

AFFAIRS OF THE NATION

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MEDIA SETS HEATHER BLAZING

THE PUNISHMENT meted out to presidential candidates and the relentless pursuit of any of their flaws and misdeemeanours has become a media trope, but it hardly applies to the lyrical media coverage of the born-again Mother Teresa of Irish politics, Heather Humphreys.

The *Irish Times* got into Clare Daly battle mode last Saturday with a lead, front-page story and lengthy page-two assault on left unity candidate Catherine Connolly's foreign policies.

The *Sindo* followed next day with an OTT effort that tried but failed to depict the articulate Galway woman as afraid to answer political questions.

There then followed the media veneration of Blue Blouse ex-minister Heather in the wake of moves by Simon Harris and Fine Gael to install her as Mairead McGuinness's replacement.

Next day saw the *IT's* Ellen Coyne report in excited tones that "Fine Gael is electrified at the prospect of having a border county Protestant running for the Áras". It also quoted "former editor of the *Church of Ireland Gazette*" (lest anyone forgot the religious angle) councillor Emma Blain's admiration for her "shared-island" outlook.

Heather was also congratulated for what Coyne described as her "prominent role in the 1916 commemorations".

The *Indo* reported Humphreys' explanation for not wanting to run for

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APOLOGY

THE LAST edition of *The Phoenix* (8/8/2025) carried a story alleging that Russian soldiers recently captured two British Army officers and an intelligence operative in Ukraine. It has since emerged that this story is a fabrication.

We apologise to our readers for failing to recognise that this story could not be stood up. It was partly based around a photo of two British officers, a photo that turned out to be an AI creation.

This is not good enough and we apologise again for publishing this story.

The editor.

WHILE PRESIDENT Michael D Higgins may be annoyed at the *Irish Times* for its hit job last month – when the paper highlighted the degree to which the number of engagements had decreased over his second term – he does have an unmissable outing lined up for next month, where he will also be hoping to shift a few CDs.

On September 5 the Against All Certainty hooley will take place in the wonderful surrounds of the National Concert Hall (NCH). It is to be "a celebration of Michael D Higgins – an extraordinary evening of poetry and music".

Of course, Against All Certainty is the name of the outgoing president's debut spoken-word album, the release of which is also being celebrated on the night by those who shell out between €35 and €85 for tickets. A good night looks to be on the cards, with Tommy Tiernan in situ as host and performances from the likes of the National Symphony Orchestra, Imelda May and Mary Coughlan.

Given that the album – recorded at Áras an Uachtaráin no less – will be on sale at the event, Goldhawk was unsure if this was a public or private engagement. When queried, the president's office stated that the event is being organised by the NCH in collaboration with Claddagh Records (Higgins's record label) and that his office "has had no direct role in the event".

While Michael D will not receive income from tickets sales for the September 5 event, the album will be on sale for €15 on the night and, apparently, "any royalties from the album will accrue in the normal way". Alas, "it is not anticipated this will amount to a significant sum".

Poor Michael Twee.



Heather Humphreys

DUALTA MOORE'S LESSON

WHILE DUALTA Moore's exciting on-line learning platform, GoConqr, looked set to become a superstar business, judging by the hype surrounding its launch a decade ago, things haven't quite worked out that way.

Back in 2015, a *Business Post* article on Moore's cloud-based educational platform was headlined "E-learning platform plans to Conqr the US". Moore was as excited about his company's potential as the tech journos, telling the *Post*: "Users love how they can take control of their learning, and also the ability to create resources to make learning a core active and responsive process."

And he was clear that international expansion was the order of the day. Judging by his LinkedIn page, things seemed to go pretty well, with GoConqr claiming "over 8 million members and 20 million user generated learning resources". This is all in the pursuit of "encouraging the development of a blended learning experience".

There was plenty of interest in Moore's project and he established a company called Examtime Ltd which, according to the GoConqr website, is the entity that trades as GoConqr.

Alas, it appears that developing a blended learning experience is an expensive business and the latest accounts for Examtime (signed off in May last year) show that accumulated losses at the end of 2023 stood at almost €7m. Moreover, creditors were owed €6.6m, almost all of which was due to a related firm, Software Asset Management International.

The chances of the latter recouping much of this debt look pretty slim, as a creditors' meeting has been called for Examtime this week, at which Padraic Bermingham is to be proposed as liquidator.

The only listed director of Examtime is Moore, who also holds the bulk of the shares.

It looks like he is about to learn an expensive lesson.

