

AFFAIRS OF THE NATION



GOVERNMENT DATA BULLIES

IN A chilling public display of loyalty to our Big Tech overlords, Fianna Fáil heavyweights have been putting the boot into a senior civil servant who dared to question the divine right of data centres to monopolise Ireland's precious resources and scarce infrastructure.

Oonagh Buckley, secretary general at the Department of Environment, Climate and Energy, recently warned that, since data centres had used up all spare electricity capacity, Ireland would have to choose between AI and building new homes.

The fact that runaway data centre growth is ramping up fossil fuel burning and Ireland's greenhouse gas emissions has so far not provoked major protests. But could the impact on our ability to provide housing be the spark

that finally incites a groundswell of public and political resistance to these energy vampires?

Buckley's brave intervention echoed warnings from numerous experts and state agencies. But Micheál Martin apparently knows better. Within hours he told journalists that her "presentation is not true". Jack Chambers followed up by dismissing what he called Buckley's "binary simplicity".

Once these two had shot the messenger, MEP Barry Cowen kicked her while she was down. In an oped for the *Indo* he made a dig at Buckley, trotted out tech industry talking points and banged on about delays in offshore wind delivery, which is irrelevant to the grid capacity issue Buckley was highlighting.

In fact Buckley's analysis aligns closely with a warning from the Commission for the Regulation of Utilities (CRU) that "data centre demand could significantly impact [ESB Networks'] ability to accommodate demand connections required to support Government policy targets such as 550,000 new homes by 2040".

Last month it was revealed that a major new substation in west Dublin, built to serve future housing needs in Dublin and Kildare, is being almost entirely used by data centres.

New substations are built at great expense to electricity bill payers but grid connections are on a 'first-come, first-served' basis and tech giants are proving adept at grabbing most of them.



Micheál Martin

Another shocking – but relatively under reported – revelation by the CRU this year was that data centres are consuming 50% of electricity in the Dublin/Meath region.

Aside from housing, another impact of data centres, which may incite the public anger that climate considerations have not, is the increased cost in household bills.

To pay for grid upgrades, €101 was added to every household electricity bill last October. Eirgrid, in its Transmission Development Plan, named data centres as key "policy drivers" for this grid upgrade spending.

As Daragh Cassidy of price comparison site Bonkers.ie told the *Indo* in March, it would be "ridiculous to think [data centres] don't impact on prices." Bonkers, even?

"ROADS ARE also important for environment, this doesn't get said often enough." That was Micheál Martin's hot take in Galway last week as he pledged support for the city's planned ring road. He said the health and environmental benefits of new roads are often overlooked. Indeed.

In 2023 the High Court quashed the road proposal due to non-compliance with the government's 2021 Climate Action Plan but supporters are determined to revive it.

A transport department report predicts the ring road would create heavy congestion at new junctions along the N6. It warns that congestion may be temporarily reduced but by 2040 the "overall level of congestion in the city will rise given the higher volume of vehicles on the road".



NOD IS AS GOOD AS A WINK

LAST MONTH Winston 'Winkie' Irvine, the top UVF boss in Belfast's Shankill district, was jailed for 30 months, half on licence. That sentence, for possession of a haul of guns and ammunition in his car boot, sparked outrage across the political divide in the north.

Former UUP leader Doug Beattie called it "bizarre". Other politicians have asked the director of public prosecutions to consider whether it was unduly lenient and appeal to the High Court for it to be increased.

Irvine's co-accused got five years. Why?

The judge said there were "exceptional circumstances" in Irvine's case, "namely his work for peace and his charity work in the community." In short, Winkie managed to con the court as successfully as he had conned the various people who provided the court with character references.

Irvine exemplified the ambivalent attitude of the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) and, indeed, Dublin's foreign affairs department towards loyalist paramilitary gangsters. For years everyone knew Irvine was the boss of the UVF's largest unit in the Shankill, B company, comprising several hundred men.

The BBC had even run a programme about it over 15 years ago, naming Irvine.

Yet Winkie was appointed to various influential bodies dealing with housing and community projects. He was regularly in contact with NIO ministers and had their mobile numbers. He was to the forefront in negotiating with senior police during riots, despite having 22 criminal convictions – including assaulting a police officer. Incredibly, he was even flown to Afghanistan to advise on dealing with the Taliban.

Since 2009 he had cultivated the image, in his own words to the court, of "a trusted interlocutor". He masqueraded as someone engaged in trying to get the UVF to decommission its weapons and "transition" to exclusively peaceful means. He was feted north and south. The Irish government funded him to do a master's course at Maynooth.

It was all a front and the police knew it.

His downfall came in March 2022 when B company organised a bomb hoax during a speech by Simon Coveney in Ardoyne. The PSNI and MI5 knew it could not have happened without the approval of Irvine. He was arrested but released without charge. He was kept under surveillance because the police knew about his clandestine real life and in July 2022 they caught him red-handed.

Of course Irvine could persuade the UVF to stop rioting and unblock roads. They were his men and he had ordered them to riot or block roads after stand-offs at Ardoyne about Orange marches. He pretended to

mediate between police and rioters, receiving concessions from the police in terms of deployment. He pretended to negotiate with the UVF in the Shankill to keep the peace in return for financial help from the NIO and Stormont, which he and his men managed to the detriment of the Shankill community.

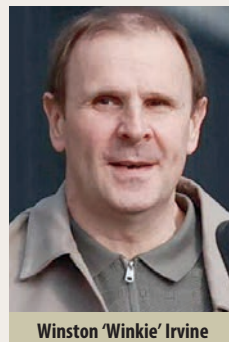
In all this subterfuge and double dealing, Irvine was the most successful but by

no means the only gangster in Belfast or other parts of the north. Curiously, neither Winkie nor any of the other "community workers" by day/gangsters by night ever managed to persuade the UVF or UDA to decommission their weapons or stop drug dealing or other illegal activities. Yet Irish government-sponsored organisations such as Cooperation Ireland continue to pump money into front groups for loyalist paramilitaries. Have they not noticed it has made no

difference whatsoever to their activities of the past 30 years?

In 2016 Stormont set up the Independent Monitoring Commission (IMC) to inquire into paramilitaries. Each year it produces a do-gooder report on the continuing illegalities. Nine years later there are more paramilitaries than in 2016 but, incredibly, this year the IMC proposed that the two governments consider "scoping" the prospect of appointing an "interlocutor" to discuss transitioning with paramilitaries.

Why should the paramilitaries do that? What's in it for them when they're doing so well as it is?



Winston 'Winkie' Irvine