



Brian Polly

MOST OBSERVERS were shocked at the revelations to the Committee for Public Accounts (PAC) by Darragh O'Loughlin, CEO of the Irish Horseracing Regulatory Board (IHRB), regarding questionable financial practices in the agency that oversees the regulation of the sport of horse racing. You would, however, get pretty long odds that former IHRB steward Brian Polly was among the bewildered. A fierce critic of the Bowler Hats and their policies, Polly has long questioned the agency's *modus operandi*, spending and accountability for public funds. The bolshy Downpatrick property developer has been rubbing the horse-racing hierarchy up the wrong way for years and a recent Government decision helps to vindicate his stance.

Hailing from a family synonymous with Downpatrick racecourse, Polly himself was a director of the track for no less than 34 years, up to 2012. He inherited the racing bug from his mother, Rita, who grew up on a farm over which Downpatrick racecourse runs. She hailed from an established national hunt family – her brother, Frankie Fitzsimons, having been a successful point-to-point rider. Both Rita and her husband, Willie, built a successful building company, as well as a hospitality business.

The dapper Brian Polly maintains his interest in the property game and has been a director of a number of companies. These days, one of the active entities is Crawfordsville Ltd, which was almost struck off the register during the summer for failing to file accounts. He is joined here as a 50% shareholder by his partner, Anne Gomes. Crawfordsville has inter-company dealings with another Polly firm, Glenallen Ltd, where his fellow director is Ballymoney-based businessman Alan Shields.

Rita Polly proved quite the player on the racecourse, with Jeremy Maxwell, John Oxx and Bunny Cox amongst the trainers who provided winners. She also forged a strong friendship and successful partnership with trainer Noel Meade, most notably with the prolific *Novello Allegro* and *Lear Fantastique*.

Her sons went on to be prominent owners in their own right, with Brian enjoying the most notable success – the Grade 1 win of the Charlie Swan-trained *Offshore Account* in Punchestown's Grade 1 Ellier Developments Champion Novice Steeplechase.

Brian's son, Philip, also a

property developer, is the latest member of the Polly dynasty to taste success on the turf, courtesy of his charge, *Pinkerton*, trained by Meade and ridden by Donagh Meyler, which recently won the Tote Galway Plate.

Brian was elected as chairman of the Association of Irish Racehorse Owners (AIRO) in March 2016, replacing John Weld in the high-profile role. During his tenure in the AIRO saddle, however, Polly voiced concerns about assorted corporate governance issues within the association and specifically questioned what he considered the liberal spending of members' monies.

As well as publicly voicing his concerns, Polly filed a complaint with the Garda National Economic Crime Bureau over the handling of a payment made by AIRO to cover the €1,200 admission fee for former chairman Weld to attend a bloodstock conference in far-off Mumbai, India, in January 2016.

Polly alleged the process was not transparent and the spend was difficult to identify in the accounts. Bloodstock consultant Weld told Goldhawk at the time that he had represented AIRO at the Indian event and that his attendance had been "rubber-stamped" by the membership. There

has been no recent sign of the boys and girls in blue pursuing an investigation.

Polly also forwarded his allegations about the AIRO board's actions to agriculture minister Charlie McConalogue, claiming that the organisation was "dysfunctional".

The going got heavier after a costly 2019 High Court case with outspoken board member James Gough, which resulted in costs of over €100,000 for AIRO members. The case saw Gough initiating proceedings and securing an injunction against his fellow AIRO directors over their refusal to allow him to put his name forward to the membership for a vote on who would represent owners on the influential board of the state funding agency, Horse Racing Ireland (HRI).

CONCERNS

Then agriculture minister Michael Creed subsequently accepted Gough's claim that at least two candidates should have to be put forward to make the vote valid. As a result, it was Polly who finally ended up standing against Caren Walsh for election but the vote was overwhelmingly in Walsh's favour.

At the 2019 AGM, racehorse owner James Mescall raised concerns over the liability of the members in the event of legal costs or damages being awarded against the association for any reason (ie the Gough proceedings). As a result, the association restructured and changed its status to a company limited by guarantee.

