

AFFAIRS OF THE NATION



LOUGH NEAGH OWNER

THE EARL of Shaftesbury, a Dorset aristocrat and former DJ who somehow owns the bed of Lough Neagh, has been enjoying considerable kudos from his big announcement in June that he would “hand back” ownership of Ireland’s biggest lake.

Among coverage of the toxic blue-green algae that has turned the lake into an ecological dead zone have been lots of references to his benevolent gesture. John Manley in the *Irish News* even speculated the earl “may well turn out to be Lough Neagh’s saviour”.

But he never really promised to hand it back. What the earl, aka Nicholas Ashley-Cooper, actually said was he “would like” to transfer it to “a charity or community trust model”. It sounded like the way a parent “would like” to give a child’s



Nicholas Ashley-Cooper

toy back if the child behaved. The earl’s offer came in a 3,000-word blog post in which he also said that “this may take time”. He added: “There is currently no entity that is offering to take it or who can guarantee to improve the environmental health of the lough.”

There you have it – the Irish aren’t up to looking after it so I’ll hang on to it for now.

Frustration among the natives boiled over into some rather ungentlemanly conduct in August when a cup of lake water was thrown at the earl during a visit to Belfast.

Nick earns handsome royalties from the industrial dredging of over a million tonnes of sand from the lake bed annually, an ecologically harmful practice, but the causes of Lough Neagh’s problems are bigger than just dredging and colonial ownership.

A few days after Nick’s water incident came another unseemly spectacle – a ‘vomit protest’ outside a chicken slaughtering factory in Craigavon. Hundreds of activists from around Ireland, who had gathered for this year’s Climate Camp on the lake shore, appeared to throw up gallons of green sludge at the gates of the Moy Park factory.

They were drawing attention to the main cause of the lake’s demise – a lethal combination of intensive farming and poor regulation, resulting in vast quantities of run-off from fertiliser and slurry flowing into waterways.

The Stormont government has massively incentivised food production while simultane-

ously underfunding environmental protection. Factory farms have proliferated in the counties around the lake. In Co Antrim alone, 20 million farm animals live in cages.

Moy Park, the north’s largest business by turnover, has breached environmental laws hundreds of times in relation to the discharge of effluent from its facilities, a BBC investigation revealed in June.

A basic first step in saving Lough Neagh, which supplies 43% of the north’s drinking water, would be an independent environmental protection agency (EPA) – something the north remarkably still doesn’t have thanks to the hugely powerful agri lobby.

When the first and deputy first ministers launched their draft Programme for Government last week, campaigners were dismayed to see no mention of an independent EPA in Michelle O’Neill and Emma Little-Pengelly’s document. The lobbyists can take a bow.

MARIE DONNELLY has had some baffling media outings since taking over as Climate Change Advisory Council chair in 2021 but a recent comment on RTE’s Morning Ireland was her most baffling yet. On the subject of what consumers can do to help reduce agricultural emissions, she said we should eat less sugar and more fruit and vegetables.

Sugar? She didn’t mention red meat or dairy, by far the biggest culprits when it comes to emissions. Is she auditioning for a job as a health guru? Or could it be that old chestnut – fear of incurring the wrath of Ireland’s all-powerful agri-food lobby?



UNFULFILLED LEGACY

MANY PEOPLE presume that the British government’s decision to repeal the 2023 Legacy Act, which halted Troubles-related inquests and inquiries, is a major success for the Government here, all northern parties, and victims’ groups and human rights organisations in the north. Not so fast. Northern secretary Hilary Benn maintains the curious position of keeping in place the so-called Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery (ICRIR).

The Legacy Act created the ICRIR, which relatives and victims groups have repudiated. Human rights groups such as Amnesty and the Committee on the Administration of Justice also maintain the ICRIR is incapable of acting independently and that the northern secretary retains too much control. For them, the ICRIR is fatally tainted by its origin in the Legacy Act, which Conservatives made no bones about admitting was designed to prevent investigation of killings and injuries committed by British soldiers.

Further criticism is levelled at the body because its chief investigator is the Northern

Ireland Office’s favourite former RUC man, ex-assistant chief constable Peter Sheridan. Critics ask how he can investigate actions of his former colleagues. Relatives For Justice called the recruitment of personnel with “intelligence experience” a “spookfest”.

It’s no good for the body’s chair, former lord chief justice Sir Declan Morgan, to talk about its “unprecedented powers” to compel individuals and organisations to provide information if its ability to investigate is inherently flawed. The ICRIR lacks any credibility. Benn admits it needs some changes but won’t say what. Even Tánaiste Micheál Martin said a fortnight ago that it needs “root-and-branch reform”.

Other credible figures have gone further. Former police ombudsman Baroness O’Loan says simply that the ICRIR should be scrapped, while victims groups and relatives are boycotting it.

After initially refusing to answer questions about its workload, the body issued an “accountability update” late on Sunday September 8, which was anything but accountability. Since it began operating in May, it seems there have been only 85 inquiries, which have initiated eight cases.

It appears that most of the inquiries have come from English victims of the IRA rather than from people in the north. The only case the ICRIR has said it’s investigating is the 1974 Guildford pub bombing with English casualties, although everyone knows who carried it out. Given there are 3,600 deaths and 40,000 injuries that’s hardly a rush of interest.

Compare the hundreds of cases with the

Police Ombudsman’s office and inquests that the Legacy Act shut down.

It’s pretty obvious the ICRIR won’t do and that Benn is keeping it on the stocks until something else is agreed. He can’t take action now anyway because there’s a legal challenge to the ICRIR to be heard in the Court of Appeal in the coming months. What Benn has made clear is that the long-promised public

inquiry into the 1989 murder of Pat Finucane will be the last one, despite a High Court judge recommending one into the LVF killing of GAA man Seán Brown.

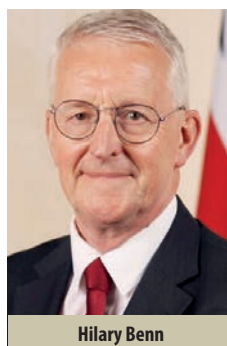
In any case, inquiries are one-offs with each costing millions and which don’t take the legacy question any further on.

The question is what to replace the ICRIR with? Sinn Féin want to go back to the 2014 Stormont House agreement that was ratified by both governments in January 2020. Unionists don’t want to do

that but so far haven’t proposed anything else.

It looks like another round-table conference with both governments and all parties trying for the umpteenth time to devise a process. The difference this time is that – unlike the Conservatives, who are complicit in the most egregious cases of collusion and undercover security force killings in the 1980s – Labour’s excesses were mostly 50 years ago and concerned individual security force operations rather than political direction and securocrat connivance that the last Conservative government was anxious to conceal.

Nevertheless, the inevitable delay means more victims and relatives will die before they know the truth.



Hilary Benn