



## BIG PHIL'S GENDER-BENDER LAW

BIG PHIL HOGAN'S return to the centre of Fine Gael, via its internal election committee, is not without irony as well as a ruthless logic given his formidable back-stage machinations that played out in the party's leadership fluctuations in recent years.

Just one of the problems facing FG's election team is the gender quota, as evidenced by the failure of FG's Cork constituency organisations to come anywhere near the 40% gender quota requirement necessary to avoid punitive financial penalties (see *The Phoenix* 23/8/24).

Election strategy discussions with and between party members now inevitably return to the gender quota and the intractable problems it is causing in candidate selection. And the man they all blame for this dilemma is the environment minister responsible for guiding the gender-bender legislation through the Oireachtas in 2012, one Big Phil Hogan. At the time, the unlikely 'woke' minister rounded on critics of his Electoral (Amendment) (Political Funding) Bill, calling them part of a "conservative culture".

The first casualty of Hogan's legislation was, temporarily at least, the esteemed enterprise minister Richard Bruton, whose Dublin Bay North party members – instructed by HQ to select one man and one woman – voted at convention in 2015 not to include him on the general election ticket (a decision that HQ reversed very quickly). That Bruton was the man who led the mutiny against party leader Enda Kenny in 2010, which Big Phil



Phil Hogan

put down with extreme prejudice, was just one of life's coincidences.

Further gender issues arose following Hogan's defenestration from the EU Commission in 2020 following his Dominic Cummings-type tour of quite a few of the 26 counties shortly after he attended that Oireachtas golf dinner in Clifden during the pandemic. This greatly annoyed EU commissar Ursula von der Leyen (especially his dissembling explanation) who, after expelling Phil, insisted on the government proposing two names – one male, one female – from which she could choose as Hogan's replacement commissioner. Ursula then chose Mairead McGuinness over economist Andrew McDowell.

Further leadership shenanigans followed, with Big Phil nursing a wounded ego and a variety of grudges, including one against the man he had helped to become party leader and taoiseach in 2017, Leo Varadkar.

Hogan regarded Vlad's capitulation to Ursula in the matter of his commissioner's post as extreme disloyalty under the circumstances and Heather Humphreys briefly became mentioned in party circles as a possible interim replacement for the dispirited Varadkar.

The real claimant to the throne, however, was always going to be Harris. Given what Hogan regarded as the ultimate betrayal by Simon 'Covetous' Coveney, who he believed had conspired to take his place on the EU Commission, Hogan rushed to Simon's side to offer good counsel.

The other contender, Helen McEntee, had by then become regarded as an empty vessel and so Harris would likely have seized the leadership regardless of Big Phil's support.

Wisely, however, Harris did not spurn the mentoring offered by Hogan in the dark art of political in-fighting and manoeuvring and now the two stand at the helm of the good ship Fine Gael – but circling each other warily.

## JENNIFER BENDS THE KNEE TO MARTIN

TÁNAISTE AND defence minister Micheál Martin has torn off the epaulettes and snapped the sword of Jennifer Carroll MacNeill, his junior officer or Minister of State at the Department of Defence. Control freak Martin, as some of his treasonous officers in Fianna Fáil describe him (out of earshot), had more than enough provocation to justify his disciplining of Thatcher MacNeill over

the summer period but it looks as though he has silenced his insubordinate officer for the time being.

The charge sheet against the seditious Jennifer begins with her mid-July *Sunday Independent* article in which she demanded that Ireland increase its military budget two-fold to €3bn. This is twice the Government's targeted level – by 2028 – of €1.5bn, itself a sharp rise in recent years due to pressure from EU militarists at home and abroad. But the minister stuck to her, em, guns, demanding extra money to spend on a fleet of at least 12 naval ships and combat aircraft. Thatcher MacNeill offered the rather statistical argument that, sure, haven't we budgeted €23.5bn this year for health by comparison.