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"THEY SAY, IN THE FUTURE EVERYONE WILL HAVE THEIR 15 MINUTES OF FLAME!"

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the presidency last year as due to her support for McGuinness. And Heather said her decision not to run again for the Dáil last November was because she was “burnt out” at the time. After enjoying “a good rest”, however, she now “never felt as good about taking on a challenge”.

Happily for Heather, neither the *Indo* nor the *IT* (the latter quoted her stated desire to spend more time with her grandchildren) had the bad taste to put to Humphreys precisely what she said back then. On October 19 the ex-minister told RTÉ: “I’ll be 65 next year and if I ran again I’d be nearly 70 by the end of the next Dáil term and I’m just not physically able to keep going for that long.”

“I was first elected to the Dáil on the 27th of February 2011 and, from that day to this, I’ve given this job my absolute all – and of course, that’s the only way you can do this job.”

At that time she also ruled herself out of next year’s presidential race, saying it was “not on the cards for me”.

She said she was not considering it for the same reason she decided not to run in the general election. “Unless I can give it 100%, I won’t do it.”

She added: “Politicians are human too, we give all we can for as long as we can but time catches up on us all”.

This Father John Misty-type explanation for resiling from a presidential run last autumn makes no mention of Humphreys’ respect for McGuinness’s presidential ambition. It does, however, place a big question mark over Heather’s “physical ability” to last the political or presidential pace for a five-year Dáil term or a seven-year presidential term.

Another bouquet that has been presented to Heather by a breathless media is that she played a prominent role in the commemorations around 1916.

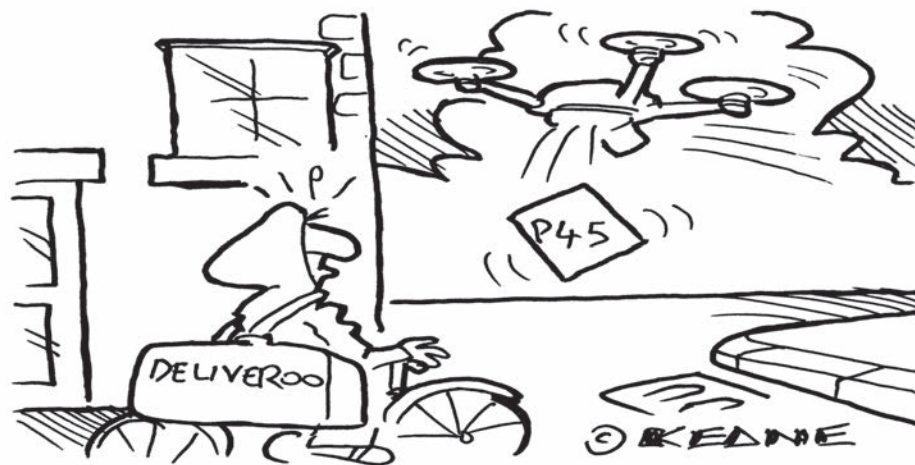
In 2018, Goldhawk wrote how John Concannon, head of the strategic communications unit, performed well in these events (see *The Phoenix* 23/3/18), saying he received much credit “partly due to... the selection of arts minister Heather Humphreys as the minister nominally in charge.”

“Humphreys revealed an astonishing lack of awareness or interest in 1916 or other events of that period when serving on the Oireachtas committee in charge of the Decade of Centenaries. In the two years and more that she sat on the committee she had little or nothing to say about anything that it considered... Nevertheless, her status as a Protestant and a woman enabled her appointment as the minister in charge of centenary events, a PR wheeze that impressed some people.”

“Humphreys was allowed to take the political credit for events while Concannon was commissioned to do the actual work.”

DISCONTENT IN Fianna Fáil’s parliamentary party about Micheál Martin’s failure to put forward a presidential candidate has seen an alarmingly high majority of TDs, senators and MEPs – including junior minister Niamh Smyth – polling in favour of running a candidate.

This was impudent enough in a party that has until recently been unable to muster a



whimper between them as its leader pays as much attention to members as Donald Trump does to his EU allies. But even more concerning to Martin will have been that several of those polled railed against the party leadership for ignoring his TDs and others, listening only to unelected handlers around him.

It is a long time since anybody dared to cheek the leader’s dictatorial manner but this resentment appears to have grown recently, with an influx of new, young TDs part of the problem.

Now MEP Billy Kelleher has demanded a meeting of the parliamentary party to discuss the presidency. The tetchy Martin is said to be incensed at the temerity of the pygmies he must occasionally deal with when he is not busy defeating Russia in Eastern Europe.

