

BONO'S PR TOUR OF DUTY

Thanks America, you've always been on Bono's side

You mean 'genocide' surely?





ALSO: Paddy Power's target; Atalanta Pollock's pile; Gary Mullan's bad vibe; Daniel O'Donnell's moolah; Michael Gaine murder 'suspect'; Tom Higgins's flight plan



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FFG AND ISRAELI ARMS

THE OUTRAGE of Tánaiste and Fine Gael leader Simon Harris as well as the loud shrieks from the party's MEPs at the slaughter inflicted by the

Israel Defence Forces (IDF) on Palestinian civilians and children in Gaza were most welcome. They were also out of sync with the political positions the party's MEPs had been instructed to adopt until recently.



Especially ironic

was the outrage expressed by the same quarters at the firing of shots above the heads of an EU delegation of diplomats visiting the West Bank last week. Harris demanded the "fullest possible explanation" from Israel and registered the Government's "condemnation" of the "utterly reprehensible" behaviour of the IDF.

FG MEP Maria Walsh and the party's three other MEPs - Nina Carberry, Regina Doherty and Seán Kelly - all raised their voices to demand the immediate suspension of the preferential EU trade agreement with Israel. Maria was especially exercised by the IDF firing a volley of shots over the heads of EU diplomats - including two Irish ones - and she broadcast her indignation at this undiplomatic behaviour on the airwaves back in Ireland that evening.

Her righteous anger at the belligerent behaviour of IDF killers is beyond irony. Walsh was one of the FG MEPs that drew the wrath of Sinn Féin MEP Lynn Boylan just the previous month when an amendment to motions on defence and security was moved that demanded an end to the sale of weapons

from EU countries to Israel. Subsequently, just weeks later, such weapons were used to intimidate EU diplomats and MEP Walsh, who voted against such arms being blocked from export to Israel, is outraged?

Walsh and the other FG MEPS voted against the amendment, helping it to fall and enabling the continued sale of billions worth of arms to the IDF and the continuation of its "utterly reprehensible behaviour".

Is the murder of Palestinian children and civilians by the tens of thousands regarded as less reprehensible than firing shots over the heads of western diplomats?

Behind this morass of contradictory moral values and political duplicity lies a tale of power struggles and conflicts within the European People's Party (EPP), in particular between the German and Irish contingents within the EEP grouping in the EU parliament. The German CDU/CSU and other 'centre-right' parties (as right-wing parties like to describe themselves) dominate the EPP and FG MEPs have found themselves

Continued on page 4

CONGRATULATIONS to senior counsel Peter Shanley, who was quick off the mark to take advantage of a key provision in the Legal Services Regulation Act, which allows direct access to barristers by the public - ie bypassing those pesky solicitors.

Shanley has hired a PR company to oversee the launch of new venture Barristers Direct (BD), which turns out to be owned by a company called Barristers Direct Ltd, where Shanley holds 100% of the shares. Oddly, this company was actually incorporated way back in 2012 to carry on the business of "legal activities", so clearly Peter was thinking far ahead

He now has first-mover advantage in what could become a busy sector, given the high level of litigation in Ireland. BD's customers will be able to directly engage a barrister through the company and pay a fixed \in 325 fee for an initial opinion from one of the legal eagles selected by the company. (BD does say a solicitor will be required if proceedings are issued.)

Given that BD will essentially act as a gate keeper, some Law Library members may wonder how the selection process works. Shanley's PR people would only say: "Barristers are assigned to clients based on the nature of the customer's query and the established expertise of the relevant barrister."

Goldhawk expects there to be plenty of griping from m'learned friends as the gigs get handed out by Shanley et al.



Just relax and try to remember what Chat GPT wrote for you

MERRION SQUARE FIRING SQUAD

IT SHOULD be standing room only at the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) meeting this week as the Arts Council, National Gallery of Ireland (NGI) and arts and culture mandarins come before John Brady's firing squad. Among the politicians lining up to take a swipe and some easy-looking targets will be the likes of Catherine Connolly, James Geoghegan and Catherine Ardagh.

It could be a very uncomfortable session for the Arts Council in particular, with the under-fire director, Maureen Kennelly, feeling the heat over that €7m IT project debacle revealed by Goldhawk.

She is joined by chairwoman Maura McGrath, who has the good fortune of not being in situ for much of the period that will be scrutinised by the PAC. As chair, however, she will be grilled as to what she knew and when. Goldhawk understands that McGrath had considered that it would be more appropriate if board members who were in place for rather longer – such as acting chairwoman Philomena Poole or senior director Jillian van Turnhout - came along for the ride.

McGrath will be accompanied instead by business transformation programme director Poly Anyanwu and Kennelly's deputy, Martin O'Sullivan (who is also finance director).

There will also be plenty of questions for the council's 'parent' department of arts and culture, with secretary general Feargal Ó Coigligh on the guest list, as are assistant secretaries Conor Falvey and Joe Healy, the former of whom is the mandarin probably most central to the department's overseeing of the Arts Council's spending spree.

There will also be some relevant input from Dermot Nolan at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and Mary O'Donoghue, head of information and communications technology (ICT) at the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer, which has "the leadership role for the digital agenda across government... It is required to review and approve ICT related spend by organisations.'

Affairs of the Nation 3. Fowl Emissions/ Northwind 9. Last Refuge 10. Print 12. Pillars of Society 14. Young Blood 16. Scenes/Sport of Kings 17. High Society 18. Funnies 20. Moneybags 24. Briefs 28.

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Continued from page 3

isolated within the group. The FG MEPs have not always voted with the German-led majority of the EPP, which has led to the consequent discord.

The *Irish Times* reported recently that Harris had determined to resolve what he saw as a damaging rift with the most powerful group in the EU Parliament and he pressured his MEPs to get with the German flow, which is now directed by hardline German chancellor Friedrich Merz. One of the primary issues that Merz is keen to promote is the growth of the EU's defensive capacity and industry.

Thus, the pressure came on FG's EU Parliamentary members who, notwithstanding the horror of their constituents across Ireland at the IDF's blood lust, voted last month to support the continuation of arms sales to Israel. Only when Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared and then implemented his intention to increase IDF attacks on Gaza's population – and the consequent revulsion of their constituents – did FG's MEPs re-assert their own attachment to a peaceful resolution of the genocide in Gaza.

Harris has his own early warning political system and he signalled the end of capitulation to the Germans on Gaza – temporarily, at least – when he stated, within hours of Netanyahu's intention to invade and seize Gaza indefinitely, that such a plan was alarming. He added that what was happening to the people of Gaza was "despicable and unconscionable".

Merz may or may not have noticed this statement from little Ireland's foreign minister but Taoiseach Micheál Martin certainly did. Martin was always less voluble in his criticisms of the pro-Israeli EU president, Germany's Ursula von der Leyen, but the day after Harris's statement he condemned Israel's blockade of Gaza as a war crime.

Hopefully this competitive outrage at home and abroad will last until there is a ceasefire in Gaza. The Government's continuing, confusing positions on the Occupied Territories Bill does not inspire hope here – nor does its opposition to SF's motion to stop the Central Bank from enabling the sale of Israeli war bonds.

THE NEW political editor of the Irish and Sunday Independent, Mary Regan is a most accomplished journalist as her work at RTÉ, the Irish Examiner and Business Post proves. So her startling failure to even mention the most significant current initiative by far of former taoiseach Leo Varadkar, in her analysis of his current trajectory, probably says more about the political blind spot of the southern fourth estate than anything else.

Varadkar's new line on the national question began before he left office but in the

LATEST DATE SET FOR NCH OPENING





year since then he has ramped up his support for a united Ireland and the need to prepare for a border poll. He had already reversed the role of Fine Gael leader (partitionist to united Irelander) with that of Fianna Fáil leader Micheál Martin (republican to partitionist). He has also made common cause with former SDLP leader Colum Eastwood, who had firstly been invited to merge with Martin's party and then abandoned by FF, while northern nationalists of all shades now regard Martin with distaste.

The seismic change in the mood and the differing stances that many are now adopting on the national question owes more to Vlad than any other taoiseach this century and he has not finished yet.

Regan's piece in the Sindo talked of his views on the far right, Ireland's place in Europe and the economics of the new German chancellor among other things. But north and south, it is Vlad's line on Irish unity that people are more interested in.

SPOOKY SWISS CLUB DE BERNE

IRELAND MAY not be able to conduct immigration security screening – necessary for the implementation of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum – according to a Government report. This is because we are denied access to a "key European security data base" as we are not a member of the Schengen area of Europe without borders. The EU's IT security system deals with security, policing, judicial and immigration issues. Hopefully, justice minister Jim O'Callaghan can direct his current display of energy and commitment to solving this problem.

This is a remarkable state of affairs given that we belong to the high-level spooky Club de Berne and have done so since shortly after its foundation in around 1970 by the big countries in the EU, ie Germany, Britain, France etc. It expanded quickly throughout the 1970s to encompass all EU states – as well as Norway and Switzerland – whose security and intel chiefs are the players in the group.

It also has a sub-group, the Counter Terrorist Group (CTG), which could be described as its own semi-military wing and which, since its creation in 2001, has greatly enhanced the role and influence of the club.



The club receives very little attention from the 'free press' but fears have been expressed that its unregulated and unmonitored activities – each state controls its own intel agencies but neither the EU nor anyone else has any control over the club or the CTG – are now totally independent.

The club and the CTG are outside the EU but communicate with it via the EU Intelligence Analysis Centre, an arm of the EU external service.

It should be noted that in 2018 the CTG co-operated in exercises with Europol's Centre for Migrant Smuggling, an initiative indicating that EU



Jim O'Callaghan

intel entities could easily facilitate Ireland in the immigrant pact now being prepared.

Ireland's early membership and involvement in the club is not surprising given modern Irish history and the northern Troubles. From 1969, the northern conflict and the club/CTG grew up together and Irish special branch personnel would have had much knowledge about the IRA and INLA to impart to club members.

This was down to republican groups' links with Palestinian groups, the South African ANC's armed wing, ETA and other such groups around the world. In this area, at least, Ireland could be said to have punched well above its weight.

However, from being a contributor at these clandestine meetings, Ireland has become what is described as a "net recipient of intel". This is due to the IRA shutting down its operations since the late 1990s and the consequent drying up of the supply of highgrade intel from interrogations, sleuthing, informers and surveillance as a result of the Good Friday Agreement.

Irish intel chiefs are unhappy at the downgrading of their stature in the Club de Berne and discussions about improving the rate of intel are ongoing. What should really concern these gents, however, is that from the beginning of the club's existence the FBI, CIA and, most concerning of all, Mossad have been members and/or observers. And the Israelis were responsible for one of the club's most important innovations, Kilowatt, an encrypted telex system for intelligence sharing on Middle East activists, ie Palestinians.

PADDY POWER'S TARGET

NEW YORK-listed Flutter Entertainment plc – owners of gambling giant Paddy Power – has launched High Court proceedings in Dublin against an Irish property company called Waymill Ltd. The name of the principal here should ring a few bells, given that he found himself in the middle of the high-profile 'Lying Eyes' murder plot a few years back.

The directors of Ennis-registered Waymill

are listed as PJ Howard and his sons, Robert and Niall, and the company was set up by PJ back in 1986. He is still on the board but transferred ownership of the company to his sons in 2018. In recent years.

Waymill ran into



a spot of bother and receiver Ken Fennell of Deloitte

& Touche was appointed to the company's

56 commercial and residential properties on foot of sums owed to AIB that had been transferred to Everyday Finance. The Howards, however, bought out the bank's interest "using an alternative lending facility" (First Citizen Finance).

As a result, Fennell was discharged in 2021, although recovery has been relatively slow, with the accounts signed off last November showing that Waymill was sitting on accumulated losses of $\in 160,000$ at the end of 2023, while the three directors were owed a combined $\in 1.6m$ in loans to the company.

The nature of the action lodged earlier this month by Flutter is unclear at this stage and Waymill has yet to nominate a legal firm to represent the business.

What is clear though is that a court case between these two parties will prove far less engrossing than the remarkable 2008 Lying Eyes trial relating to the hiring by PJ Howard's partner, Sharon Collins, of Las Vegas blackjack dealer Essam Eid to kill PJ, Robert and Niall Howard.

Collins had been looking to ensure she could inherit PJ's multi-million-euro estate and contacted Eid in 2006 via the 'hitmanforhire' website, choosing the *nom de plume* lyingeyes98. She proposed that the Egyptian would arrange for the two sons to have a fatal accident, after which he would kill PJ Howard himself but make it look like a suicide. Little wonder the story ended up being turned into a movie.

Having paid a deposit of $\in 15,000$, the plot came apart when Eid tried to blackmail the Howard family by demanding payment of $\in 150,000$ in exchange for cancelling the assassination contract. This led to the involvement of the boys in blue, the exposure of Collins's involvement and, eventually, a seven-week trial that gripped the nation and resulted in Eid being jailed.

Collins, who denied having ordered the triple murder, was also sent to prison.

Goldhawk is unsure what odds Paddy Power would have given on that outcome.

AS THE fans of Donegal crooner Daniel O'Donnell come to terms with the fact that he is to take an extended break from touring, the good news for the man himself is that there is plenty of moolah in the coffers to tide him over for quite some time.

A month after Wee Daniel took to Facebook to warn the public to beware of fake pictures of him looking sick in hospital and suggesting he needed help, he has announced that there will be no concerts from the end of this year (and indeed not too many over the next few months) as he takes time out to deal with chest issues "that wouldn't have bothered me if I wasn't singing".

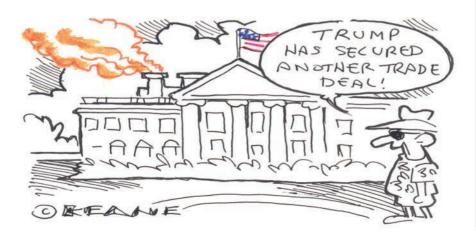
In the age of Spotify, eschewing the option of touring will have a direct impact on the bottom line for any act, as indeed was the case in the years around the pandemic. In the 12 months to the end of October 2022, for example, DOD Promotions Ltd lost a hefty \notin_2m .

Happily, DOD bounced back in 2023, while the accounts filed this month reveal a profit of just on \notin 200,000 in the year to the end of October last, leaving accumulated profits standing at a poptastic \notin 4m.

By the way, although Daniel's missus, Majella, is a listed director, it turns out that all of the shares are registered in his name.

JIMMY FENNELLY'S FINALE

TENACIOUS ACCOUNTANT Jimmy Fennelly will feel he balanced the books somewhat at last week's AGM



of the Chartered Accountants of Ireland (CAI), with whom he has been having a long-running battle (see *The Phoenix* 13/12/24).

