



## 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

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 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 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



Jack Chambers



Jim O'Callaghan



Mary Hanafin



## AFFAIRS OF THE NATION

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.

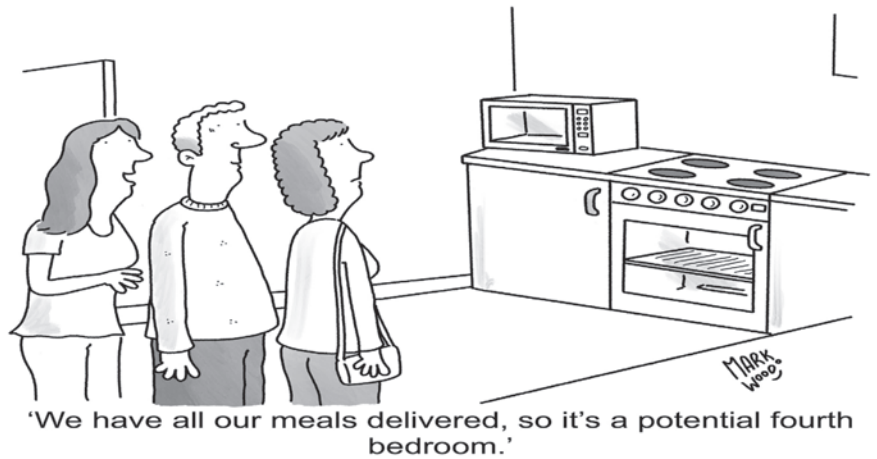
However, this is where things might get tricky for Mary as she was criticised in 2008 as education minister for engaging in a 69-day legal battle with two parents seeking education for their autistic child, an issue that has since become larger with many parents and in the public mind.

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



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 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 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 Toole

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.

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## 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



Tom Clonan

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'.

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 larger-than-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.