denied selection as one of the Senate nominees of the current Government in 2020. If the 'shared island' approach does not even amount to the sacrifice of a Senate place by any of the Government parties, then what might it mean when it comes to more substantial issues?

WILL SINN FÉIN BOUNCE BACK?

GLEEFUL NOISES from Government parties and media critics at Sinn Féin's poll slide as well as its political confusion indicate a new confidence among coalition Government members that they can see off the party at the local, EU and, most crucially, general election in the coming months. How does Mary Lou McDonald and the SF leadership explain recent setbacks and how do they expect to return to the heady days of 12 months ago, when SF was polling in the mid-30s (the latest poll showed the party on 26%)?

The answer is that they don't expect to return to such levels, although most of their strategists believe the party will take well over 200 council seats (up from 81); three MEP seats (up from one) and will climb back to levels of 30% at the general election. If this transpires the coalition permutations will need AI to sort out the next government.

SF's blunders and U-turns have included, most recently, the denouncing of the Hate Bill, whose main target would surely have included racist attacks. This followed a dramatic retreat from its usual solidarity with Palestinians in Gaza, which saw the party vote against demands to expel the Israeli ambassador from Ireland in motions in Belfast and Derry local councils and a refusal to boycott the St Patrick's Day White House festivities – unlike the SDLP!

The effect of these and the softening of other positions has led to the charge by its rivals that SF is not really different from the establishment parties. Ironically, this particular accusation grew out of the party's refusal to align itself with anti-immigrant protests and has been hurled at SF by the far right as

it attempts to lure its more nativist nationalist support away.

The charge of being part of the establishment does not square with the ferocious attacks from the actual establishment parties, such as Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, but it is an allegation that threatens to undercut much



Mary Lou McDonald



Pearse Doherty

of SF's appeal. The last fortnight has seen both FG and FF leaders, Simon Harris and Micheál Martin as well as a near-unanimous chorus of hacks deride SF as having flip-flopped on its politics.

The 2020 general election saw McDonald, Pearse Doherty and others manoeuvre both 'centre-right' parties into the elite establishment role as against the party for change, SF, a narrative that hugely benefited the latter, it being essentially true. This division will re-occur naturally at the next election but may be harder to maintain throughout an election campaign, depending on which issues are dominant at the time.

Israeli genocide may not be a big issue at election time but SF's prevarication over

Gaza has made a negative impression on many young people and left-wing activists, its natural support base.

The Social Democrats have been quick to take advantage here, with relentless attacks on Israel including a demand for withdrawal of the Israeli ambassador – unlike SF – which is hardly accidental.

Some SF strategists explain that external circumstances – immigration, continued housing crisis, increased far-right agitation – have combined to create a perfect political storm and that political and media opponents have exploited this (naturally enough). But they also concede that a conscious decision by the party leadership to behave as if they are in government and are being judged as such led to conservative responses, as was the case in the Gaza debate.

All of this has meant that the party has bled support on the left and the right. How will they get back to the status of front runners to lead the next government?

The belief is that the reason for SF's surge in 2020 was due to its focus on central, essential issues such as housing, the cost of living and health, which dominate in predominantly working-class communities and, to an extent, middle-class areas. These are what SF sees as 'its' issues and it believes it should and can resist attempts by the far right and Government parties to change the political agenda.

It also believes that the far right may take some local seats from SF but that, come the general election, the far right will have nothing to offer on the economy, housing etc.

All general elections are interesting but this one will be novel and doubly fascinating.