



WILL MARY LOU BACK CONNOLLY?

SINN Féin strategists may claim they are engaging in mature reflection about their choice of presidential nominee but the reality is that the widespread consultation of members led to confusing results and then political paralysis.

In turn, this firstly allowed Catherine Connolly to take the lead role in discussions about a united left candidate. Secondly, it allowed the still disgraced Labour Party to push SF into third place in this forum when Ivana Bacik and Labour's leadership grasped the nettle and came out in support of Connolly – despite a much more antagonistic history of conflict between Labour and the Galway West TD.

SF will get little credit from the media or anyone else for deferring to its members but the decision at its recent ard comhairle to postpone a decision until its September meeting only prolongs this image of SF hesitation and procrastination. Is this the reason why Mary Lou McDonald told the media this week that SF would have to make a decision within the next “couple of weeks”?

This might not matter if it were not for the more important strategy – outside of the presidency – that all on the left claim to be agreed on; namely, a broad, united opposition to Government that can take on the FFG coalition electorally. If this is not possible in a presidential campaign, how will it work during a general election?



Mary Lou McDonald

More important at the ard comhairle meeting was the argument put by some that when the membership was asked about a united campaign for the presidency, the candidate's name on everyone's lips was that of senator Frances Black, who has since departed from the fray.

Black is regarded as ‘sound on the national question’ but while SF members are aware that Connolly has a benign attitude to a united Ireland, she is not exactly an unrepentant Fenian in the same mould as themselves. Thus, extra time is needed to test attitudes towards Connolly.

The September deadline was not intended in the first place to allow considered rumination by the membership but rather time and space for the leadership, or some of the leadership, to persuade members of the benefits of a united presidential campaign. This will not be easy as the memories of anti-republican abuse from what passes for most of the left in the Republic still rankles in SF.

Doubtless, SF seniors will point out to members that unless the party backs Connolly, the left vote will split and McGuinness will win the presidency for Fine Gael (a first-time triumph for the Blueshirts), for which SF will be held responsible. Here again, Mary Lou confronted that argument this week in what looked like a move away from a united front candidate.

Even if the Shinnars vote to back Connolly, some of them are worried that it will look as if they were forced to do so by the ‘split’ accusation above as opposed to making their own decision.

What is it about presidential elections and SF?

BERTIE AHERN TO LOSE OUT

THAT *SUNDAY INDEPENDENT* poll showing Bertie Ahern ahead even of Micheál Martin in a Fianna Fáil presidential candidate survey (by the somewhat embarrassing score of 24% to 19%) may have come as sweet music to Bertie's ears. But there is no sudden rush in political and media circles to declare that the former taoiseach is now the stand-out candidate for the party's nomination.

The penny may have finally dropped for Bertie and his plentiful admirers in FF that what has done for him is the fear among many members – and certainly those weighing up their own future electoral prospects – that

the Mahon Tribunal's findings against Ahern would be depicted in full technicolour glory across every media platform if he became the party candidate. The argument that it was a long time ago and that Bertie does not provoke the same opprobrium as Denis O'Brien has not persuaded those who matter and Bertie will not be running for FF in the presidential election.

That Martin resents Bertie in any case has hardly helped. But what has mattered more is the negative view among those anti-Martin elements who railed against his leadership after the 2020 general election and gathered around Jim O'Callaghan but who also believe that nominating Bertie for the park would be a blunder.

The growing view now is that the leadership will likely not choose a party or even a non-party candidate but will instead adopt a nominal, supine stance of support for the ‘Government’ candidacy of Fine Gael's Mairead McGuinness.

There may be a negative Blueshirt reaction to this phenomenon of FF bearing gifts – a reaction borne not out of ingratitude but the knowledge that, without an unchallenging FF candidate, there appears to be no source of the transfers needed to elect Mairead (see *The Phoenix* 25/7/25). In the context of the unspoken battle between the two civil war parties in decline, such a result would not dismay a great many FF members.