In early August MacNeill repeated her demands verbatim with statements to the *Irish Mail on Sunday*, including the strange health expenditure argument, saying:

"I believe €3bn is a target we now need to be working steadily towards."

However, the *Mail* also published a stern statement – one that "rejected her calls" – from her department, in reality her boss and the real defence minister, Martin, saying that "consideration" would be given to adopting a level of ambition (LOA) 3, ie the €3bn target, in 2028.

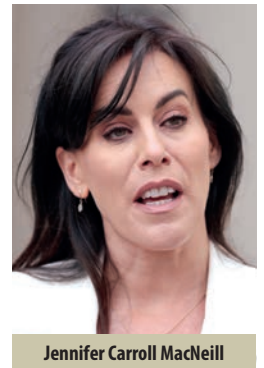
The *Mail* also described the rift between MacNeill and Martin on this issue as "deepening tensions" between coalition partners Fine Gael and FF. This, the newspaper said, was underlined by Martin's refusal to heed calls from FG to devolve delegated powers to his junior minister.

She is the only one of 20 ministers of state with no delegated or executive functions, they claimed. Several anonymous Blueshirts and one identified junior minister – Martin Heydon – made some rather provocative statements about the "old boys brigade" and an institution that "is toxic for women".

A week later, on August 11, Thatcher MacNeill returned to the fray with a carefully crafted article in which she argued that we simply have to get to this next level of investment (LOA 3). She added that she was "pleased to say" that the recent defence policy review and Government policy was that "consideration" would be given to moving to LOA 3. This later statement, of course, is exactly what Martin and his department had said when rejecting her calls for a straight decision with no ifs, ands or buts.

If the junior defence minister's statement indicated a face-saving concession of defeat to Martin and FF, then another, follow-up declaration in the Aarwish edition of the *Sunday Times* was not unlike statements the Germans had to sign in the Treaty of Versailles. MacNeill began in usual belligerent form, railing against the dastardly Russians and telling gung-ho hack John Mooney that we had to increase military spending but, significantly, refusing to put a figure on it.

She then went on to protest rather too much, saying firstly that there was no



Jennifer Carroll MacNeill



....Lets up it to two apples a day and see how you get on from there...

## AFFAIRS OF THE NATION

difference between FG, FF and the Greens in Government regarding defence spending; secondly, there was no difference between herself and defence minister Martin; and thirdly, there was unity in the coalition's approach to defence.

In the annals of military history, Versailles seems like a compromise by comparison. But Taoiseach Simon Harris and the Tánaiste are aware of the scope for FG/FF disharmony as the general election approaches and the FF party leader, Martin, simply had to be backed by FG party leader Harris against the ambitious, would-be FG party leader Thatcher MacNeill.

The latter will not have improved her stock as a party leader among FG members with a misjudged campaign against her boss in the Department of Defence.

## HARRIS TO WIPE OUT FF IN WICKLOW?

**INTERNAL CONVULSIONS** in Wicklow Fine Gael, involving competition between two contenders for a place on the general election ticket with Taoiseach Simon Harris and resentment against Eoin O'Duffy-type discipline in the constituency organisation, led to a tense selection convention last weekend.

Former poll-topping councillor Shay Cullen had been expected to put his name forward but he failed to run in the local elections and did not put his name forward at convention. The main reason for the retreat of the ambitious and popular Cullen was that one of the first things Harris did when then taoiseach Leo Varadkar appointed him as director of elections last September was to tell Cullen that he would not be on the general election ticket. This led to Cullen throwing in the towel at local election level and, everyone presumed, in the general election.



Shay Cullen

However, with the resurgence of FG under the Harris leadership, Cullen and his supporters changed tack and he was nearly selected to run with Harris at the convention, being narrowly beaten on the night by councillor Edward Timmins – with the Taoiseach's backing.