The new company was incorporated by the Companies Registrations Office in March 2020 as AIRO Racing Company Ltd and the current listed directors are David Hyland, John Weld, Sandra Fox, Caren Walsh, James Fenton, Kevin Power, Sam Dunwoody, Richie Galway, Frances Crowley, Peter O'Reilly, Mark Molloy, Eleanor Manning and, the most recent arrival, John Connolly.

One of the issues that was raised at the 2019 AGM related to the status of the smaller owner in Irish racing and, having put themselves forward for election to the council, the critics withdrew their applications in order to register their protest on the night.

Polly had always been seen as supportive of the gripes from the smaller players in Irish racing and was vocal about the size of the slice of the taxpayers' pie that was directed by HRI towards the prize money for the more prestigious races, dominated by the biggest owners and trainers.

Although there was no sign of movement at the time, Polly and his supporters could



AFFAIRS OF THE NATION

be said to have been vindicated as the powers that be in HRI are now struggling to deal with the concerns. The agency has just announced a new programme of 60 races that specifically excludes the top four Irish national hunt trainers from competing.

It is unclear what the odds are on its success but the backlash has been significant, with the bigger owners and assorted other players dismissing the idea as simply daft. Certainly, the HRI wheeze has caused a split within the ranks of the Irish Racehorse Trainers Association.

In the past there had been attempts to oust Polly from the chair of AIRO – as a result of his repeated criticisms – all of which proved unsuccessful. When he finally stepped down towards the end of 2021, Polly noted: “Many factors have contributed to my dissatisfaction as to how the association has been and is being run.” But he added that he would “continue to represent smaller owners in Irish racing to the best of my ability”.

Having certainly shaken up AIRO during his tenure, Polly’s exit cleared the way for one of his main critics, David Hyland, to move into the saddle at the March 2022 AGM.

It would be interesting to know what Polly made of the organisation’s recently published 2023 annual report. The accounts showed income of €270,000, yet the company, which boasts only one employee (Regina Byrne), managed to post a loss of €15,000.

The spending of membership subscription income included “awards expenses” of €54,000 at John Magnier’s swanky Cashel Palace Hotel. Recipients of the awards included Geneva-based JP McManus, fellow moneybags the Aga Khan, Sue Magnier (wife of John) and private equity player Barry Connell.

RACE-DAY STEWARD

Following his departure from AIRO, Polly retrained his sights on the IHRB. As a race-day steward for the sport’s state-sponsored governing body, he was well positioned to question various aspects of the body’s *modus operandi*, including the selection process used to appoint its members.

When former IHRB boss Denis Egan assured TD Paul Kehoe at an Oireachtas committee hearing that it was relatively straightforward for any member of the public to join the IHRB as a “volunteer” steward, Polly took exception.

He pointed out that the so-called application process for individuals seeking appointment essentially relies on them being selected from within the IHRB’s ranks, which makes the organisation, in Polly’s opinion, a self-perpetuating, self-electing and self-policing state-funded private club. As a result, he claims, the IHRB suffers from a lack of diversity.

Polly was also a prominent critic of the costly redevelopment of the Curragh racecourse, questioning whether the taxpayers’ contributions were fairly reflected in the actual share of the course held by the state. His

concerns primarily related to the fact that the private IHRB had received its initial 30.8% shareholding in Curragh Racecourse Limited (CRL), even though the only contribution was the site (which was subsequently revealed to have been valued by Jordan Auctioneers at €12.17m) and a good will element.

Considering the original budget for the expensive revamp was set at €65m, funded by state finances and private investors, it is clear why Polly was concerned. Following the inevitable overspend, the IHRB shareholding was later diluted to 18.8%, although the

IHRB retains a 33% voting share in CRL.

Despite the vast sums expended on the project, the first structures to greet the paying punters at Ireland’s premier track are temporary ‘marquees’. The ticket ‘tent’ leads on to the ‘Paddock Bar Tent’ and its two canvas partners, which all border the parade ring – itself the subject of a €1/2m realignment fiasco.

Separately, Polly raised concerns about monies deducted by HRI from racehorse owners’ accounts and prize monies to help fund certain racing charities.

A 2022 transfer of funds by the IHRB from a jockey welfare fund administered by the regulatory body to a separate IHRB account turned out to be at the heart of “matters of grave financial concern” that incoming Bowler Hats’ boss Darragh O’Loughlin announced to a stunned PAC last year.