In this scenario the demeanour of FF members – especially those in close, intimate interaction with their FG colleagues in Government – will be interesting, amusing even, to behold during a tough election campaign. Already, some of these have been privately muttering that MEP Seán Kelly would have been a better candidate given the profile of the ex-GAA boss and his much chummier disposition than Mairead.

The unofficial advice being dispensed by shrewder FF members to their less cynical party colleagues is that, in the event of a first ever presidential victory for ‘our Government’ candidate, McGuinness, they should claim credit for the part FF played in FG and Mairead's triumph. Alternatively, should McGuinness lose out, it can be rationalised by way of noting that ‘we were not that involved’ in any case.

What this couldn't-care-less attitude might do for coalition unity, already frayed after less than a year in office, is hard to calculate.



Bertie Ahern



DON'T FUND THE GENOCIDE

WHILE THE Dáil argues about the Occupied Territories Bill, Palestinian supporters in Galway have decided to make the global local by organising a boycott of the Leonardo group of hotels, which is owned by Israeli businessman David Fattal.

The Galway Alliance against War says that

AFFAIRS OF THE NATION

Fattal is an active supporter of the infamous Netzah Yehuda battalion of the Israeli Defence Forces, which has been accused of a litany of abuses against Palestinians. Palestinian supporters in Galway are running a boycott of the Fattal Hotel Group, which has two hotels in the city, the five-star G and the Leonardo Hotel, a former Jury's hotel.

Pickets are regularly held outside both hotels, with all Palestine solidarity demos through the city concluding at the Leonardo at Spanish Point.

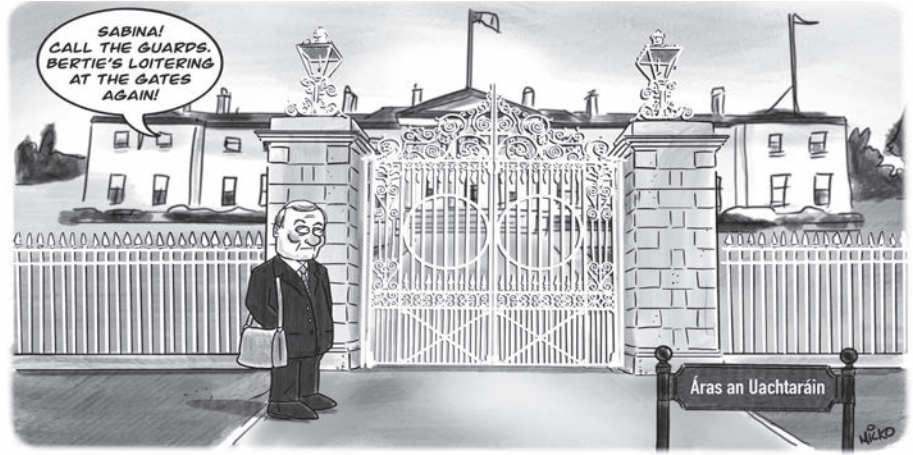
In Belfast there is also a weekly vigil every Saturday at the Leonardo. The hotel chain is also prominent throughout Dublin and Cork.

Even the deeply Zionist US government had contemplated imposing sanctions against the Netzah Yehuda unit but was persuaded not to following a 2024 Israeli campaign led by Benjamin Netanyahu. Even before the ongoing genocide in Gaza, the battalion was responsible for mass atrocities including torture, sexual assault and the killing of detainees as well as unarmed civilians.

The battalion is recruited from an ultra-orthodox sect, called Haredi, and was established in 1999. Since then it has been active in supporting the establishment of



Benjamin Netanyahu



illegal settler outposts in the Palestinian West Bank.