Behind the scenes manoeuvring was, of course, more interesting than the actual convention result and the word put out by some interested parties beforehand was that, if Cullen was not selected, he could run as an Independent, thus stymieing FG's prospects of a second seat here, which has declined from five seats to four. So irked was Cullen by a report in Shay Fitzmaurice's *Wicklow Times* to this effect – just days before the convention – that he complained to FG head office that Timmins had leaked this 'spin' to the newspaper.

The reality is that, if Cullen does decide to run as an Independent, he could actually win



'I'm on a wellness detox.'

a seat should he agree an electoral pact with another poll-topping Independent councillor, Joe Behan, whose DNA is Fianna Fáil rather than FG. Cullen is perhaps electorally stronger than Behan but the vagaries of Wicklow voting patterns is such that it is hard to say which one would be best placed to win a seat if they combined their forces.

One reason why FG might pull off a coup with a second seat here, despite the constituency losing a seat, is that FF now has no councillors at all in either Bray or Greystones (the two most heavily populated centres in Wicklow county) and just one in Wicklow. At the same time, Social Democrat TD Jennifer Whitmore is on course to return to the Dáil, as is Sinn Féin TD John Brady, with SF wisely not running a second candidate with him.

FF senator Pat Casey will run with health minister Stephen Donnelly, but the latter is most unlikely to have a battalion of students bussed in from Dublin by Micheál Martin, as happened in 2020 when Donnelly had no canvassers of his own on which to rely. Casey will have the old guard of FF to rely on but this may not be enough.

All of this will likely see Harris, Brady and Whitmore re-elected with Cullen (if he runs) and Behan, leaving FG's Timmins and FF's Casey fighting over the fourth seat.

## WEAPONISING IRISH

THE DUP has once again raised the charge that Sinn Féin is "weaponising" the Irish language, as Belfast City Council issues a draft language policy for consultation with the public.

The draft includes proposals to allow for the use of Irish or English in correspondence with the council, along with Ulster Scots. It also sets out how the council plans to promote Irish and use the language across its services, including interpreting and translation, key documents and publications, signage at facilities, and on the council's official logo and website.

The DUP, however, has denounced the proposals as "divisive". It has been backed up in this stance by both the hardline TUV and the supposedly moderate UUP. It will be interesting to see whether the new leader of the UUP, Mike Nesbitt, is able to drive his reform programme to the extent that this opposition is dropped by his party.

SF, supported by the SDLP and the Alliance Party, are pushing through with the

consultation, arguing that instead of being 'divisive' the proposals are inclusive, citing in particular the provisions for Ulster Scots and for various minority languages spoken in the city.

The DUP is arguing that the whole issue has been driven by SF at a time when, according to Sarah Bunting, DUP leader on the council, recent violent events in the city have highlighted the need to come together on what unites the community rather than on what divides it.

Ms Bunting said the 2021 census shows 0.3% of the north's population say Irish is their main language and she asked: "What, then, is the reason for parity?"

"We have other priorities for our city that we believe the council ought to be focusing on at this time, rather than spending millions on unjustifiable changes to the identity of the council."

And there's the nub. The DUP argues that acknowledging the existence of Irish as an equal language to English in council affairs would change the identity of the city to what SF would like it to be.

SF, however, was badly caught out a few years ago when the independent An Dream Dearg movement came to the fore in 2019 to demand a language act (since brought in by the British government) and other measures to ensure language rights.

SF had assumed the Irish-language movement was in its pocket – a view obviously still held by the DUP – but Irish speakers themselves had grown increasingly frustrated at the lack of priority given by SF to the language and developed their own campaign.

It is this pressure, rather than any devious SF ploy, which has driven the consultation draft and which will see far-reaching language rights entrenched in council policy. This was shown yet again last week when demonstrators from An Dream Dearg filled the new Grand Central Railway station in Belfast, condemning the lack of Irish-language signage and demanding that SF infrastructure minister John O'Dowd intervene.



Sarah Bunting