While the world of number crunchers is a boring one at the best of times, Fennelly's stand-off with the profession's representative body featured a few highlights, with Jimmy going so far as to create his own website where he outlined his various concerns. He also commissioned consultancy firm Governance Ireland (GI) to carry out a review of the handling of the protracted disciplinary process he had found himself embroiled in. GI's report identified "clear deficiencies" (although the CAI did not engage with the consultancy firm's review).

A 2014 complaint to the CAI by a client of Fennelly's had ini-

Fennelly's had initially been dismissed by the conduct committee in 2016, before a review was kick-started on foot of a request by the client. That review, by Esmond Reilly, was considered to have been flawed and resulted in the whole affair being prolonged, until Fennelly ultimately settled with the



Barry Doyle

accountants' body in 2019 after a flurry of legal missives, with the CAI paying \notin 200,000 towards his legal costs "in full and final set-tlement".

Nevertheless, after the CAI got a kicking from the Auditing & Accounting Supervisory Authority for its botched handling of the process, Fennelly raised questions about the decision to facilitate a review of the dismissed complaint against him. In turn, this led to an 'independent' review in CAI, which found in 2020 that all had been more or less in order.

Fennelly was less than impressed given that the independent review was not carried out by an external expert but rather by deputy CAI president Paul Henry, with GI claiming the position of the accountants' body that the review was independent was "not credible".

This claim has been rejected at AGMs by successive CAI presidents but the dogged Fennelly refused to go away.

He finally got a result at last week's AGM when the outgoing CAI president, Barry Doyle, read out a statement regarding Fennelly's concerns about Henry's independence: "The institute wants to acknowledge that Mr Fennelly had grounds to question whether Paul Henry was independent and that this should have been acknowledged at earlier annual general meetings."

Apparently, "this matter can now be considered closed".

Well, it only took six years.



KINCORA SECRETS STILL TUMBLING OUT

SIR ANTHONY HART'S derided 2017 report into the Kincora abuse scandal was meant to quash interest in the story but served only to fuel a spate of reports in The Phoenix and Village, The Lost Boys documentary and a book on Lord Louis

Mountbatten's complicity by Andrew Lownie. The latest rebuttal is a book by Chris Moore, formerly of BBC NI, entitled Kincora, Britain's Shame, which puts MI5 and the RUC squarely in the frame for running the home as a



'honeytrap' for paedophiles and contains new information about Mountbatten.

The Phoenix has doggedly pursued the scandal, with a two-page special in our inaugural issue. We predicted (see edition 18/2/83) that the first "independent" investigation, by Sir George Terry of Sussex Police, was "aimed at giving the scandal a coat of whitewash". In the event, Terry gave MI5 and the RUC a clean bill of health.

Goldhawk then exposed (see edition 4/7/85) that members of Terry's team led the botched investigation into a killing in Sussex that landed Capt Colin Wallace, a Kincora whistleblower, in prison for manslaughter. His conviction was later overturned.

The February 1983 edition also predicted that "perhaps some details of the private life of Sir Maurice Oldfield, the Ulster Security Coordinator and former MI6 chief, seems likely to emerge". There was a reference to Oldfield's "love of young boys" in the July '85 issue. In 1987, Margaret Thatcher revealed in the Commons that Oldfield had been stood down from his NI role because of his sexual appetite for young men.

On April 1, 1983, Goldhawk alluded to the complicity of Peter England, a senior NIO

AFFAIRS OF THE NATION

security official. England's name was later raised in the Commons by Ken Livingstone as a Kincora abuser.

A three-page special (see edition 16/9/83) linked Sunday Times journalist and MI6 asset David Holden to the affair. A former Kincora boy has since confirmed he was abused by Holden at the Europa Hotel in Belfast.

After the failure of Terry to alleviate public concern, a fresh inquiry, led by Judge Hughes, was launched. On March 16, 1984, Goldhawk revealed: "Shrewd barristers all over the south of England would manoeuvre any cases concerning 'cottaging' (importuning in public toilets, as the law puts it) into [Hughes'] court in the belief that [he] showed a great deal of compassion for those so accused."

Hughes did not ask MI5 or RUC about the scandal because his terms of reference were changed, in secret. To his discredit, Hughes failed to report he had been gagged.

The Phoenix reported (see edition 8/11/85): "Last week ... the Press Association's lobby correspondents received an off-the-record briefing from [Thatcher's] press office that she had ordered the Ministry of Defence to open a new enquiry into what has become known as the Kincora Affair ... even the most stupid of Unionist leaders could not have missed the message: play ball or we will ruin you."

This was a manoeuvre to dampen unionist opposition to the Hillsborough Agreement.

Then, on February 14, 1986, Goldhawk wrote: "Among those involved were: the late Knox Cunningham, South Antrim MP and mentor of James Molyneaux, who as a bachelor provided Knox with unstinting service as his constituency agent.'

Molyneaux's former lover, Chris Luke, has since revealed that he began a relationship with Molyneaux, then 64, when he was 17.

Back on November 11, 1983, we reported how Stephen Waring, a Kincora boy, ran away to Liverpool, where "he was picked up by the police. The RUC were told to meet him and he was put on the overnight ferry to Belfast... The body was seen falling from the ship but it has never been traced." Decades later, it emerged Waring was one of Mountbatten's victims.

In April 1990, Mountbatten's role was first exposed by Frank Doherty, the security correspondent of The Phoenix, and 'John Byrne' (a pseudonym for David Burke) in a five-page special report in NOW magazine.

RIGHT-WING ULTRAS

THAT SIX members of the National Party's (NP) anti-Barrett faction travelled to Milan, Italy, for the recent Remigration Summit indicates how far the party's brand of hardline ethnonationalism is from the right-wing populism espoused by most of Ireland's anti-immigration movement.

The conference was organised principally by Austria's Martin Sellner and Dries Van Langenhove from Belgium, who have become the public face of the international Identitarian movement. Identitarianism started in France with the launch of Génération Identitaire,

which advocated for a defence of an imagined ancient European heritage. This heritage being defended by the Identitarians is not just cultural but also biological and they advocate for segregation of races.

A clearly panicked Sellner who is banned from entering Switzerland,



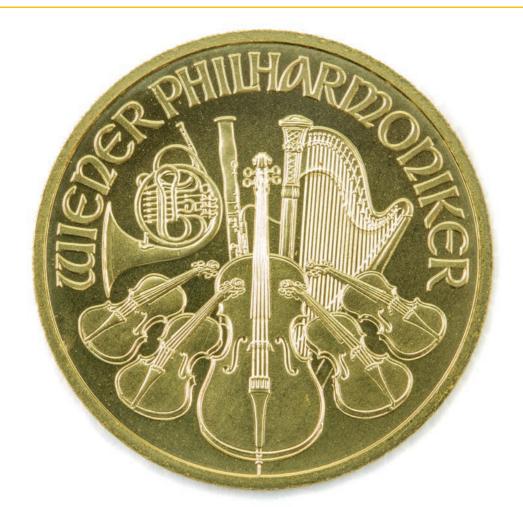
the US and Britain - released a video on the eve of the Milan conference. He outlined how some activists had been arrested trying to leave Germany to attend the conference, while others had been expelled from Italy on arrival.

He also detailed how the original conference venue had cancelled the booking once they realised who they would be hosting. When the conference eventually convened

on May 17, the hundred or so activists gathered at the Teatro Condominio Vittorio Gassman had to endure a series of rather dull speeches

While the first half of NP representative John McLoughlin's speech sounded like a statistics lecture, he seemed to get quite animated when he spoke of the NP contingent leading the chants of "get them out" at the recent anti-immigration march in Dublin. He emphasised that he did not want to just get these immigrants out of Ireland but out of Europe too.





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FREEDOM OF HATE SPEECH

WHEN THE European Commission issued a statement in early May outlining the sanctions Ireland will face for failing to implement legislation

criminalising hate speech, the response of some 'centre-right' politicians and supporters was predictable. Last September the then justice minister Helen McEntee had effectively kicked the can down the road on the implementation of the hate speech aspects of the on-again-off-again Criminal Justice (Incitement to Violence or Hatred and Hate Offences) Bill 2022 in order to neutralise the issue in the run up to the general election.

The commission's statement said that Ireland faced being taken to the European Union's Court of Justice as "the Commission considers that Ireland still fails to transpose the provisions related to criminalising the public incitement to violence or hatred against a group or a member of such group based on certain characteristics, as well as the conducts of condoning, denial, and gross trivialisation of international crimes and the Holocaust".

In response an irate Michael McNamara, Independent MEP for Ireland South, demanded at the European Parliament that the threatened proceedings against Ireland be abandoned. He claimed that "people resent the fact that they're threatened with prosecution for expressing their views" and "are afraid to express their views, rightly or wrongly"

In the Irish Independent shock-jock columnist Ian O'Doherty asserted that the EU ultimatum threatened to lead Ireland down a dark path. In his usual melodramatic fashion on X O'Doherty even went as far as to state that the "EU is faltering and trying to become more dictatorial to maintain its control".

Off-Grid Ireland is a prominent Irish platform for right-wing content and has tens of thousands of subscribers and followers of its active online accounts on YouTube, X, Rum-

AFFAIRS OF THE NATION

ble, Telegram and multiple other platforms.

It is run by Gavin Lowbridge and participants on livestreams broadcast by the platform have included British fascists Mark Collett, Joe Marsh and Stephen Thompson, members of Patriotic Alternative and right-wing figures from Ireland such as councillor Malachy Steenson, Hermann Kelly, Justin Barrett, Mike Connell, Philip Dwyer and Derek Blighe. For a number of years Patricia Regan helped Lowbridge manage the platform and, when she announced she was leaving her role on May 3, she said that, for her, Off-Grid Ireland was a "place of learning, growth and connection".

On Telegram Off-Grid Ireland has a chan-

nel for broadcasting public messages and the Off-Grid Ireland Chat group channel, which has over 5,300 members. The description in the chat group bio states: "All members views expressed are their own, we can't control it ... We don't support any calls to violence in any way report to admin any violations ... For Adults only. All rights reserved."

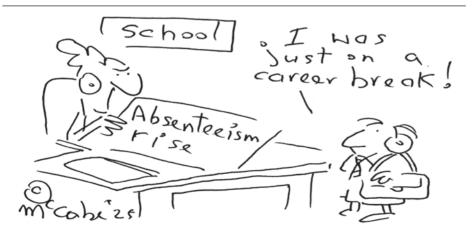
The Off-Grid Ireland chat group is a stream of extreme content, where there is regular use of racial slurs by members. Slurs

such as nigger, kike, faggot, yid, coon, knacker and abo are interspersed among members' comments. At the time of writing, the word nigger had been used 227 times by members of the Off-Grid Ireland chat group, the word faggot 208 times and the antisemitic term kike 179 times.

Despite asserting that the channel does not support threats of violence, comments such as "He needs to get a group of white boys together and go fuck them niggers up" and "Niggers got to go... It can be the easy way or the hard way ... But they are going ... Departure or buried ... " are unmoderated. One Telegram member even felt free to post the following "I'd kill that black cunt!!!" and "I'm break [sic] every bone in that niggers body" Another posted: "Only good nigger is a dead nigger".

There are also threats of violence against Jews. A post by fawksstarr 2208 stated: "Jews for rope, and not the kind on a soap-KIKE" Another posted: "Our father's fathers should have killed every kike on the planet. Now we have to.

There are also hundreds of posts and dozens of videos shared that deny the holocaust, with phrases such as "fake holocaust tale", "big lie of the Jewish Holocaust" and other tropes.





I took that medal on behalf of all those people who don't get medals – the activists, the people who are getting killed now in Gaza Bono on his much-criticised acceptance of the Presidential Medal of Freedom from



Joe Biden, RTÉ Radio 1

We've been going through so much hysterical climate catastrophism for the last few years that most people have just decided they've had enough and are now going to live their best life. lan O'Doherty, Irish Independent

Vaulted ceilings evoke the architecture of Irish churches, with sweeping arches feeling reminiscent of medieval castles, and warm gold silk wallpaper representing the glow of an Irish hearth. Trudy Feenane on the Rixo clothes store in Kildare Village, Irish Tatler

It's 4 o'clock in the morning, you're on the bog and you get a bit of a sniff of fire. Countrywide's Philip Boucher Hayes on the impact of fires on nesting curlews' habitat, RTÉ Radio 1

Kelly materialised on the touchline in Croke Park, sporting an access-all-areas pink wristband, and a versatile sports coat and chinos, apt for a cocktail evening in the Hamptons or midtown Manhattan. Denis Walsh on Declan Kelly, Irish Times

RTÉ will also continue to work with other European broadcasters, sharing top quality masses and services from across the Continent. RTÉ press release on the new commissioning process for Christian worship programmes, which may have been issued by the sports department

So when I'm working on someone, I'm not working on them as Gary. I'm working as an antenna to the spirit world. I'm allowing the client's ancestors and the spirit world to come in and show me aspects of what needs to be healed in that person. Shaman Gary Quigley, Irish Independent

The room is as chic as the woman herself, with a sleek blonde bob and flawless make-up. Janice Butler on Vogue Williams, RTÉ Guide

Of course I am responsible. I am responsible for bringing the decision to the Cabinet. I am going to be responsible for a world-class facility. Simon Harris speaking in the Dáil about the National Children's Hospital and its delays

So naturally, when the morkeshing and commorcial hotshots in Montrose decided to film a slick new promo for RTÉ News, they hired in an outside company to make the advert. Miriam Lord on the whiz kids in RTE's marketing department, Irish Times

Please send suitable contributions to: The Hot Air Brigade, The Phoenix, 44 Lr Baggot St, Dublin 2 or email: hotair@thephoenix.ie





GREAT GAS

IT MUST be a head-spinning time to work for Gas Networks Ireland (GNI), the semi-state company responsible for operating Ireland's fossil gas grid.

On the one hand, the Government announced in March that GNI would own a controversial new liquid natural gas (LNG) terminal in Kerry – an abrupt about-face on previous government policy that ruled out developing LNG infrastructure as Ireland pivots to clean, renewable energy.

On the other hand, GNI, under acting CEO Ronan Galwey, has been on a media blitz touting the green credentials of its, ahem, "renewables-ready" gas grid. The company is "committed to promoting sustainability across

our business and in the communities where we operate", according to an advertorial currently running on the *Irish Examiner* website.

GNI says it's on a journey to net zero, by



NORTH HOUSING CRISIS: DÉJÀ VU

THERE ARE about 13,000 people on the waiting list for social housing in Belfast. Those on the list are overwhelmingly concentrated in north and west Belfast and they are overwhelmingly nationalist.