Clearly, the findings of the long-delayed report from Mazars, which was called in to examine the debacle, will provide interesting reading for Polly. Not that he remains too close to the action. Early last year, Polly was informed in writing and without warning that his appointment as a race-day steward had been “revoked”. The IHRB told Goldhawk that it “does not comment publicly on individual race-day stewards, current or former”.

Polly subsequently claimed he had been informed by telephone that the reason for his ousting was because he had “discussed and brought confidential IHRB matters into the public domain”.

He added: “I have always prided myself in being a person of the greatest integrity and my appointment as an IHRB steward hopefully reflected this... On my own behalf and on the behalf of smaller owners and trainers, I posed many wide-ranging questions about the concerns we had regarding the IHRB.”

In a nutshell, he had “sought to bring some transparency” to a publicly funded entity that receives over €11m per annum from the taxpayer.

Given the battering taken by the Bowler Hats in recent times, it is now clear that Polly was asking valid questions and five weeks ago the Department of Agriculture announced that, on foot of 2023 recommendations from the PAC concerning the €95m pa horse and greyhound fund, an external review will be undertaken. This will include an evaluation of “the use of the government funding to subsidise prize funds”, specifically whether this represents “the best value for money”.

And, with the Mazars report at the starting gate, there is more heaving going to come.



Darragh O’Loughlin



‘THAT’S MY HASH’

CORK DISTRICT Court heard the case of Patrick Fennelly (63), who was charged with a number of public order offences arising from several incidents in May and June this year. On May 30 the defendant appeared at Mercy University Hospital (MUH) in an intoxicated state and became abusive towards staff. Sergeant John Kelleher told the court that Fennelly did not require medical attention and refused to leave. A small amount of cannabis was discovered on his person when he was arrested, prompting him to declare to gardaí: “That’s my hash.” A similar incident occurred at MUH several weeks later and Fennelly labelled arresting officers a “bunch of pricks” before proclaiming that he would “hammer” them. Fennelly was also involved in a drunken disturbance at Oliver Plunkett Street, Cork, where he told gardaí: “Fuck off’ye pricks”. Judge Mary Dorgan adjourned sentencing until November 25 for a probation report in advance of sentencing. *Echo*

SHOT DOWN

A MAN who contacted gardaí to falsely claim that he had been shot was fined at Naas District Court. Stephen Killeen (48), of 53 Ballyhagan, Carbury, was charged with criminal damage and a breach of the Public Order Act on November 30, 2023. Judge Desmond Zaidan heard that Killeen had contacted gardaí and claimed he had been shot. When officers investigated, they found Killeen in an intoxicated state and he told the gardaí to “fuck off”. The defendant was arrested after becoming more aggressive. In his cell, Killeen ripped the mattress on his bed and soiled the cell. The court heard that, contrary to Killeen’s claim, he had not been shot. Solicitor Seamus Boyle told the court that his client was apologetic and had ill-advisedly mixed alcohol with medication on the day in question. Killeen was fined €500. *Leinster Leader*

‘SKINNY TRAMP’

LEONA O’RIORDAN, of 84 Mangerton Close, The Glen, Cork, pleaded guilty at Cork District Court to charges of obstruction, engaging in threatening behaviour and public intoxication. O’Riordan came to the attention of gardaí at Cook Street, Cork, when they saw her shouting at staff outside the Rob Roy pub. Garda Karen O’Leary approached the defendant and noticed a strong smell of alcohol. O’Riordan became belligerent when informed that she would be searched and called the officer a “skinny fucking pig”. She then told Garda O’Leary she “will do fucking nothing” and concluded that the officer was a “skinny tramp”. Judge Mary Dorgan heard that the defendant tried to bite Garda O’Leary, while yelling: “You’re nothing but a rat bastard.” Judge Dorgan directed O’Riordan to do 75 hours of community service in lieu of a two-month custodial sentence and fined her €300 for engaging in threatening behaviour. *Echo*

• Suitable contributions to: *The Phoenix*, 44 Lower Baggot St, D2, or email bogcuttings@thephoenix.ie