PETER MANDELSON’S GOLDEN TOUCH

CANADIAN COMPANY Dalradian, which is behind a proposed gold mine near Omagh, Co Tyrone, has upped the ante on its planning application that was delayed by an abortive “public local inquiry” organised by the north’s Planning Appeals Commission.

The inquiry, merely a routine consultation procedure for all planning proposals of “regional significance”, collapsed ignominiously on its third day in January when it transpired that the Sinn Féin-

led Department for Infrastructure had not consulted public bodies across the border on the impact of the proposal. Dalradian’s New York-based parent organisation, Orion Resource Partners, was scathing in its criticism of both bodies for the delays, which are throwing the financial viability of the project into doubt.

Keen to protect a \$400m investment since 2009 without a fleck of gold having been produced, the mining company has enlisted

the help of a British government minister, the US consul general in Belfast, and Peter Mandelson, British ambassador to the US since February, to move the project along.

Mandelson, one of the four horsemen of Tony Blair’s New Labour, served in the British cabinet as secretary of state for the north and later as the EU’s trade commissioner.

The ‘Prince of Darkness’ intervened at Dalradian’s behest – after he hosted a convivial St Patrick’s Day breakfast with the company – by writing to the head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service to encourage a solution to bureaucratic delays, which the company argued were threatening the north’s image as a destination for foreign direct investment.

That Britain’s most senior diplomat should interfere in a planning application in Co Tyrone has to be seen in the context of the current Labour government’s objective of securing preferable trade deals with an increasingly protectionist US and in President Donald Trump’s rebuffed effort to secure mineral resources in a post-conflict Ukraine.

Diplomatic intrigue, however, seems unlikely to dislodge such maladministration. Liz Kimmins’s infrastructure department botched a planning process that has seen an unprecedented 50,000 objections, while party colleague Caoimhe Archibald’s economy department failed to advertise in the *Belfast Gazette* recently awarded prospecting licences for gold and silver.

Archibald, having opposed the same licences as a constituency MLA in 2022, now faces questions as to why she has issued them so urgently and cack-handedly.

In addition, the brutal economics of mining loom large, particularly when an undisclosed portion of the gold that would be mined in Curraghinalt has already been sold to a US mining speculator, Wheaton’s, for \$75 million.

It looks increasingly like the gold will be staying in the Sperrins.



Peter Mandelson

PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE’S FEUD SHOCK!

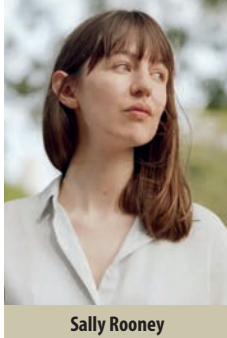


AFFAIRS OF THE NATION

SALLY ROONEY'S
IRISH TARGET

WHILE ARTISTS here and elsewhere have sensed the changing temperature around the Gaza genocide and started to speak up – even Bono and Bob Geldof felt it was okay to jump on the bandwagon – it will not surprise many that it is Sally Rooney who has really upped the ante.

Her provocative article last weekend in the *Irish Times* made it crystal clear where she stands but it will also have made uncomfortable reading for the Micheál Martin *et al.*



Sally Rooney

Rooney's *IT* article was headlined "I Support Palestine Action", which refers to a group that is proscribed as a terrorist organisation across the Irish Sea and which the Irish author has now committed to supporting with "the proceeds of my work", including income from BBC adaptations.

The reaction from the British state has been swift, with Downing Street announcing that anyone who funds the banned Palestine Action risks committing a terrorist offence.

Intriguingly, the scribbler noted: "My books, at least for now, are still published in Britain and are widely available in bookshops and even supermarkets."

This comment ("at least for now") may refer to the possibility that Rooney's next oeuvre might not be allowed to be printed in the UK but maybe Sally is toying with the idea of boycotting UK publishers herself. She has form in this arena, given action taken when her last novel was published.

Back in 2021, when *Beautiful World, Where Are You* came out, Rooney refused to sell the Hebrew translation rights to an Israeli publisher (Mordan) on foot of her "solidarity" with the Palestinian people and a desire to support the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement.

While the attention around Sally's recent interventions have focused on Israel and now the UK, it is Ireland that features rather significantly, as it did again last weekend. The writer put the boot into the Government

SOLUTIONS TO IRISH EDUCATIONAL SHORTGAGES #1



What about making transition year students do all their work experience as teachers

here for remaining silent on Irish citizens being arrested in London for supporting Palestine Action, in contrast to the situation where Irish people are arrested "under authoritarian regimes elsewhere".