There are obvious reasons for this. North and west Belfast have more concentrations of poverty and deprivation than elsewhere, with people unable to buy or rent appropriate accommodation. But there are also reasons that are not obvious to an outsider.

If you go to Google Maps and look up Alloa Street in north Belfast, you'll see a large area of white space adjacent to the street. In street view, you can see a 5m-high fence along one side of the street because Alloa Street is what's known as an interface.

Beside Alloa Street is Annalee Street, which is made up of newly built social housing – so new that the houses are not yet on online maps. People only moved into the new housing a few months ago. The houses were allocated on the usual points-based system, which resulted in a mix of Protestant and Catholic tenancies.

On May 21 a masked gang smashed the windows in the Catholics' houses with

AFFAIRS OF THE NATION

some point decades into the future.

A separate advertorial on *TheJournal*. *ie* states that the gas network is "the heart of the Irish government's ambitious climate and energy targets to successfully transition to a carbon-neutral economy by 2050". This "transformative journey" will see a fully decarbonised gas network by 2045, using "green hydrogen" and biomethane.

GNI is also running a radio ad campaign bigging up its success in renewables.

Given that it has been touting renewables for several years, what is notably missing from all this hype is any hard data on just how far along the road GNI really is.

Goldhawk understands that there is less than 1% renewable gas in Ireland's gas grid,

so all the talk about renewable transition needs to be taken with a generous pinch of salt.

GNI claims that more than two-thirds of the gas grid will be powered by green hydrogen within two decades, with the balance sourced from biomethane.

A major scientific review found hydrogen to be completely unsuited for home heating. It is also extremely expensive to produce and difficult to store. Hydrogen manufactured from

renewable electricity may well have a limited role in directly

fuelling power stations but GNI is surely aware that its own projections of hydrogen comprising the bulk of the national gas grid in the years ahead are just fanciful.

masonry blocks. Some families with young children fled, others are hanging on in the hope that a static police presence will deter further attacks: more in hope than expectation.

As New York Yankees player Yogi Berra said: "It's déjà vu all over again."

In 1969 Catholics' houses in both Annalee Street and Alloa Street were attacked, some were burnt, and the occupants fled. Their houses remained derelict for years.

In 1986 An attempt to repopulate the district failed. After serious sectarian rioting, a whole street of brand new houses planned for Catholic tenants had to be demolished because repeated attacks proved it was too dangerous to move in. The whole area was left as waste ground.

It seems that, after almost 40 years, the attempt to move in Catholic tenants has failed again.

It's a scenario repeated at various interfaces across north and west Belfast. Despite rapidly falling numbers of unionists, in north Belfast particularly, loyalist paramilitaries are determined "to hold the line" at interfaces to prevent nationalists moving into what have been traditionally unionist areas. Thus there are areas of vacant space on the Shankill side of the Falls/Shankill interface wall, at the Alliance Avenue/Ardoyne wall, and around the former British Army Girdwood barracks near Alloa Street and the newly rebuilt Annalee Street.

Derelict houses have been demolished over the years but there is no demand for new Cynics might suggest that 'clean' gas is more about corporate self-preservation than securing Ireland's renewable transition, since GNI's other 'renewable' gas, biomethane, is highly problematic from a climate standpoint.

The fact that GNI is also behind the importing of new sources of LNG, a potent greenhouse gas, further adds to the impression that the company is putting up a dense PR smokescreen to obscure the fact that the national gas grid is effectively already a stranded fossil fuel asset that may well be obsolete within the decade.

The reality is that Ireland's energy future will be powered by clean electricity, directly produced by wind and solar farms, backed up by batteries, with no useful role for gas, beyond a limited emergency reserve.

TODAY 33 Irish rivers are classified as "heavily modified water bodies" (HMWBs), meaning they are of minimal ecological value and so don't need to be counted against our EU targets on improving the ecological quality of our waterways. New Government plans will see an almost 15-fold increase, to 466, in the number of declared HMWBs. Rivers to be downgraded include the Liffey, Dodder, Lee, Boyne and Blackwater.

This move has the clear fingerprints of the rural Independent TDs, given that much of the damage to our waterways is from agricultural pollution and arterial drainage and dredging of rivers to protect farmland from flooding. It's truly an Irish solution to the pollution problem.

unionist occupants. Unionists have tended to migrate to the outskirts of Belfast.

North and west Belfast have Sinn Féin MPs (John Finucane and Paul Maskey, respectively) and a majority of SF assembly members and councillors. Nevertheless, loyalist paramilitaries, mainly the UDA, have successfully prevented any movement beyond the lines the British Army established in north

and west Belfast in August 1969, when they marched in to stop further loyalist destruction of Catholic districts.

As a result, the nationalist communities that elect those SF MPs, MLAs and councillors are squashed into heavily overcrowded districts, exerting ever greater pressure on local services such as schools and surgeries. Even if there was the money to build enough houses to satisfy the demand – which there isn't – there's nowhere safe to locate new developments.

As the events of the last couple of weeks have shown, the unchanged sectarian geography of Belfast maintained by loyalist violence remains as big a problem as ever. It prevents a true reflection of the remarkable changes in the city's demography and electoral results.

John Finucane

Indeed, there is a school of thought which holds that the migration of unionists to the outskirts of Belfast has heightened tensions as loyalist paramilitaries feel threatened by the growing nationalist majority around them.

Satisfying housing demand in Belfast is a lot more complicated than in Dublin.





JACK V JIM: SLOW MOTION CONTEST

AN INTERESTING observation by Irish Times political editor Pat Leahy recently was to the effect that Jim O'Callaghan's busy, public prominence is due to two

reasons: the first is simply that Taoiseach Micheál Martin organised O'Callaghan's elevation to the justice department (a logical step given the plummy-sounding barrister's legal credentials); and the second is that Martin engineered



his new prominence in order to give O'Callaghan the rank of leadership contender alongside deputy leader Jack Chambers. Crucially, Leahy (who has great access to Martin's thoughts) then qualified his analysis by saying that the Taoiseach was not endorsing O'Callaghan but rather he was ensuring that a leadership contest, not simply a coronation (of Jim), would happen.

An alternative reading of Martin's thoughts and intentions are that he knows O'Callaghan has a definitive edge, in intellectual and presentation terms, over Chambers (23 years his junior) and that this will be telling in any leadership contest.

More important is that Martin also knows that Jack knows this is how the scene is read by members of the Fianna Fáil parliamentary party and ministers. Thus, the felt need by Martin to reassure Jack that he is not being dispensed with and the word has spread among the party's officer class and NCOs that the paternal, party patriot that is Martin has a

AFFAIRS OF THE NATION

vision of the succession stakes that involves an even contest.

But a lot has happened in the last 12 months. Last summer's local elections saw Chambers as director of elections and he was subsequently given the same responsibility for the general election. At the same time he was made finance minister in June 2024 and, as deputy party leader, appeared to be garlanded with more senior titles than anyone in Cabinet bar the Taoiseach. He seems to have been dusted down and dressed up for the role as leader-in-waiting of both the party and the country at the tender political age of 33.

Meanwhile, O'Callaghan appeared to be yesterday's man with a political record as a failed leadership contender and someone that rejected the role of junior justice minister back in 2020.

The general election changed all that and, while Chambers was



Jim O'Callaghan

formally feted and given credit for FF's relative electoral success, the fact is that Martin relied on O'Callaghan to give substance and credibility to the FF campaign, with Chambers relegated to a less than primary role. Chambers retained his

ministerial crown as

finance minister and this will surely give him experience and scope to develop as a future contender in the next two or three years. But O'Callaghan has hit the ground running as justice minister and has managed to combine a populist touch with finesse in this most dangerous area of politics and civil service mandarins that have usually put manners on their minister.

Goldhawk has lost count of the announcements, press statements and initiatives that O'Callaghan has launched in the months since entering Government and he has already received plaudits from party colleagues for becalming the immigration issue - for the time being at any rate. He has also perfected the image of a collegial minister that has the interests of the party at heart and he is popular.

The irascible Chambers, in contrast, is reckoned by many to be a loud argument waiting to happen.

Many of these perceptions are down to the return of the politically prodigal counsel



to the fold and the fortunate turn of events at the general election. And they could go into reverse depending on events, as they say. But they are also down to a dearth of talent at top level. In any case, Martin has felt it necessary to reassure Jack that he has not been rejected as heir apparent at such an early stage and that he is still the dauphin – or at least an equal contender with Jim.

Meanwhile, Darragh O'Brien and Dara Calleary watch the two personalities with guarded but keen intent.

STAR-STUDDED ÁRAS HOPEFULS

THE LATEST Fianna Fáil no-hoper for the FF presidential nomination whose name is being floated (this time by the aspirant herself, not party handlers) is

former minister Mary Hanafin. On paper Mary's political career was stellar, including as it did her appointment by Micheál Martin as party deputy leader for a few weeks in 2011 and a number of Cabinet posts before that. But there were



Mary Hanafin

downsides too. She clashed with Martin when attempting to bulldoze her way not always successfully - on to various electoral tickets for the Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council, the Dáil and the EU Parliament. Nevertheless, modest Mary has now let it be known that she is open to a conversation with Martin about the party's nomination for the presidency, explaining that many people from different walks of life had urged her to do so.

Hanafin was once part of a set in FF that was led by the late senior counsel Eamon Leahy and ex-minister John O'Donoghue, during which period an eager young Micheál Martin was also a member. The Taoiseach and Mary have long since parted ways, especially after she publicly criticised his comradely attitude to relations with Fine Gael in 2016.

If most party members and others in politics dismiss Mary's prospects of securing the FF nomination, Mary herself is showing that irrepressible self-belief so familiar to her colleagues.

She was in Athlone last weekend where she stormed Ógra 50, the 50th anniversary gathering of Ógra Fianna Fáil. There she treated the 200 or so delegates to the unnerving spectacle of Mary in full battle mode as she worked the room, hitting every table at the dinner that Saturday night.

One long-time colleague of Mary's advised Goldhawk that people should not have been surprised to see Hanafin step forward and make a lunge for the presidential ticket. The word among the more rarified south Dublin soldiers of destiny was that the

minute Barry Andrews's name was put out there to gauge public reaction, Hanafin would have decided to go for it.

In 2019 Barry (a member of the Andrews FF dynasty) defeated Mary (a member of the Hanafin FF dynasty) for the party nomination of Dublin candidate in that year's EU election.

Hanafin may be a no-hope candidate but she is the only credible female party candidate to emerge so far, a characteristic that some in the party argue is essential. She is also a strong pro-life supporter and her *CV* includes being a minister in four different departments, including education.

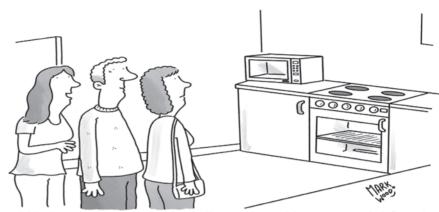
However, this is where things might get tricky for Mary as she was criticised in 2008 as education minister for engaging in a 69-day legal battle with two parents seeking education for their autistic child, an issue that has since become larger with many parents and in the public mind.

Given the failure of party MEPs Andrews and Cynthia Ní Mhurchú to whip up a storm around their putative nominations, Mary feels that she can step into this vacuum.

Goldhawk still thinks that Bertie Ahern is a more credible candidate than any of his party colleagues mentioned so far.

THE LONE TD that remained sitting next to Michael Lowry, 'chairman' of the Regional Independent Group (RIG) – after Barry Heneghan had abandoned him – was Gillian Toole, Independent TD in Meath East, according to a recent report. This may be because Gillian is made of sterner stuff than Barry.

Like Lowry, Toole was a member of Fine Gael and took a council seat for the party in 2014 but in 2019 she resigned from



'We have all our meals delivered, so it's a potential fourth bedroom.'

the Blueshirts saying they were unserious about local issues such as public transport, healthcare and community safety. She also came across as a

public scourge of developers. In the 2019

In the 2019 local election in Ratoath she stood as an Independent and came second out of the seven elected but was well ahead of the three FG candidates. And in the 2024 local elections she topped the poll



Gillian Toole

with 3,158 first preferences, nearly twice the quota and a country mile ahead of the second candidate elected, FG's Maria Murphy on 1,794 votes. Gillian's exit from FG in 2019 caused quite a dust-up in the party and veteran party stalwart, John V Farrelly, lost the run of himself at a meeting that discussed the issue. At one point he used seriously offensive language, for which he later apologised, but a more interesting suggestion he made was that party members should sign a pledge not to join other parties or become an Independent politician for five years after leaving FG.

If that measure had been adopted in years past, then neither Lowry nor his soul sister, Gillian, would now be members of the Dáil.



INSECURE SECURITY COMMITTEE (CH. II)

READERS WILL remember that there was consternation at the Dáil reform committee meeting to organise draft orders of reference for Oireachtas committees when Government members realised that the newly expanded defence committee now bore the more hazardous title of "defence and national security" (see *The Phoenix* 16/5/25). This, along with the appointment of Sinn Féin's Rose Conway-Walsh as committee chair, put in jeopardy the cosy consensus whereby nobody, not even the Shinners, would dare raise the state's security strategy at a house committee.

Thus, a footnote was appended to the overall report stating: "National Security encompasses cyberdefence, sub-sea critical infrastructure and related hybrid threats." This was an effort to severely restrict the 'security' span of the committee.

TDs Duncan Smith (Labour) and Aengus Ó Snodaigh (SF) then triggered a lengthy discussion about the meaning of the word 'security' and how it could not be confined to the footnote's terms of reference.

The Government got its way with its inbuilt majority but, at the first meeting of the defence and security committee itself, when it sat in private, it became clear that the limited security issue had not been resolved.

This would have been a little

disconcerting to Government members and the loyal officials surrounding the committee who had facilitated the insertion of the disarming footnote about 'security'.



Duncan Smith

The committee chair, Conway-Walsh, opened the meeting and then asked for comments from members, of which there were quite a few and most were unsympathetic to the Government and its suppression of 'free speech'.

Tom Clonan

Smith and Independent senators Tom Clonan (ex-Irish Defence Forces) and Gerard Craughwell (ex-Irish Defence Forces and ex-British Army) were not buying the argument about security being the reason for a ban on discussion of security at the Oireachtas committee. The three argued that the committee should proceed to discuss security without limitations and with no exclusion of An Garda Síochána and other

national security issues from its scope. To do so, it was argued, would itself constitute a threat to democracy.