In 2015 a combat soldier from the battalion was jailed for nine months under aggravated circumstances, after he was convicted of having electrocuted Palestinian suspects on two separate occasions. This included arresting a Palestinian suspect near the West Bank city of Jenin, before blindfolding, handcuffing and beating him and attaching electrodes to his neck and electrocuting him. Four other soldiers involved in similar incidents were also indicted.

Fattal has hosted a series of "relaxing vacations" for members of the battalion and their families, with the CEO of the Leonardo Plaza hotel in Jerusalem, Ortal Noah Moalam, boasting in the *Jerusalem Post* that "the Fattal

chain is excited and proud to partner with the Netzah Yehuda association".

Local Palestinian supporters say that some of the profits of the Fattal chain go to fund the Israeli war effort and that Irish citizens should express their revulsion at what is happening in Gaza and the West Bank by refusing to fund the genocide. They are particularly targeting the Leonardo hotel in Belfast by asking people participating in this year's Oireachtas na Gaeilge in October to boycott the hotel.

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'COMRADES' MICHAEL D AND CATHERINE C

GIVEN THE alarming prospect of leader Ivana Bacik's support for Catherine Connolly's presidential campaign being rejected by her own party, Labour's members grudgingly, and definitely not unanimously, decided to accede to her wishes and row in behind the former party member, who once told them they had lost their soul. But it will be interesting to see just how active and energetic members in for example Tipperary North, the constituency of Alan Kelly – an implacable opponent of Connolly's candidacy – and other old-guard TDs and members will be in the presidential campaign.

A raft of criticisms of Connolly, laid out in almost press statement discipline, had been circulating in the media and elsewhere before the party made its decision. It listed her 'negative' political style, her split from Labour, her pals on the far left, her visit to Syria and other sins. Her remark about Labour losing its soul was especially provocative to the old guard.

Some of her critics made sure to publicise Connolly's falling out with Labour in 2006, describing it as the party's decision, along with that of then party leader Pat Rabbitte, to ensure that Michael D Higgins was the sole candidate – sans Catherine – in Galway West at the 2007 general election. This account leaves out much of the electoral and political arguments involved in that disagreement.

For a start, Connolly knew well she would not win a seat in 2007 but, with the party locally and even nationally obsessed with

ensuring Higgins's seat would pass to Labour after he retired, she wanted to stand alongside him and be in pole position to succeed him subsequently.

Connolly and her sister, Colette – collectively known mockingly by the 'comrades' as the Grim Sisters – had greatly



Ivana Bacik



Catherine Connolly

increased Labour's local vote and doubled its representation on Galway City Council from two seats to four at the 2004 local elections.

They were very much to the left of the party and had even begun to criticise Michael Tweek's very flexible tactical astuteness locally and nationally, a theme they vocalised more often and more loudly after exiting the party.

Although Connolly argued that her candidacy at the 2007 election would only help Higgins via her extra votes in transfers, the party said no.

That is how it has been reported recently

but the fact is that Higgins himself was even more hostile to her candidacy than Rabbitte or any party handler at HQ.

The ongoing tensions in Galway West during this period and in the following general election in 2011 – Connolly took 2,006 and 4,766 first-preference votes as an Independent in 2007 and 2011 respectively – only intensified the friction between her and Higgins. Ironically, running as a left Independent was much more of a threat to Higgins than if Connolly had been allowed to stand as his running mate.

Today, the relations between the two are sub-zero and, while Labour is formally backing her presidential campaign, it is perhaps fortunate that President Michael D is precluded from expressing a preference one way or another in the contest.

Media commentary about Connolly being a continuity candidate in the Higgins mould may be on the button politically but personally this is far from the typical reality of splits on the left. Many Labour activists are also fearful that unity with the Social Democrats, far left and Sinn Féin (if the latter decides to come on board) will be of benefit only to these parties – all of which are to the left of Labour.

However, Bacik at least knows that refusal to agree to a left unity candidate will depict her party as obstructive and party political sectarian, more concerned with potential careers in government with, say, Fine Gael, than building a left alternative to the current coalition.