She also asked how the state can criticise the ongoing genocide but keeps schtum when "its nearest neighbour funds and supports that genocide".

Last year, when lips were generally buttoned in large sectors of the artistic community, Rooney launched a blistering attack (again in the pages of the *IT*) targeting Joe Biden's policy but also highlighting the Irish Government's two-faced approach of condemning Israel while playing footsie with the US. "This way, our Government can bask in the moral glow of condemning the bombers, while preserving a cosy relationship with those supplying the bombs."

Plus ça change...

JOHN BYRNE'S
COCKROACHES

THE LATEST list of food hygiene infringers produced by the Irish Food Safety Authority (IFSA) got a fair degree of attention last week due to the naming of one of Lidl's Dublin stores (Sallynoggin) as a business where rodent droppings had been found "in multiple areas". Of more interest to Goldhawk was the cockroach problem that landed the Brandon Hotel in Tralee on the naughty list.

The well-regarded property has been operating for decades and today it is Ballsbridge-based moneybags John Byrne who is the most high-profile name associated with the owners of the Kerry operation. He is in the saddle at the property empire built up by his father, John Byrne Sr (who happened to be rather well known to Squire Hockey).

Last year, John Jr continued his ascent up the ladder when assuming the role of chairman of the Irish Horseracing Regulatory Board (formerly the Turf Club). His old man had also been a big personality in the sport of kings and John Jr has become a well-known breeder, having been closely associated with Ballymadun Stables. He also served on the Curragh committee and was chairman of the project board for the multimillion-euro development of the track.

The minted Byrne has also galloped ahead with the family property group, Santenay Ltd, which is the parent company of a number of entities, including Prince's Investments Ltd (PIL). This latter happens to be the firm that owns the Brandon Hotel and it is listed as the entity on which the IFSA closure order was served last month.

According to the report from the authorised officer, there was "evidence of a significant cockroach infestation at all stages of the life cycle throughout the food premises".

Dead cockroaches were found in the kitchen area, the wash-up areas and the staff canteen, as well as in the restaurant, where live specimens were also observed.

As a result, the Brandon had to close all kitchen areas and the restaurant on July 23, with the order duly lifted on July 25.

PIL is owned by Santenay, which is, in turn, owned by an entity called Claraduff Society Ltd, where John Byrne and his 80-year-old mum, Ciara, hold the positions of secretary and chair respectively.

So just how loaded are the owners of the Brandon Hotel? The 2023 accounts for Santenay reveal a profit for the year of a more than respectable €7.4m, after John and Ciara shared a combined remuneration of just on €800,000. (The profit compares with a hefty €34.5m loss in 2022 following a revaluation of the group's investment properties.)

The rather good news is that, as a result of the surplus recorded in 2023, Santenay ended the year with accumulated profits of no less than €122m. Nice.

"Hotel operations" accounted for €5m of the group's turnover, which relates to the Brandon Hotel. This was up almost €½m on 2022 and no doubt the Byrnes are keeping their fingers crossed that the recent food safety hiccup doesn't impede the Tralee business's momentum.



John Byrne



"It must've happened when I was reading that report about how disinterested we are."

MAKING LAOIS
 GREAT AGAIN

ENORMOUS HYPE surrounded the recent Make Europe Great Again (Mega) conference in Warsaw. It was claimed that attendees came from over 40 countries and three continents, while reports in conservative media asserted that the Mega gathering demonstrated the strength and cohesion of populist right-wing politics in central and eastern Europe. The fact that Irishwoman Elaine Mullally spoke at this, the fifth in a series of Mega conferences, is noteworthy.

Mullally is a native of Portarlington, Laois, where she owns the Clown Around Play Centre. Despite growing a substantial following on X and Facebook in recent years, it wasn't until she resigned in July 2024 as chairperson of Independent Ireland (II) that her significance in Ireland's new right could be gauged.

When it was announced that then newly elected II MEP Ciaran Mullooly had been accepted into the European Parliament's liberal Renew group, Mullally immediately quit II. She posted on X: "I have made the difficult decision to step away from Independent Ireland, as it no longer aligns with my values and principles."

Following Mullally's resignation, on Gript Media podcast *The Week That Really Was*, Sarah Ryan gushed: "A nicer, more competent, more like a high integrity lady you couldn't meet... I'm just such a fan."