The argument was put that the notion of there being no parliamentary scrutiny or discussion of such matters was inherently undemocratic and that Ireland was the only state in the EU that did not have political oversight of its own security issues.

They also asked, rhetorically, how the committee on security and the Irish parliament could adequately combat threats to democracy if they did not know what constituted such threats. And how would they become aware of these issues without quizzing gardaí and other security personnel?

These arguments did not provoke any reaction or disagreement from Government TDs.

If these views prevail then future discussions will surely attract a largerthan-usual attendance from Oireachtas members and others in the near future – unless of course, some unsporting officials and Government TDs insist on all such discussions being held in private sessions.



RTÉ BLANKS GAZA PROTESTS

THE ANGUISH of RTÉ luvvies over a private firm being hired to produce an advert for RTÉ News in a simulated newsroom – 'fake news,' they cried – is nothing compared to how most viewers would feel if they knew how RTÉ News

really works. A good example is RTÉ's refusal to broadcast the recent demonstration to demand that director general Kevin Bakhurst push the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) for talks about Israel's involvement in the



Kevin Bakhurst

Eurovision Song Contest.

As requested by RTÉ's NUJ broadcasting branch, Bakhurst had agreed to press for such a discussion and the demo, headed by actor Stephen Rae and musician Keith Donald was intended to highlight this demand. Unsurprisingly and despite similar protests being broadcast for the last three years, RTÉ blanked the 300-strong protest. When former RTÉ producer and Ireland Palestine Solidarity Campaign (IPSC) activist Betty Purcell lobbied programmers inside Montrose, a camera crew was sent out to film the event but it was not broadcast later that evening or at all.

Purcell has now complained to the station, suggesting sweetly: "It would be deleterious indeed if the decision not to cover was in any way dictated by the fact that the director general has been under considerable pressure on the issue, not least by a call by the NUJ broadcasting branch.'

An interesting aspect of the incident was that the only reason a camera crew was sent out to film the protest was because the BBC

AFFAIRS OF THE NATION

had contacted RTÉ with a request for footage, even though it was not subsequently broadcast by RTÉ itself. So RTÉ filmed the protest and sent it to the BBC as requested but canned the footage itself.

It's not quite Ryan Tubridy/Noel Kelly territory but it fits the image of a Montrose culture of wastage of resources

Purcell has also charged RTÉ, on behalf of the IPSC, with ignoring the massive national protests over the carnage in Gaza, including the March 22 demo that mobilised 40,000 marchers, the largest at that point in the war.

She has also accused the station of altering Pope Leo's call for the "release of hostages" to the "release of Israeli hostages", words he did not say. The pontiff, she explained, chose his words carefully and many would have interpreted his statement as a call to release both Israeli and Palestinian hostages.

MICHAEL GAINE **MURDER 'SUSPECT'**

KERRY-BASED American Michael Kelley, who was arrested on suspicion of murdering Kenmare farmer Michael Gaine and who gave an interview to the Irish Mirror last weekend about his arrest, ought to follow the advice of his own solicitor and watch his mouth. Due to Kelley's remarks to reporter Paul Healy, the newspaper felt able to report that the former had "accepted when asked by this paper that gardaí are treating him as a suspect in the murder of Mr Gaine".

After admitting he was arrested and questioned in the Gaine investigation, Kelley denied that he was guilty of the crime and described the murder as heartbreaking. He also referred twice to his solicitor and his advice, including that it would be incautious of him to answer Healy's question about what he believed may have happened to Mr Gaine.

Goldhawk recalls vividly - as will most of the country's legion of cops 'n' robbers 'security' correspondents - how a similar quote by the late Ian Bailey was used against him by the media and gardaí to support their almost universal quest to pin the murder of French woman Sophie Toscan du Plantier on him. Shortly after Sophie's murder, Bailey went on Pat Kenny's RTÉ radio programme and mentioned, with no hint of guilt or selfincrimination, that he was the "prime suspect" in the case. This was by way of saying that the gardaí were focusing on him to the exclusion of others who should have been pursued.



"..I'd like to recite a new poem I've written for the occasion. "

Gardaí regarded this phrase as a gift in their pursuit of Bailey, despite no evidence linking him to the crime (as the DPP concluded), and was used by most media to support the gardaí's case, which was nevertheless eviscerated by the DPP's office.

Already some media are comparing the Gaine murder inquiry to the French woman's case. Hopefully there will be no reports of gardaí feeding crime reporters with sensationalist anecdotes about suspects, as happened in the Toscan du Plantier investigation (see The Phoenix 4/5/2012).

GAZA REVISITED

IT'S HARD to single out the most brazen U-turn on Gaza by those who might now be anxious about having endorsed – by word or even silence - the Government's failure to translate words into action in the face of Israeli carnage. But Sunday Times columnist Alison O'Connor's belated lament last weekend – headlined: "World is waking up at last to the extent of horrors in Gaza" - is surely a contender.

O'Connor noted "the barbarism of this war that has appalled Irish people from the beginning" and also that "we, together with a handful of other countries" had called out Israel's behaviour. "We"? She also

commented: "Given



our early stance on this, Irish people can look straight on in the mirror". "Our early stance"?

When media reports in February made it clear that the Government intended to abandon the long-promised Occupied Territories Bill (OTB), O'Connor welcomed the reported decision saying: "Ireland depends hugely on US investment, and our government has to think of Ireland Inc.'

O'Connor referred to Israeli defence minister Israel Katz's jibe about Ireland and other countries that had opposed Israel's military operations in Gaza being hypocrites if they did not take in Palestinians. She followed by saying: "It is interesting to consider though that, while the war has gone on, there was no groundswell of public support here to offer sanctuary to Gazans."

She also asked how people felt about nearly 960 Palestinians seeking international protection here last year – "a huge increase", she claimed - before making another presumably meaningful comment that "young men made up 44% of these applications Precisely what are these figures intended to convey to readers?

These stats are a little different to those coming out of Gaza. At the time of Alison's February column, the Israeli kill rate was close to 50,000, mainly women and children, and has risen to around 54,000 after Israel abandoned the ceasefire.

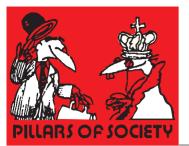
Last weekend O'Connor welcomed the renewed intention of the Government to bring forward the OTB. Did her mirror crack recently?

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Ivana Bacik

THREE YEARS ago, Ivana Bacik became the sixth leader of the Labour Party in 20 years and last November its members hoped that its electoral seat gains – from six TDs to 11 – meant that the party had turned a corner following its disastrous term in coalition from 2011-16. But the root problem that produced Labour's post-2016 electoral rejection – an addiction to coalition with one of the centre-right parties – appears to still shackle Bacik and the party. An opportunity to break out of this self-imposed isolation has now arrived, with widespread discussion on the left for a united alternative to Fianna Fáil/Fine Gael/Michael Lowry. After a mere four months in power, that axis comes over as flaccid, untrustworthy and incompetent. But has Ivana got the mettle to go for it?

Bacik may present as an ephemeral creature with no political steel or ruthlessness but she has shown herself able to get down and dirty when necessary. Consider how macho man Alan 'AK47' Kelly was ousted as leader of Labour in 2022 after just two years in the post.

Another surprising act of opportunism – or what a party apparatchik might term 'realpolitik' – came during the local elections last summer when Labour's candidate in Ringsend, Dublin, Carol Reynolds, was interviewed on video by far-right antiimmigrant campaigner Gavin Pepper. Among other contentious remarks, Reynolds told the accommodating Pepper that Ireland had "too many immigrants" who viewed the country as "Treasure Island".

After a party inquiry, however, Bacik said Reynolds would remain a party candidate. Apparently, Carol had been "misrepresented" by the "edited" video.

But the most disingenuous sleight of hand Bacik ever pulled was in 2016 when, as party leader in the Seanad, she was steering austerity junkie Brendan Howlin's stringent measures through the house. Especially damaging to Labour and Bacik's vaunted image as defenders of women, she guided through party leader Joan Burton's infamous legislation that financially penalised lone parents whose

children reached the ripe old age of seven.

Aware that many women activists had turned up in the chamber to witness her dish it to the government, Bacik's tone, body language and facial expressions gave the impression of serious distaste at the very measure she was piloting through the Seanad – a dramatic stunt that enraged many women.

As in the Seanad farce, Bacik's performative behaviour in an RTÉ interview about the coup against Kelly missed the point and the problems facing Labour.

The problem was not Kelly's brash personality, as many in the media were briefed, but the more political fact that the party that once rested on two national constituencies – middle-class liberals and working-class trade unionists and labourers – abandoned the latter in favour of the former. This was partly because of what Labour

thought was a necessary financial blitz of IDF proportions against its own workingclass voters but also because a mammoth qualitative survey told them the party had lost this base and that it was not coming back any time soon; furthermore, its only potential growth area was among women and a soft FG vote Thus was born the

ludicrous

slogan of

then

leader Eamon Gilmore – that gay marriage is "the civil rights issue of our generation" – in the most diverting and misleading soundbite of modern Irish politics, which was accompanied by an intense focus on social issues as opposed to housing, wages and proper public services.

ELECTORAL COMPETITION

If Bacik and others around her had any awareness of this isolating political process, they have shown little sign of acting on it. Labour's current mission statement declares boldly and shamelessly that "from 2011-2016, Labour in government prioritised the rights and needs of workers. The biggest priority was to get people back to work."

It goes on to say the party had reversed previous FF government cuts to the minimum wage. In the relevant period FF published a list of cuts and cost increases introduced by Labour and FG - 25 in all - including disability allowances, child benefit cuts (three), medical cards and a host of other measures that still resonate.

Bacik is not unique among Labour leaders, all of whom have gone along with the more centre-right measures and programmes of their coalition partners in FF or FG and who could not see beyond partnership with their bigger and betters in these parties. But in the past Labour could expect that, after a punishing term in government, the party would be forgiven and voted once again into coalition government. That was when there was little or no electoral competition on the left but the growth in the last decade or so of firstly Sinn Féin, then the far left and the Social Democrats has changed all that.

The latter party and SF have taken much of Labour's actual or potential vote. Between 2020 and early 2023 the Soc Dems and Labour were neck and neck in the polls, scoring somewhere around 4% each on average, until Holly Cairns took over the leadership of the Soc Dems in March 2023 and that party inched ahead, underlining its new, youthful image.

Last November's election showed the Soc Dems on 4.8% and Labour on 4.7%, with both parties taking 11 seats each. SF took 39 seats; the radical left has five; Aontú has two; and the Green Party one. That means a combined left vote (including Aontú) has just under 70 seats compared with FF/FG on 86.

A feature of the last election for SF was its failure to realise its full potential (plus an erosion due to right-wing, 'nativist' voters defecting). In the same way, the Soc Dems popularity declined when it came to the actual vote, while the more traditional, even conservative Labour equalled it on the day.

Behind these fluctuating figures is a nervous electorate

that wants change but is unsure whether they can trust the new left of SF and allies to actually govern, never mind deliver houses by the tens of thousands. The disparate and disunited nature of the opposition parties' election campaigns would have underlined this choke effect last November and helped to persuade many anti-government supporters that there was little prospect of an alternative government.

Much has changed since then – and quickly. The first few months of this Government has provided examples of a tired, moribund Government with the same entitled

attitude to strokes and power play. Add in not only the worsening housing statistics but the, em, 'over-optimistic' government stats used in the election and housing minister James Browne's fumbling performance and this Government has an early political crisis.

More importantly, the potential for a renewed and reinvigorated opposition was triggered by the Governmentcreated furore over Michael Lowry's novel form of corporatism, whereby his team can be in Government and opposition at the same time.

Most ironically, it was the *Irish Times* that first began to push the idea of a limited – very limited – form of left unity, as far back as January 2023, when it urged Bacik to forge unity with the Soc Dems to recreate a leftof-centre party that could revive Labour in another form. This idea reflected not a deep concern for Irish social democracy but a desire by the right-of-centre FFG to stimulate creation of an alternative opposition party to SF and/or a party that could be the third leg of a future FF/FG/soft-left coalition.

UNIFIED OPPOSITION

But when the Lowry/Government deal provoked an angry, unified opposition campaign, reaction from media and FFG parties was suddenly hostile. Interestingly, they targeted the party they regarded as the weak link in the united front of SF, Soc Dems, Labour and the far left. Bacik was taunted in the Dáil for allegedly tailing Mary Lou McDonald in the new opposition. This was not simply an attack on Ivana but a red flag waved at those old soldiers in Labour who are greatly unimpressed with such imagery.

Since then, opportunities for unity have come along, with suggestions for a broad left presidential effort as well as a campaign against the abolition of the triple lock and in defence of neutrality as well as housing.

The two names so far floated for a bid for the Áras have been singer, addiction counsellor and senator Frances Black and TD Catherine Connolly. Black would be regarded by Labour and Bacik as not quite Mary Lou but not exactly Mary Robinson either when it comes to the national question, while long time socialist Connolly left Labour in despair many years ago. Both would be seen as leftwing, republican fellow travellers by those Labourites who don't mind being reminded of the influence that Conor Cruise O'Brien, the party's northern spokesperson long ago, wielded in government.

This drawing back from Black or Connolly explains why Labour and Bacik made a somewhat desperate suggestion recently that former World Health Organization deputy director general Dr Mike Ryan would be a good candidate for the presidency.

AFFAIRS OF THE NATION

On the neutrality front, a multiplicity of groups on the left are organising a national demonstration next month and are holding meetings nationwide. Labour representatives were absent from the planning meetings and also from a recent rally in Dublin, but discreet messages from Bacik and Labour

have expressed the intention to become involved "soon".

A recently announced united left housing campaign, Raise the Roof, has involved Labour, something the party could hardly boycott.

In recent years Bacik has expressed more than once her personal objection to sharing power with SF in any future government. She is seen as the ultimate western social democrat by many republicans.

It was noticeable that, while most parties eventually came to the aid of Sabina Higgins after she came under attack for her 'provocative...

outrageous... capitulation to Putin' in her appeal for peace talks in Ukraine in 2022, Bacik was way behind the posse on this issue (see *The Phoenix* 12/8/22).

Ivana often references her grandfather, Charles Bacik, who along with his family made a "huge contribution to our society" after arriving here in 1945. Charles owned four glass factories in Czechoslovakia but the communists seized or nationalised them (as social democrats sometimes do also) after World War II. Mr Bacik then emigrated to Ireland, where he co-founded Waterford Crystal.

Bacik and her party's lethargy in joining the rest of the left in united-front work is not just down to their traditional antipathy to the national question. The reality is that the virtual destruction of its working-class base has meant that Labour's vote is now overwhelmingly ABC (Ivana's own Dublin Bay South base is a good example of this).

Bacik's fundamental dilemma is that this cohort of essentially middle-class voters would shrink from unity with Provos and Trotskyists, whatever about the Soc Dems. Many, if not most, of these would prefer Labour to coalesce with FG or FF.

Alternatively, Ivana knows that a refusal to at least look like she wants to be part of a new, left-wing wave would alienate young radicals and others that want to take on the right-wing united front of establishment parties and individuals.

Many Labour TDs – such as Ged Nash, Duncan Smith and especially Marie Sherlock – are eager to revert to working-class politics but so far there has been little movement here.

Up until these unifying events, Bacik had hidden behind calls for unity with the Soc Dems and the Greens alone. Cleverly, Soc Dems acting leader Cian O'Callaghan called a meeting to discuss a joint presidential candidate, inviting these parties as well as SF and the far left.

Your move, Ivana.



THREAT, NOT PROMISE

SLIGO DISTRICT Court heard the case of a man accused of verbally abusing gardaí on two occasions. On January 17 officers received reports of an intoxicated and argumentative individual at the Clayton Hotel in Sligo. They arrived to find Declan Cunnane (48) being asked by staff to leave the hotel. Cunnane, of Woodfield, Ballymote, Sligo, told the gardaí to "fuck off" on a number of occasions and, while being escorted out, said: "You think you're a big man. I'll sort you out." He added that was "a threat, not a promise". The defendant was then pepper-sprayed and handcuffed after attempting to grab one of the officers. Separately, on May 1, Cunnane was found "shouting loudly" in Sligo Courthouse. When asked by Garda McNulty to keep quiet, he replied: "Fuck off, you prick. Fuck you." Judge Michael Connellan convicted Cunnane on one public order charge, taking the other into account. Sligo Weekender

FORGOTTEN DRUGS

A MAN who failed a breathalyser test and was found in possession of a bag of drugs on two separate occasions appeared before Portlaoise District Court. On March 31, 2024, Glen Brereton of 9 The Meadow, Ballybrittas, was waved down at a Garda checkpoint. Officers noted the car skidding to a stop and that the driver smelled strongly of alcohol. Asked to provide a breath sample, Brereton told the gardaí: "I am fucked now." When asked about a bag of blue powder in his possession, he said it was "MDMA from three weeks ago when I was in Amsterdam. I forgot about it." On July 20, 2024, the defendant was once more pulled over and found in possession of a bag of cannabis and he again told gardaí: "I am fucked now." Brereton was disqualified from driving for three years, fined €300 for drink-driving and ordered to make a €500 donation for the charges relating to drug possession. Leinster Express

NOT-SO-GREAT ESCAPE

TWO MEN who became embroiled in a physical altercation with gardaí following a drunken incident on January 19 appeared before Letterkenny District Court. Officers observed John Morrow, of Silverwood, Balleybofey, in a "highly intoxicated" and aggressive state on Main Street, Letterkenny. He refused to leave the area, telling the gardaí to "fuck off". As they moved to arrest him, Morrow became physically aggressive. When he was restrained and placed in the back of a patrol van, his friend, Jamie Dowd, of Mark House, Stranorlar, tried to open the van doors to free his friend. Dowd also became aggressive with the officers, leading to his arrest as well. Solicitor for Dowd, Frank Dorrian, told the court that his client was "delivering a protest about the other gentleman being arrested". Judge Éiteáin Cunningham said she would apply the Probation Act if each man donated €300 to Donegal Hospice. Donegal Democrat

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



Mary Lou McDonald



For many people, college is the best time of your life. Student politicians must know this better than anyone else since they do their utmost to prolong their university experience for as long as possible. Gilroy has taken this sentiment very seriously. He has gone from a part-time officer with Trinity College Dublin Students' Union (TCDSU) to a class rep, a faculty convenor, TCDSU education officer and vice-president, and now finally vice-president for academic affairs at the USI, which has been newly christened Aontas Mac Léinn in Éirinn (AMLÉ).

Basically, if there's one thing student politicians love more than avoiding facing adulthood, it is increasingly lengthy and more than incidentally bilingual initialisms. But what do these positions and initialisms mean and why is it of interest that Gilroy is the one to climb this specific ladder?

Gilroy came to the vice-presidency of TCDSU under somewhat controversial circumstances – 'somewhat controversial circumstances' being the key buzzwords that have defined TCDSU's 2024/25 campaign.

After the shock resignation of former education officer Cat Arnold in April 2024, Gilroy took over as vice-president and education officer a month early, making him the longest-serving current TCDSU member – and boy, has it been a long year. (Arnold left over irreconcilable differences between herself and former president László Molnárfi, claiming that she had endured a "fraught year with consistent issues of a toxic workplace environment" as well as other issues.)

President Jenny Maguire, always fashionable and never quiet, has spent the past year since then in an increasing state of social justice-fuelled fury. Despite what parents may tell their temper-tantrum toddlers before dropping them off at creche, sometimes anger does solve your problems. Jenny and her union (with Gilroy in tow) succeeded in freezing proposed rent increases, fixing incorrectly translated Gaeilge signs on campus and expanding the placement of period products in bathrooms.

With each victory, the union grew bolder until it completely exploded. Yet curiously, Gilroy managed to avoid getting hit by any of the debris.

What detonated this explosion was the increasing anger about the third of female college students who are sexually assaulted annually in Irish colleges. The result was the rapist-effigy controversy that occurred in Trinners this year and which many perceived to have been a self-inflicted, damaging blow against an urgently needed campaign against

Eoghan Gilroy

EOGHAN GILROY has managed to climb the ladder of student politics almost to the very top and shows no sign of slowing down (even over a year after graduation). The Union of Students in Ireland's (USI) newly elected vice-president for academic affairs has somehow managed to sidestep both collegiate and national controversies but how has he done so and will they one day come back to bite him?

violence and rape endured by women.

In early April of this year, TCDSU decided to raise awareness of sexual assault on campus. It is hard to imagine the most misogynist elements objecting to students raising awareness of this very important issue but the campaigners managed to gift such sources with their crass tactics and imagery.



Eoghan Gilroy

TCDSU lynched a mannequin representing a rapist, while not providing any support or details about organisations that help victims. They then administered beatings to the effigy with bats (with multiple presentations over multiple days) and posted anonymous confessions of people describing their sexual assault on the door of the junior dean without asking the consent of the people who submitted the confessions.

A social media storm ensued, with TCDSU issuing a blanket apology, saying: "We, TCDSU/AMLCT, are so deeply sorry for the distress and harm caused by the Union's actions this week... The campaign's use of graphic imagery, effigies, and confrontational language – such as comments about STEM students – was inappropriate and deeply hurtful, especially to survivors of sexual violence."

This escapade rocked Trinity's campus. Instagram accounts were set up demanding the resignation of Maguire and welfare and equality officer Hamza Bana, the two main TCDSU officers behind the idea. Emergency town hall meetings were called to allow the student body to question the officers involved in organising the demonstrations. If not for the fact that it was already April and the 2024/25 union officers would be taking their final bows soon, the campaigns against Maguire and Bana might have gained more traction. Instead, the controversy was managed and carefully anaesthetised by none other than Gilroy, who somehow managed to play both sides masterfully.

The town hall that was called to hold TCDSU officers to account was chaired by Gilroy. The apology on behalf of TCDSU was issued by Gilroy. And yet the union official with the least involvement appears to have been Gilroy.

Although he placed himself front and centre of the union's apologies, there is no evidence that he was personally involved in organising or participating in the effigy demonstrations. One reason there is no evidence is that there were no minutes taken during the union meetings called to organise this protest. ('How convenient,' scream the conspiracy theorists. 'Typical union disorganisation,' sigh many others.)

Whatever, it is undeniable that his experience in student politics stood him in good stead, enabling him to come out of a disaster such as this entirely unscathed. The town hall meeting was held on April 10 and by April 15 Gilroy had been elected to the executive team of the USI, overseeing tens of thousands of students across the country.

The USI/AMLÉ states on its website that executive members of staff are the "public face" of its organisation. By keeping his name and face unconnected to major controversies and acting as an impartial peace broker when catastrophe unfolded, Gilroy toed the line perfectly in the run-up to his national election.

Gilroy has spent a total of five years involved in student politics and is about to embark on his sixth, with the potential of more if he decides to run for election again with AMLÉ next year (many of the union's officers run for multiple terms).

He has also had some experience in realworld politics, however, interning for nine months in 2017 for Independent senator Lynn Ruane.

If that wasn't enough politics for one person, he also has a degree in law and political science from Trinity.

In a country where who you know and where you met them can get you a long way in politics, this already appears to be a pretty sturdy foundation on which to build a potential career in proper, grown-up politics. Coming over as the sole adult in the room during the effigy crisis may stand to Gilroy as he moves forward into an industry where controversy is never far away.

SOCIETY * STAGE * SCREEN * SEX * SOUNDS * SPORTS * SIGHTS * SOCIETY



THE BIG GIG

AN ADVERT for one of the more prestigious jobs in the arts sector has just been posted by the National Concert Hall (NCH) on

its website. It turns out that the wellregarded institution is seeking applications for the role of chief executive, the position held since 2021 by

Robert Read. Given the massive redevelopment project due to be carried out on Earlsfort Terrace, it comes

as something of a surprise that the pivotal position is being advertised, with Read set to have completed a single five-year term by next February.

He has been overseeing the Project Ireland 2040-funded revamp that is set to be the largest redevelopment project ever in a national cultural institution, so if the CEO is exiting the stage there will be big shoes to fill. The job description makes it clear that the NCH is "currently undertaking an ambitious redevelopment"

For board chair Maura McGrath, the appointment of a CEO is a significant undertaking at a time when she has plenty on her plate, having been installed as chair of the troubled Arts Council a year ago.

It is unusual for anyone to find themselves chair-

ing two national cultural institutions simultaneously and it would have been expected that McGrath would have stepped down from the NCH by now. It may be that she wants to oversee the CEO appointment, although this means if a new person is in situ

(probably from the start of 2026) NcGrath's successor in the chair will not have had any input into this crucial decision. Her term officially ends in June next year.

If Read is interested in extending his contract, he will now have to apply for the post, which was the subject of a recent failed approach to the Department of Public Enterprise and Reform to have it upgraded to a higher salary point. Nevertheless there should be significant interest in the €130,000-a-year gig.

COUNCIL ARCHIVED

GOLDHAWK NOTED Orlaith

McBride popping up in the media last week on foot of the Government's plan for the 1926 census, the first of the Irish Free State, to be published online at an overall cost of €5m. While the National Archives of Ireland (NAI), where McBride is director, will obviously be centrally involved, there will be no input from the National Archives Advisory Council (NAAC).

If the 1926 census is uploaded on schedule, it will be available to search from April next year. What is clearly not on schedule, however, is the appointment of members to the NAAC, a body set up back in 1987 to advise the arts and culture minister "on all matters affecting archives and their use by the public".

Remarkably, the last council - appointed back in 2017 and chaired by ex-appeals court judge John Hedigan - concluded its five-year term in July 2022, almost three years ago.

Goldhawk raised the issue of the empty seats back in 2023 (see The Phoenix 3/11/23). At that time, the arts department told Goldhawk:"A new process has commenced to reappoint members of the previous NAAC.

Fast-forward 14 months to January this year and the department was sticking to its story: "A competition to appoint a new NAAC via the public appointments system will be launched in the coming weeks.'

A curious Goldhawk wondered if the forgotten council might be in place for the 1926 census. The less-than-surprising news is that, according to the department last week, "the minister [Patrick O'Donovan] will shortly seek nominations for the NAAC". Fans of The Phoenix will not be holding their breaths.

Moreover, on each occasion that Goldhawk has asked why the vacancies have not been filled, as is required under legislation (The National Archives Act, 1986), no explanation has been provided by the department. At the same time, the NAI is the subject of a huge ongoing upgrade project.



TONY **MULLINS'S** MEMORIES

EARLIER THIS month, Tony Mullins – brother of Willie –

failed to overturn a Workplace Relations Commission award of a chunky €86,000 made to Yasir Ali, a former stable hand at the trainer's Watree Stud in Co Kilkenny. Probably the most evebrow-raising evidence from Mullins was that he did not recall if he had attended the

Cheltenham jamboree two years ago. There was certainly enough going on at the time.

The original award – for assorted breaches of employment legislation – was made to Ali in March 2023 and Mullins subsequently lodged his appeal outside the period allowed. The Labour Court heard last month circumstances" that led to the deadline being missed, including Tony's illness at the time and the Cheltenham and Fairyhouse

Goldhawk was surprised that Mullins could not recall attending Cheltenham considering he had saddled his then stable star,

> son, David), to finish fifth in the 2023 Cheltenham lack De Bromhead Grade 2 Mares Novice Hurdle.

A cursory glance at Mullins's X account includes numerous videos posted of the trainer at Prestbury Park with his beloved mare (which was later transferred out of Watree due

to a difference of opinion with her owner, Pat Kehoe.

ed to one of Mullins's Cheltenham tweets - that had suggested the mare ran well – saying: "What a load of rubbish.You did not give proper instructions to the jockey who will never ride Zoe again.

Memorable stuff.

TED WALSH'S WOES

Ted Walsh - the trainer, pundit and patriarch of the Walsh

family of racing TV presenters was back in hot water with the Irish Horseracing Regulatory Board (IHRB) stewards earlier this month.

Following the running of the TC Cullen Memorial Novice Steeplechase at Wexford, the race-day stewards enquired into the running and

riding of Walsh's charge, Ta Na La, with the IHRB veterinary officer finding the nag's condition to be normal

Evidence was heard from Brendan Brady, the trainer's authorised representative on the O'Callaghan, who stated his riding instructions were to get the mare settled and not to use his whip. The stewards - Nicolas

day, and the horse's rider, **Shane**

Lambert (chairman), Charles Cunningham, Patrick Coveney and Colman Sweeney reviewed the race and found that both the rider and trainer were in breach of the rule relating to a rider not seen to have attempted to obtain from the

horse "timely, real and substantial efforts to achieve the best possible place"

O'Callaghan was suspended for 14 race days, while Walsh was fined €3,000 but this was dropped on appeal.

This encounter with the Bowler Hats follows hot on the hooves of

the victory of Buachaillbocht at the Punchestown Festival, after which the handler's explanation for the improvement in form of JP McManus's horse - which had landed a colossal gamble was noted by the stewards.

Ted Walsh





Maura McGrath

that there had been "exceptional

festivals.