Frustrated by the direction II had taken, Mullally decided to run as an Independent in the general election in the three-seater constituency in Laois. In a well-financed



Elaine Mullally

campaign, Mullally's first-preference vote of 2,438 was well shy of the 9,570 quota but a respectable showing nevertheless.

In her Mega speech, Mullally claimed that Ireland was under attack by a tyrannical Government and also stated: "Our own political leaders are seeking to erode democracy, our free speech, our national identity, our culture and our heritage."

She posted pictures from Warsaw of herself with American alt-right figure Jack Posobiec, with the text: "Patriots all over the world are uniting".

Posobiec has been central to spreading the QAnon-linked "Pizzagate" conspiracy theory online, which claims that "Hillary Clinton was running a child sex-trafficking ring out of the basement of Comet Ping Pong, a pizza restaurant in Washington, D.C." Not only did Posobiec make claims online like "#PizzaGate may be bigger than we suspected", he also travelled to the restaurant and only left after police arrived.

Mullally also posed for pictures at Mega with former Brexit Party candidate Jim Ferguson. He controversially chaired a recent meeting of prominent Irish right-wing figures including Independent councillor Malachy Steenson, former leader of Ireland First Derek Blighe and Irish Freedom Party member Michael Leahy, who were seeking to establish a new unified political party.

MI5'S STELLA
 RIMINGTON

MI5 DIRECTOR-GENERAL (1992-96) Dame Stella Rimington, who passed away this month, worked in all three branches of MI5 – counter-espionage, counter-subversion and counter-terrorism – and possessed an intimate knowledge of its most ghastly secrets.

As an intelligence collator in 1969, she was one of the first within MI5 to address the turmoil in the north. In retirement, she achieved success in the UK with her spy novels, which featured spirited MI5 heroine Liz Carlyle battling stereotypical Russian

villains. In 2011, she served as chair of the judges for the Man Booker Prize.

Yet neither her novels nor her sanitised 2001 memoir, *Open Secret*, alluded to MI5's darker truths of which she was familiar.

Her insistence that no one in MI5 ever actively sought to undermine PM Harold Wilson was directly contradicted by cabinet secretary (1973-1979) Lord John Hunt, who



Stella Rimington

acknowledged that rogue elements in MI5 disseminated damaging stories about Wilson's government.

Rimington's career was pock marked by the surveillance of MPs, trade unionists, civil rights groups and journalists.

It is inconceivable that she was unaware of MI5's collusion with loyalist paramilitaries in the north, including the notorious Glennane Gang, responsible for the 1974 bombings in Dublin and Monaghan. The ongoing Operation Denton, tasked with probing this scandal, is emulating Rimington's proclivity for fiction by focusing on a few rogue gang members within the RUC or UDR, while turning a blind eye to those in British intelligence who controlled them.

Consider too the MI5-RUC 'shoot-to-kill' policy investigated by John Stalker, deputy chief constable of Manchester in the mid-1980s. He uncovered MI5's involvement in the murder of individuals such as Michael Tighe and was removed from his probe in 1986 by dirty tricks. These machinations were described in forensic detail last year in Patrick Hillyard's book, *Decades of Deceit: the Stalker Affair and its Legacy*.

It would stretch credulity beyond breaking point to suggest that Rimington rose to become DG without a full briefing on the dirty tricks involved in the framing of Colin Wallace for manslaughter and the smearing of Fred Holroyd as unstable. Both of these men challenged MI5's involvement in illegal activities in the north and campaigned vigorously in the 1980s and 1990s for truth and justice.

Last June the British government appointed Sir Gary Hickinbottom as chair of the Patrick Finucane Inquiry into the 1989 assassination of the Belfast solicitor by acknowledged British agents. The British establishment's tactic of incessant delay has again yielded results: two crucial witnesses – Rimington and her MI5 predecessor, Patrick Walker – are now deceased.

Rimington became one of two deputy DGs of MI5 in 1990. That was the year of the arson attack on Sir John Stephens's office during his investigation into MI5's use of the UDA as proxy assassins.

As DG of MI5 she maintained the atrocious cover-up of the Kincora Boys' Home scandal, piling misery and frustration on the traumatised survivors of child abuse.

Rimington had an opportunity to pen a ground-breaking spy novel, one that explored the complex moral ambiguities inherent in the intelligence world. Instead, she delivered Liz Carlyle and her jolly hockey stick escapades.



The first batch of presidential posters are back from the printers.



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