Princess Zoe (ridden by Tony's

An irate Kehoe had respond-

SOCIETY \star STAGE \star SCREEN \star SEX \star SOUNDS \star SPORTS \star SIGHTS \star SOCIETY



A LOAD OF POLLOCKS

THE IMPRESSIVE early 18thcentury Mountainstown House on 121 acres outside Navan, Co Meath, will be auctioned on June 12, having been in the ownership of the **Pollock** family for well over 200 years. Previous attempts to sell fell flat but the auction is expected to throw up a buyer.

Mountainstown is described as being "in superb condition", which is not surprising given the truckloads of money poured into its restoration in recent decades. The property comes with all original ornate ceilings and fireplaces, as well as no less than nine bedrooms and a shoot room, wine cellar and billiard room.

According to the Lavender's Blue archive, the L-shaped pile featured in the 1988 *Guide to Irish Country Houses*, where Mark Bence-Jones highlighted its "charming air of bucolic Baroque". It also got a mention in Maurice Craig's 1976 *Classic Irish Houses of the Middle Size*, while the Knight of Glin, Desmond FitzGerald, wrote the introduction to a 1988 Christie's auction of contents catalogue.

(A Glin Castle auction handled by Christies in 2009 turned out to include a *Portrait of Mrs Pollock of Mountainstown* attributed to 18th-century artist |ohn Trotter.)

Various members of the Pollock family resided at Mountainstown over more than 200 years, with Johnny and

Diana Pollock taking charge in the late 1960s. They oversaw the auction of contents in 1988 and used the income to carry out a substantial and impressive restoration of the house. They also took advantage of the Section 482 tax relief for historic houses and gardens

open to the public, in return for which the cost of major repairs could be written off.

In 2004, Mountainstown passed to **Arthur Pollock**, who moved in with his artist wife, **Atalanta**, daughter of the fabulously named Sir Hercules Langrishe and **Granier Sybil Wingfield**, daughter of the 9th Viscount Powerscourt. The couple carried out yet more renovations in Meath but maintaining a Georgian property like this comes with a hefty price tag and in 2015 Mountainstown



Atalanta Pollock

was put on the market. Savills was looking for \notin 4.15m, although this was reduced to \notin 3.15m and then \notin 2.75m in 2020 before the house was withdrawn from the market.

One factor in deciding to go to market may have been windrelated – specifically a planned €240m wind farm adjacent to Mountainstown with 46 giant turbines, each with a proposed

height of up to 169 metres. Given its scale, it is not surprising that the scheme proved contentious and attracted opposition, especially from horsey names such as **Noel Meade** and **Paul Carberry**, as well as An Taisce. The so-called

Castletownmoor wind farm project, initiated by **Tim Cowhig**, was deemed "strategic infrastructure" and fast-tracked straight to An Bord Pleanála (ABP) but was duly blown off course, despite the scale having been reduced. The thumbs-down from ABP was then the subject of a High Court challenge but in 2018 Judge **Michael Twomey** refused to greenlight a judicial review.

The much anticipated auction of Mountainstown House is set to go ahead on June 12. THE MCDONNELL sisters, Jane and Sarah, had an outing in The Currency last week, where they got to plug their latest venture, Design Week Dublin. Not surprisingly, there were also mentions of times gone by, including a lengthy stint at Image magazine. The latter business has just filed its figures for 2024, which reveal a deal has been successfully completed with the Revenue Commissioners over warehoused tax.

These days Image Publications is a joint venture between Monkstown-based moneybags Robert Power; the mag's co-founder, Ann Reihill; and her nephew, Patrick Dillon-Malone (although Reihill resigned from the board a few years ago). The partners hold their stakes through Emeritus Consulting Ltd (Power) and the Longford AP Investments Ltd (Reihill/Dillon-Malone).

A note in the accounts for the year ended June 30, 2024, signed off this month, states that Image Publications had availed of the option of warehousing "certain tax liabilities during the Covid-19 pandemic. In April 2024 repayment terms were agreed with Revenue and repayments commenced before the year end. All other tax liabilities have since year end been paid according to their appropriate due dates."

IN THE wake of the high-profile 'gals in space' media stunt by **Jeff Bezos's** Blue Origin, it is interesting to note that the market has recently taken a shine to **Richard Branson's** Virgin Galactic (VG) space flight operation, where Goldhawk's old pal, **Tom 'Psychics Live' Higgins** stumped up $\in I/4m$ almost 20 years to book a seat on the long-delayed trip into the outer atmosphere.

Irish space cadet Higgins learned to be very patient as VG struggled to get its act together. There was much popping of champagne corks when Branson's Unity rocket took off from Spaceport America in New Mexico a couple of years ago before travelling 88km into near space, at which point the passengers experienced around five minutes of weightlessness.

At that stage, the plan was for VG to start offering monthly trips to customers from September 2023. But things did not quite work out and VG shares plummeted to Earth in August after Branson's company released quarterly earnings. Technology website ARS Technica examined 'SPCE' stock's performance at the time, headlining its article, "Virgin Galactic just flew again but is the company

going anywhere?" The answer from ARS's senior space editor, **Eric Berger**, was:"I don't know."

Fast-forward to this month and the New York Stock Exchange reacted enthusiastically to VG's first-quarter 2025 results, when the company beat

expectations albeit with revenue of just \$461,000.

More significantly, VG announced it was on schedule to begin private astronaut missions in autumn 2026. Moreover, the current price tag for tickets is a chunky \$600,000 but this is expected to rise as VG brings its two new Delta Class spaceships into rotation. The aim is that the Delta ships will carry up to 60 passengers a month, thus helping to significantly reduce the company's stratospheric cash burn.

Last year, Branson announced the completion of a manufactur-

ing facility in Phoenix, Arizona, where final assembly of the Delta spaceships is taking place. Also, an agreement of co-operation was signed with Italy's civil aviation authority to study the feasibility of VG conducting spaceflight operations from Grottaglie Spaceport in Puglia,

southern Italy. The idea is that this operation will eventually complement Spaceport America in New Mexico.

All of this good news must be putting a smile on the face of one-time Swiss tax resident Tom Higgins, who is these days to be found in the impressive pile in north Co Wicklow he shares with his wife, **Theresa Dunne**.

The main Irish firm investing

the millions scooped from the sale of Psychics Live many moons ago is White Nun Holdings Ltd, where Higgins has 75% of the shares and his missus holds the balance. A note states that the principal place of business of the company is Elia Zammit Street in St Julian's in sunny Malta, where business appears to be pretty good.

White Nun recorded a profit of \in 1.5m in the year to the end of June 2024, leaving it with accumulated profits of over \in 8.1m, according to accounts just filed.

This company has an agreement in place with Higgins that gives it "the option to purchase properties from Tom Higgins". White Nun has agreed a price of €295,000 "in relation to a property to be transferred into the ownership of the company".

Interestingly, a subsidiary, Acquire Art International Ltd (AAI), which manages assets on behalf of White Nun, is shown to owe its parent a chunky $\in 6.8$ m. This wedge "has been provided for in full due to AAI being in a net liability position".



TOM HIGGINS'S FLIGHT PLAN





800

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THE IRISH TIMES

Trump announces tariff on tariffs

The markets have been thrown into further turmoil after US President Donald Trump announced an 80% tariff on existing tariffs. The tax is expected to last until at least this afternoon, when the president will most likely change his mind – again. "For too long the US has been taking

"For too long the US has been taking advantage of itself with low tariffs," said Trump in a 3am Truth Social post. "This is why I'm announcing an 80%



tariff on existing tariffs, which should finally realise my masterplan of turning

America into a total economic basket-case." Meanwhile, the response in Ireland has been quick.

"It's obviously very disappointing," said Taoiseach Micheál Martin. "I've already been in contact with President Trump, who responded by asking 'Who is this?' and then promptly hanging up. That marks the first step in our radical plan to react to the tariffs – by doing absolutely nothing."

Children's hospital latest!

The Taoiseach has sensationally claimed that the new children's hospital could be up and running at some stage in his lifetime.

Following the announcement of a 719th delay to the facility opening, hopes were starting to fade about the

coalition's ability to get the medical centre operational.

However, Micheál Martin has



reassured the public of his determination to get the controversial project done and dusted in the coming decades.

"Look, I've never being afraid to shoot from the hip, unless it was in relation to the dysplasia scandal. My Government is all

about delivery but, failing that, we'll just pin the blame on the contractors or Stephen Donnelly. Remember him?"

That Marriage Referendum Anniversary

Exclusive to all papers IT HARDLY seems possible that today is the day when I've been asked to write yet another piece marking 10 years since Ireland voted for marriage equality. Incredibly, it seems like only yesterday that I wrote a very similar story looking back at the emphatic celebrations across the country immediately after the resounding yes result in 2015. But one couple who tied the

Dublin-based Micheál and Simon, however, are in no doubt

knot say they still face challenges a decade after the landmark vote.

about what makes a successful marriage of convenience. Micheál said: "The secret is not to saddle yourself with a petulant non-entity who inspires nobody – and I should know because Simon tells me this 10 times a day". (That's enough anniversary fillers – Ed.)

Reactions to Qatar's plane gift to Trump



Michael D Higgins I think it's absolutely disgusting that this administration would

have anything to do with a deeply sectarian, autocratic regime with a very questionable human rights record. I just hope common sense prevails and the Qataris wash their hands of Trump.



Michael O'Leary If Trump thinks he's going to generate some cheap publicity for himself by resorting to pathetic histrionics then he's obviously being paying a lot of attention to yours truly. On a separate note, buying your own aircraft is actually a lot cheaper than flying Ryanair these days.



Simon Harris Why does everyone keep asking me about aeroplanes these days? As I have

new level of the previously stated, I have absolutely no knowledge of what a plane is, let alone if they are being used for illegal deportations or transporting weapons for the purposes of genocide...





HIS ENEMY? THE UN VETO. HIS MISSION? **Destroy the triple lock**. AND HE'S GOING ALL GUNS BLAZING. Craic & Codology ··· Craic & Codology ··· Craic & Codology ··· Craic & Codology

Coalition unveils campaign to boost school attendance



Pupils who refuse to attend classes will get a typically tedious lecture from Helen McEntee

Warn young people about the dangers of ending up in dead-end careers such as politics

Deal with juvenile delinquents (Government-supporting backbenchers etc)

Mollycoddle disinterested students as if they were Michael Lowry himself

Explain to scholars that only TDs can do absolutely nothing for months at a time

Stress the importance of being able to read and write out expenses claims for the Dáil

ARE LEAVING CERT STRESS STORIES CAUSING STRESS?

by Clare Monger

THERE were scenes of mass hysteria throughout the country yesterday as thousands of students struggled with filler pieces about Leaving Cert 2025.

"Exam-related stress articles aimed at students are worse than ever this year," said an anxious school principal. "It means they have no time at all to use their smart phones or even get around to doing any actual revision."

One stressed out mother commented: "These alarming articles are crammed with tips warning traumatised teenagers to stay completely calm while they're having panic attacks.

"Vulnerable young people are being constantly pressured into reading depressing stories about soaring CAO points and how the Leaving Cert will totally ruin their lives. No wonder they keep falling asleep."

INSIDE

Really scary 'burnout' stats – p3-9

STARMER HAILS HISTORIC TRADE AGREEMENT

Keir Starmer has hailed the landmark trade deal between the UK and EU, with both sides agreeing they never want to discuss Brexit ever again. Starmer insists the deal will transform both the

EU and UK beyond all recognition, as well as earning him and Ursula von der Leyen lots of column inches.

"This spectacular fudge has all of Europe alive with indifference," said Keir. "It marks



another seismic moment as my Labour government reaches historic levels of unpopularity and slides inexorably towards electoral oblivion."

EU-UK deal key points

- No one mention war in Gaza
 At least one Premier League club to be allowed back in Champions League final next season
- Eurocrats to keep earning massive amounts of money.

Bloom's best plot



O'LEARY INTERVENTION A 'TURNING POINT' IN THE WAR, SAYS RUSSIA

Delighted Russian war officials have welcomed a recent drone attack on Ukrainian airport directors by Ryanair guru Michael O'Leary and claim the onslaught could mark a "major turning point" in Russia's efforts to decimate Ukraine's resistance to the invaders.

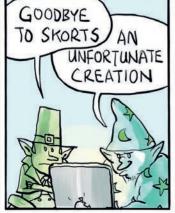
The Irishman's droning included dropping bombshells about "very" lazy Ukrainian officials not getting "off their fat arses", which subsequently exploded on to the front pages of several newspapers.

"Comrade Mikel's constant droning is well known and feared throughout the world", beamed delighted Russian general Begor Tisyerselfisee on the frontline.

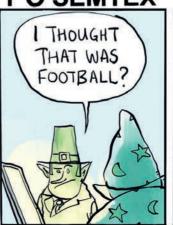
"Just the sound of Mikel starting up yet another drone about landing spaces, baggage fines or refund applications cause many people to lose their will to live. We expect Ukraine to surrender within a week."



THE ADVENTURES OF FESTY O'SEMTEX



THE PROPER ATTIRE FOR A GAME OF HURLING IS A POTAGE OF LIME TO STIFFEN THE HAIR, AND A PINT OF BLUE PAINT TO COVER THE NAKED BODY





22 THE PHOENIX MAY 30, 2025



ACROSS

- I Scientist's dish of chopped tripe might be full of germs. (5)
- 4 For female mathematician finding botanical specimens missing article of her underwear. (7)
- 8 When business leader absconds, extra performance-related pay actually becomes a burden. (4)
- 9 Make a statement confirming how legitimate a party member in UK is. (10) 10 Tough guy cooking chicken in beer was eventually
- done for cooking the books. (2,6) н Surrenders to the Spanish, interrupting the
- insulting of the Jews. (6) 13 The badger I injured was spared as I am a really
- magnanimous and generous type. (10) 16 In Cork, we are told to take cover right away,
- near small sea inlet. (4) 17 This also has marine connections, is also in Cork
- we are told and holds sales we are told. (4) 18 Arrange for treatment of anaemic pet, and it's
- free! (10) To break bread with her around is a desirable 20
- thing for a really cool guy. (6) 22 Was he the undisputed genius of the troubled nineties? (8)
- 24 It will take a lot of guts to wear a Versace tie knotted so. (10)
- 26 Its abundance may be why no Sahara-like deserts were ever seen in Terra Incognita. (4)
- 27 You just cannot not be able to understand my point. You have to go to new Star Wars film! (4,3)
- 28 Take a quick drink from the bottle, about midmorning, and hang for it! (5)

DOWN

- I Would golfer use platinum tee, but strangely enough, only at the 17th hole? (||)
- 2 A new make of car causes the least trouble. (5)
- 3 Ask about soft drink with top removed being sacrosanct. (9) 4 Non-specific sickness occurring in metal
- processing. (7) Gentile getting round Dalai Lama starts to
- act in a somewhat divine fashion. (5) 6 Two obligatory items on afternoon tea
- tray join and contribute to optional floral display. (9) After Queen of Scots was beheaded,
- her remains were scattered over part of Scotland, (3)
- Let nasty vigilante do some pigeon following, without being seen, fitting in seamlessly. (11)
- 14 Employ foul-mouthed expression when you hoist sail in stormy conditions. (9)
- 15 Name a talking horse that turns and runs fairly quickly to those holding the booze.
- 19 Did the dame sing "We'll Meet Again" in an era that was just not exceptional? (7) 21
- Right slippery ones for anglers to get their lines on, or for dancers, (5) 23 There are twelve inches in a foot, but only
- seven of these. (5) 25 With energy and enthusiasm, Caesar
- put half a dozen before a thousand. It's cleaner. (3)

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"I'm working from home"

KEY POINTS OF THAT UK-EU TRADE DEAL

Fisheries: UK government will continue to be all at sea Migration: Tories worried about voters going to Farage Security: UK and EU's support for Netanyahu indefensible Pet passports: Brexit now generally seen as a dog's dinner Erasmus: Labour's policies looking increasingly academic Trade: Keir Starmer worried he'll get what's coming to him Energy: DUP guaranteed to start having a meltdown

Soc Dems bill to reduce voting age

The Social Democrats have come up with the brilliant idea of a referendum to reduce the voting age to 16 years.

Said Deputy Aidan Farout: "This totally new and original system is already happening in Scotland and is being considered by the UK government. My party colleagues believe that this radical proposal will be welcomed by a whole generation of apathetic young adults who don't believe in anything - particularly voting.



"Let's face it, the country's other political parties are totally behind the times and have no understanding whatsoever of Tik-Tok, AI robot music or watermelon-flavoured vapes

'The current

old-fashioned voting rules are unjust, unrepresentative and, above all, unfair to the hip Soc Dems, who have been languishing in a blaze of obscurity since Holly disappeared without trace on maternity leave."

NEW HOLIDAY HOME BOYCOTT OUTRAGE

TDs have reacted angrily to a proposed boycott of holiday homes, with many insisting such action would mean their second and third homes would never see use. Deputies have insisted they are being unfairly targeted for wanting to holiday in exotic five-star

exclusive continental hotel with my mistress," fumed one deputy. "If my various holiday homes have to lie idle, so be it. Whenever I do take a break down the country in Ireland, I do my bit for the local economy by running up massive expenses at various restaurants and pubs, so it's time people laid off the criticism.

Scribble Box

"All I want is a lavish break in an

COURTER A SUCE OF FUN FROM 6AM





Stocks & Shares



Underpowered Greencoat Renewables ripe for picking

IT IS difficult to know what Paul O'Donnell and Bertrand Gautier – the so-called investment managers in Schroders Greencoat Capital who run Greencoat Renewables for a juicy fee – are up to. They are earning a very handsome fee not linked to performance, while the company's share price has been plummeting. For investors, matters are made worse by the indecipherable accounts and a worrying depreciation policy.

Moneybags has previously criticised the use of outside managers to run public companies for a fee, as is the case here, where matters are further complicated by the Byzantine accounting structure.

The share price has been running out of energy over the last six months and is now down to 72c, at which it is trading on a 34% discount to the last published net asset value (NAV) of €1.23bn, representing 110.5c per share.

Greencoat is a wind farm investment group, 0.05 which typically works off 0.90 15-year off-take agree-0.85 ments and thus boasts 0.80 a very stable income 0.75 base and is attractive for 0.70 institutions. This is par-0.65 ticularly the case given the current (overly generous) dividend payout of 6.74c a share, which means the shares at 72c are trading on a remarkable 9.23% dividend yield.

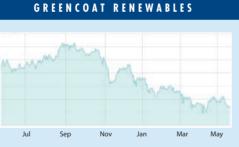
These types of figures have reportedly attracted the attention of Irish value investor Eamon Waters, who sold out his sprawling waste collection operation, Panda Beauparc, for €1.4bn cash.

As O'Donnell says, the strategy is "to hold assets in its investment portfolio for the long term" but Greencoat is now selling off six Irish wind farms for €156m, following the disposal last November of a Finnish farm for €34m, bringing total asset sales over the last six months to €200m.

This is not what an expanding business does and the justification given – to bring down the group's debt/equity ratio from 54% to 50% – makes little sense for a group that has funded expansion through serial share placings.

It could be, however, that

the Greencoat model only really works when interest rates are down around zero. The recent trend upwards has increasingly eaten into returns, with interest charges growing from an upward trending €33m in 2023 by a further 33% last year to €44m. With loans of €1.2bn, it is not going to get easier anytime soon as any earlier lowinterest-rate fixes fall away.



Although there was a 2% fall in NAV last year, the company boasts that "total NAV return, including dividends paid, was positive at 4.5%", whatever this means. The obvious question is how can Greencoat possibly pay out a dividend of 6.74c.

Following its 2017 flotation, Greencoat shares traded at a modest premium to its NAV up to September 2024, when the slide began, and they have dropped from 94c on the election of Donald 'Drill, Baby Drill' Trump in October 2024 to the current 72c.

When the 2024 results were published on March 6, the market was certainly not calmed. The report referred to "cash generation of €148.6m", which had fallen back 24% from €196.7m, but the NAV per share had fallen only 1.7% from €1.124 to €1.105, while the dividend was nevertheless increased to 6.74c.



Paul O'Donnell

A real challenge for Greencoat shareholders is to try to make sense out of the accounts, which are characterised by "the exemption permitted by International Accounting Standard [IAS] 28". This usually applies to true invest-

ment companies, which report on changes in the value of minority stakes in a range of investee companies.

But in Greencoat's case there seems no rationale for adopting IAS 28 as it is a trading company and, in the majority of cases, fully owns its utility operations – mainly wind farms. In

the accounts, Greencoat treats each of these wind farms as an individual investment for which the holding company attributes a value based on its own estimates, instead of simply allowing shareholders to see what revenues are generated and what profits are earned after depreciation, interest and tax.

As a result, auditor BDO opts for a "consolidated statement of comprehensive income" in place of a regular profit and loss account. Here, a "return on investments" of €113.8m is reported, down 8% on the previous year. This is made up of interest charged by the parent company to each wind farm, which are all held in special purpose vehicles (SPVs). Last year, the interest charged was €89m, an increase of 29% on the €69m charged in 2023.

These are all internal matters, however, and the parent company could increase or reduce its loans to these operations as it sees fit and it decides what interest to charge the SPVs. In 2024, the average interest charged to Greencoat's own subsidiaries on the loans came to 5.8%, while in the preceding year interest charges came to 4.5%.

To add to the confusion, the annual report states that the internal dividends paid by the SPVs more than halved last year from €83.6m to €41.0m, again without any explanation. This is not the level of disclosure usually demanded by consolidated results.

Greencoat reported total income of €113.8m in 2024, from which operating expenses of €15.5m were deducted. The main element of these expenses is the juicy investment management fee, as provided for in the current contract. The five-year contract was extended in 2022 by the Rónán Murphy-chaired board (where former AIB and Davy boss Bernard Byrne has now joined).

This contract clearly should have been terminated (see *The Phoenix* 8/4/22).

After the contract was renewed, Schroders Greencoat Capital now charges 1% on the first billion of NAV and 'only' 0.8% on €1bn-€1.75bn. This fee is paid irrespective of Greencoat's performance and generated fee revenue of €24m over the last two years alone.

The actual €2.6m cost of *Continued on page 26*

Reference the Market Abuse Regulations 2005, nothing published by Moneybags in this section is to be taken as a recommendation, either implicit or explicit, to buy or sell any of the shares mentioned.

Stocks & Shares

Just why is the board trying to sell Dalata?

IT REMAINS difficult to know who is pushing to have Dalata Hotels Group bought out. AS CEO, Dermot Crowley is clearly front and centre but, given his stated strategy, a sell-off would be hard for him to stomach. Also, it is very hard to justify the excuse being put forward by the company for the kicking off of a sales process. The relative lack of committed investors on the share register, however, suggests that a deal could well be done.

Chairman John Hennessy suggests that Dalata's board of directors is pushing a deal. He advises: "We are unanimous in the view that the key to achieving that vision [the group's 21.000 bedrooms target for 2030] is the availability of capital and the share price does not reflect the underlying value of the company. We believe that now is the right time to undertake a rigorous and formal strategic review, which will consider options to increase access to capital and also enhance shareholder value."

If this was the case when Hennessy issued his statement, with the shares at €4.80, it was even more appropriate through most of last year, as shares drifted down from a peak of €5 at the beginning of 2024 to under €4 by July.

Moreover, if the board is fully committed to its growth strategy to increase its bedroom stock by 70% over the next five years, Dalata should be conserving its resources rather than paying out €27m in dividends and, clearly, should not have lashed out €55m to buy-in its own shares last year.

€

3.5 It is hard to see how Hennessy can stand over his above justification in such circumstances. Indeed, in this light the chairman's statement makes him look simply foolish.

If it is directors' strategy to maximise the company's value ahead of a take-out, Dalata should already have made up its mind whether it is essentially a three-star Maldron hotel group or a fourstar Clayton hotel group. More importantly, its dependency on the Dublin market should have been decreased, given that it represents a hefty 44% of last year's total group turnover of €652m.

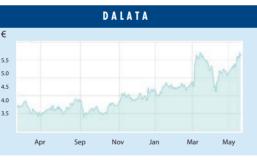
With its 4,446 bedrooms in Dublin, Dalata has a 15% share of the 29,000 bedrooms in Dublin and Crowley's plan is to increase this by a further 1,500 bedrooms and grow the group's Dublin market share to 20%.

If the CEO wanted to fend off an international hotel group with an eye on Dalata, this is exactly how he might go about it. No big international group would be

salivating over a hotel company planning on having 6,000 bedrooms in Dublin and a 20% market share there, when it is already 44% dependent on turnover from the Irish capital, which is also responsible for a whopping 50% of earnings.

Crowley gives some insight into how profitable really big hotels are by disclosing the profitability of its biggest operation - the 608-bedroom Clayton Hotel beside Dublin Airport. Last year it earned an impressive €22m, with the ebitda per bedroom at just over €36,000.

Excluding this, the operation results in a group ebitda of €212m on 11,400 beds, an average earnings per bedroom of €18,600, not much more than half the profitability of the Clayton Dublin Airport business. Yet, nowhere in the annual report does Crowley



discuss economies of scale or how they impact on the group.

It could be that selling off the two Dalata hotels in Wexford town at the end of last year is the start of a recycling of capital into larger hotels. For a growing group, however, selling any hotel should fit in with an overall strategy.

The Wexford Maldron hotel has 108 bedrooms and the Wexford Whites hotel has 160. On the basis of economies of scale, these disposals do not fit, given that Dalata has several smaller hotels - for example 92 bedrooms in Dublin's Smithfield Maldron, 90 in the Portlaoise Maldron, 93 in the Maldron in Derry and 89 in the London Wall Clavton.

If size is not the reason that Dalata exited Wexford town, it must be the size of the town. But this does not appear to stand up either, as Portlaoise is smaller and Sligo is pretty much the same size.



Dermot Crowley

It is also hard to explain what Dalata is doing running three small hotels on a management contract basis. Two of these are in northside Dublin, just off Parnell Square, including Donie

> Cassidy's well-known Belvedere Hotel with 109 bedrooms, a popular GAA spot. The other is Cassidy's slightly smaller Barry's Hotel, which has 83 bedrooms.

It would be interesting to know how Dalata's booking engine distributes bed night enquiries - although, given the level of demand in the

capital, this may not be an issue. Barry's Hotel is currently quoting €264 a night, while the 182-bedroom Maldron around the corner is quoting €247 a night, as is the Maldron Smithfield, with the Clayton on Cardiff Lane south of the river at €264.

Two other Dalata operations the Samuel Hotel on North Wall Ouay and the Gibson Hotel adjacent to the 3Arena - are quoting €268 and €363 respectively.

While Dalata's biggest hotel is the huge 608-bedroom Clayton near Dublin Airport, the group does have two other giants - the Clayton on Burlington Road, D4, with 502 bedrooms and the Clavton Manchester Airport, which is currently being extended to 581 bedrooms. These beasts deliver significant economies of scale and drive very profitable food and beverage operations.

It is easy to understand why Dalata bought the former Tara Towers Hotel in south Co Dublin, given the asking price was just €13m. What is harder to understand is why the hotel was then demolished and replaced with a €100m 140-bedroom hotel. This simply cannot justify the outlay Continued on page 26





"Look! Social media for old people !"

Stocks & Shares

Greencoat continued from page 24

running the Greencoat Renewables operation is then separately charged, as well as directors' fees that totalled €616,000, with Murphy taking a handsome €200,000.

According to the auditors, this left Greencoat with a so-called operating profit of €97m, down from €107m in 2023.

INTEREST COSTS

Then comes the key matter of interest costs on the group's €1.2bn of borrowings, which last year rose over 30% to €44m. This works out at an average interest charge of 3.7%, up from 2.8% in the preceding year. Moreover, the most likely direction in the near future looks to be further upwards.

Significantly, the auditors show in the income account that earnings per share actually fell from 6.61c to 4.5c. Given that the group is paying out 6.74c in dividends this year, costing \notin 73m, this baffling strategy must be eating into Greencoat's reserves.

Moreover, the ability to pay out dividend levels like this is facilitated to a significant degree by a depreciation policy that is clearly underpowered, totalling €5.8m in 2024 when a figure nearer €100m would be more appropriate.

Murphy states that dividends were comfortably covered, not by earnings but by what he calls

Dalata continued from page 25

when compared with a simple upgrade of the original property.

Then there is the small continental hotels division, which Crowley plans to grow to over 14,000 bedrooms over the next decade. He has brought in two leased hotels – the 393-bedroom Clayton in Düsseldorf, Germany, and the 173-bedroom Clayton Amsterdam in the Netherlands – and has signed up to lease a new 243-bedroom Clayton hotel in Madrid, near Adolfo Suárez Airport, but it won't open until 2029.

MAJOR DIVERSION

The 14,000-bedroom expansion plan for mainland Europe represents a major diversion of Dalata's resources but the performance so far is less than stellar. Last year the hotels earned an average ebitda of €19,430 per bedroom, which does not justify a plan to roll out across Europe to the likes of Rome, Brussels, Frankfurt, Prague, Vienna, Copenhagen and Stockholm. Oddly, France does not feature.

It is in this overall context that Dalata appointed Rothschilds to find a buyer, with several parties "gross cash generation", a very unusual concept but one seemingly okayed by BDO.

Greencoat's most recent investment is a 50% stake in the 80 megawatt (MW) South Meath solar farm – the group's first move into solar. There is a power purchase agreement (PPA) in place here with Microsoft, which is also the case for the 37 MW Tullahennel wind farm in Co Kerry. The other Greencoat farms have PPAs in place with the likes of Bord Gáis, ESB, Flogas, SSE Airtricity and Energia. In total they provided net power of 798 MW in Ireland last year.

The refocusing towards continental Europe could be because wind farms there can be acquired for significantly below the approximate $\notin 2.5m$ per MW being demanded by vendors in Ireland. This could be the reason the company stopped publishing what it paid for the power plants acquired since 2021.

Working backwards, Moneybags estimates that Greencoat paid only €1.33m per MW for the 101 MW Erstrask South wind farm in Sweden, presumably because it has a PPA in place worth only €42 per MW, whereas the Irish state guarantees €81 per MW, while in France the figure is €86 per MW.

In June 2022, Greencoat made one of its largest purchases – the 134 MW Erstrask North farm – again without publishing the price.

believed to have declared a valid interest by the May 1 deadline.

Dalata shares were floated off at €4.50 in 2017 and hit a peak of €7.25 in July 2018 before the pandemic-induced nadir of €1.76 in March 2020. Then CEO Pat McCann did manage to get away a €94m share placing in September 2020 at €2.55, one-third of the price just two years earlier, causing 20% equity dilution.

That fundraiser opened the door to aggressive shareholders such as Helikon Investments, which specialises in identifying undervalued stocks and is now sitting on a chunky 16% stake. If there is any doubt over management – the 14% fall in pre-tax profits last year to €91m is surely a worry – Helikon will be eager to exit, particularly when it can more than double its money.

This is surely also true of the Saudi Zahid group, which has 10%, and also Norwegian property outfit Eiendomsspar, which sits on an 8.5% stake.

The largest holder pre-pandemic, Ameriprise, has fully sold out its 9% share, while Fidelity has 4.99%, down from 5.93%. Likewise, JP Morgan Chase is down at 3.74% from 5.53% at the beginning of this year.



Rónán Murphy

Seven small wind farms were bought in France at a high price because of the high state subsidies but these bring no economies of scale. The two farms bought offshore Germany, however, were huge, with Borkum Riffgrund 1 delivering 312 MW of power, of which Greencoat takes 50%. It also has a 38% stake in the 288 MW

German offshore farm, Butendiek. Germany now accounts for 22% of Greencoat's portfolio, the largest after Ireland's 57%.

Despite its short-comings and

impenetrable accounting, Greencoat does have a solid asset base that is no doubt worth approximately what the company claims. This explains the potential interest of the likes of Eamon Waters as the share price struggles at a 32% discount to NAV.

The factors that have pushed the share price down in recent months include a 2% reduction in the value of Greencoat's assets and the rise in interest charges.

It could be an opportune time for predators to strike.



John Hennessy

At today's share price of €5.70, Dalata is capitalised at €1.21bn and is standing at a 15% discount to the group's net asset book value of €1.4bn, represented by a net asset value per share of €6.75. Nevertheless, the shares are currently standing on a not unreasonable price-earnings multiple of 16.

A private equity buyer might see an opportunity here to significantly rationalise the whole Dalata operation, disposing of all the smaller hotels and dramatically reducing the Dublin focus, aiming for fewer but more profitable larger hotels – a model that could be rolled out around Europe.

On the other hand, Dalata may be structured in such a way today that the group is simply indigestible.





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Derek Madden's prime problem

FANS OF Goldhawk with long memories will recall an interesting little bioenergy company called Prime Energy Power Ltd (PEP), where **Nicholas**

O'Dwyer of Grant Thornton was installed as liquidator after it ran out of moolah (see The Phoenix 20/4/2018). The principal player here, Derek Madden, has now been restricted for five years under Section 150 of the Companies Act. It also turns out that the shareholders and unfortunate

investors brought on board lost a whopping €13.5m.

The listed directors of PEP were Galway native Madden and Finnish businessman (and the company's vice-chairman) **Rainer Haggblom** – an associate of moneybags paper mogul **Dermot Smurfit**, who at one stage had a stake in the operation.

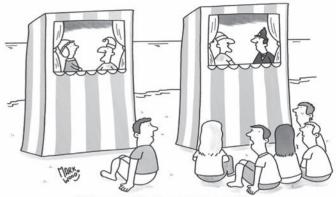
Set up in 2009, PEP was a biomass energy operation that specialised in the construction of small-scale power and heating plants and the provision of sustainable fuels such as woodchip and wood pellets. The Athloneregistered firm operated mainly in Europe and notable projects included the €35m construction of a biomass-powered plant

in the Romanian resort town of Busteni.

PEP was successful for a while, recording an impressive €3m profit in 2013. According to the last available annual return, Madden was the largest shareholder

at this time with a 63% stake, while Smurfit owned 15%

of the company and Helsinki-based Haggblom owned close to 5%. Just over 2% was held by a Helsinki-registered entity called Prime Vision. (Smurfit and Haggblom



'Are you still on season one?

had previously worked together at Finnish forestry operation The Forest Company, where Haggblom is chairman and Smurfit was a board member at one stage. Impressively, back in 2014 Dermo was awarded 'The Knight, First Class of the Order of the Lion of Finland' for services to business.)

Trying to ascertain PEP's financial position in the run-up to its 2018 liquidation is challenging because it never filed accounts after those for 2013 and it had been struck off the companies register in 2016 for that reason.

PEP, however, was restored to the register in July 2017 on foot of a petition to the High Court by creditor OBMC. Judge **Tony O'Connor** also ruled at the time that Madden would have to file the company's outstanding annual returns and corporation tax returns, but this never happened.

A number of other Madden entities have been struck off for failing to file accounts, including one called Bireme Holdings Ltd, where Smurfit was again a listed shareholder. Madden was awarded shares on foot of the "acquisition by Bireme Holdings of 130 ordinary shares in Prime Energy Power Ltd from Derek Madden".

Separately, a company called

Brief Cases continued on page 30

GOLDHAWK SPIES that the company behind the lauded Prosperity recruitment firm is being liquidated this week. The good news is that it looks like the multi-talented founder of the firm – actor-turned-executiveturned-DJ Gary Mullan – has landed on his (dancing) feet.

This week a creditors' meeting is to be held in D2, at which number-cruncher **Michael Kennedy** will be installed as liquidator of Thank God It's Monday Ltd, which turns out to be the entity behind Prosperity.

The news may come as something of a surprise given Prosperity's high profile and apparent success as a leading digital sector recruitment agency, boasting offices in Dublin, Paris and Barcelona, as well as more recently targeting expansion into the United Arab Emirates.

Set up by Mullan and his 50% partner and director of operations, **Jim Murray**, over 20 years ago, the company has attracted oodles of positive media coverage, operating in a fast-growing sector and claiming among its customers giants such as Google, Facebook, Microsoft, Sage and Accenture. Prosperity's annual digital salary survey also helped to maintain its profile.

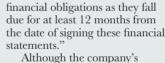
Having opened an office in Paris, the boys followed this up with a so-called centre of excel-

lence in Barcelona, "where we build tech teams locally for our clients worldwide". Sunny Barcelona clearly appeals to Mullan, who is now based there.

There were no really obvious signs that Prosperity was in trouble. The last accounts filed cover the year to

the end of 2023, at which time the company was sitting on accumulated profits of €287,000, albeit having made a profit of a tiny €2,000 in the 12 months.

Certainly, Mullan and Murray had no concerns at the time these figures were signed off at the end of last September, just eight months ago. A note in the accounts states: "The directors have a reasonable expectation that the company has adequate resources to continue in operational existence and to meet its



website claims that "Prosperity is undergoing an ambitious global expansion", the accounts show that staff numbers at home were down from six to five, while directors' remuneration for Mullan and Murray had been cut back from a generous €341,000 in 2022 to

€208,000 in 2023.

At the same time, the amount owed to the company by the Spanish subsidiary, Prosperity Digital SL, more than doubled to €395,000 and there was also a €175,000 jump in the amount outstanding to "other creditors".

This is not the first time that Prosperity has found itself in a spot of bother. Many moons ago, it was faced with legal threats from the Church of Scientology no less, on foot of Mullan and Murray seeking to register the 'Prosperity' trademark. Happily, the legal shemozzle went nowhere and the Irish company got to protect its business name.

While Prosperity survived the Scientologists, it looks like prayers will not save the company now. Mullan, however, wears a number of hats, including that of actor, having appeared in TV shows such as *Fair City*, as well as some movies.

His other talent is focused on the dance floor and 18 months ago he was smart enough to set up a new business – in Barcelona where he now lives – called EchoBeats, "a high energy live act blending DJ beats with live saxophone percussion". According to Mullan's LinkedIn page, EchoBeats "brings the vibe, the rhythm and the unforgettable energy to every stage".

Its website notes that Gary and **Marco** (his business partner in Barcelona) "have become a sought-after pair of performers in the city". EchoBeats apparently offers "unforgettable experiences, from Dublin Beats to Barcelona Grooves".

The Fitzwilliam Place creditors' meeting for Prosperity could turn out to be quite good fun.



Gary Mullan's bad vibe



Society of St. Vincent de Paul





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Brief Cases continued from page 28

Prime Energy Solutions Ltd was struck off in August 2018. The last accounts filed here cover the year to the end of April 2016, at which stage accumulated losses stood at €460,000.

Back at PEP, the recent report from liquidator O'Dwver states that unsecured creditors are owed €13.6m and that the winding up should be completed later this year. One issue that impeded the liquidation was a legal action against a contractor in Austria that ended up in arbitration in the Austrian Supreme Court.

Alas, PEP proved unsuccessful and O'Connor noted in a filing: "It is likely that no funds will be received as a result."

Big noise Matt Gleeson

A COMPANY called Blackberry Hearing Ltd has just had a charge registered against it by

non-bank lender InvoiceFair Ltd, which now trades as FinanceFair. This follows on foot of a most upbeat outing in the Sunday Times by Blackberry boss and pal of Denis O'Brien, Matt Gleeson.

The ST article made it clear that Blackberry Hearing has been going places since Glee-

son joined his father's company in 2018.

Before that, he had worked in the telecoms sector, having got started after meeting O'Brien when in situ as president of one of UCD's business societies. That encounter led to an internship at Digicel in the sunny Caribbean resort of St Lucia.

Blackberry Hearing had been incorporated by Dave Gleeson and his engineer associate, John Ryan of Axion Enterprises. When Matt came on board as

general manager, he oversaw a digital transformation" that helped to boost revenues and resulted in "double digit growth in each of the last five years".

Today, Blackberry boasts 60 outlets and has also collaborated with Tesco, where the company has opened its own-branded retail outlets at five Tesco Extra stores, "with more expansion planned".

All this growth, of course, requires funding and Gleeson, who moved up to the managing director role, told the ST that last year he brought in "a multi-million euro investment from private equity house Abbey International Finance", which enabled Dave Gleeson and Ryan to "cash in their chips". (The two boys still hold a minority stake through their vehicle Dradime Ltd.) There is no sign yet of the Abbey International windfall on the share register, as the latest annual return filed only covers the year to the end of September last but Abbey international's

chief finance officer, Niall McKeon, and head of private equity Mark Good were both appointed directors of Blackberry a year

Although the euro Abbey fillip is presumably in place to fund the planned ongoing expansion, Blackberry has also accessed funding

courtesy of FinanceFair, which registered its charge against the former company earlier this month.

The 2023 figures for Blackberry, signed off in April 2024, reveal that it dropped just on €450,000 that year, following on from a loss of €420,00 in 2022. Having been in the black at the end of 2021, this left Blackberry sitting on accumulated losses of €336,000.

Given the hearing aids business lost almost €900, 000 over



"You're an actor! Would I have seen you in anything?"



two years to the end of 2023 and is still "on the acquisition trail", it is perhaps not surprising that FinanceFair has joined the party so soon after the big Abbey International deal was signed.

'Im<u>ag</u>e' makeover

ELSEWHERE IN this issue, Goldhawk notes the agreement between Image Publications Ltd (IPL) and the Revenue in relation to repayment of warehoused pandemic-period taxes (see p18).

It is also worth noting that the publisher has been steadily reducing its significant accumulated deficit.

These days IPL is owned by a holding company called Zernicke Ltd, which in turn is jointly controlled by Monkstownbased publisher Robert Power; the mag's co-founder.

Ann Reihill; and her nephew, Patrick Dillon-Malone. This shareholding arrangement followed a restructuring of the publishing outfit in 2015.

These days Reihill (who turns 80 next year) is no longer a director but the board does include Dillon-Malone, while other directors are Image chief executive Clodagh Edwards, Laura Power (wife of Robert), and, most recently, the Russian-born, Barcelona-based chief financial officer (and fitness fanatic) Olga Gordeychuk.

When Covid-19 kicked in, accounts published by ILP revealed a jump in accumulated losses from €435,000 to €2.4m in the year ended June 30, 2020. And matters were hardly helped by the decision taken in 2020 by Aer Lingus to crash-land its inflight magazine, Cara, which had been published by IPL.

The following year the losses

stood at €2.26m and the company was in the red to the tune of €1.2m, while the amount owed to creditors - including tax and social insurance - jumped over 50% to €747,000.

By the end of June 2022, the good news was that the accumulated deficit was down to just over €2m on foot of a €200,000 profit but the figure for creditors, including tax and social insurance, had jumped 74% to €1.3m, as ILP took advantage of the Revenue's tax-warehousing scheme.

In the year to June 23, 2023, ILP delivered a €1/4m profit to reduce accumulated losses to

€1.8m, while the

amount owned to

creditors, includ-

ing tax, was down

€100,000 to €1.2m.

These figures were

signed off in April

last year, at which

stage there was no

agreement in place

ment arrangements

for the warehoused

tax liabilities and,

therefore, these

regarding repay-



were technically due for repayment in full by that stage

Happily, the June 2024 accounts published this month show that, while the amount owed to creditors (including tax and social insurance) had jumped from €1.2m to over €1.4m, repayment terms for warehoused taxes had been agreed with the Revenue in April last year "and repayments commenced before the year end".

Meanwhile, a profit of just on €210,000 left accumulated losses at ILP at 'just' €1.6m. This is over 30% down on the figure in mid-2020, although there is still an awful lot of red ink.





ago. multi-million-





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