



John Lahart

HARDLY THE most publicly contentious or outspoken of backbench TDs, Fianna Fáil's John Lahart was chosen to chair the Oireachtas Committee on Foreign Affairs, which involved him overseeing its recently published report on the Occupied Territories Bill (OTB). He must have been highly thought of by party leader Micheál Martin, who has been seen by Palestinian activists as safely tucked into the pocket of the stridently pro-Israeli EU Commission president, Ursula von der Leyen. But Lahart, while now seen as a loyal, even compliant servant of the party leader and Taoiseach, was not always at one with Martin and he has made some rather untimely political choices about the party leadership in recent years. Lahart would, naturally, be keen to produce a report on the OTB that would upset as few people as possible on this highly challenging issue. Has he succeeded?

The rise of psychotherapist Lahart from backroom adviser for former junior minister Tom Kitt in the 1990s and noughties to South Dublin county councillor for 17 years to 2016, eventually saw him win a Dáil seat in Dublin South-West in 2016. It was shortly after this that his political troubles began.

With FF trying hard to recover from the electoral catastrophe of 2011, Dublin became even more important than usual at the 2016 general election with its high number of seats and with the party possessing not one in the capital city.

Lahart was one of the six newly elected FF TDs as a recovery of sorts began that year and Martin put him on the front bench as spokesperson for Dublin. But despite this grandiose title Lahart failed, like many other party TDs, to make much of an impact as FF adopted the then controversial confidence and supply (C&S) agreement, with Fine Gael in benign opposition to the government.

Come the 2020 general election and Jim O'Callaghan, formerly Martin's right hand man – already excluded from Martin's leadership circles by 2018 because he disagreed with continuation of the C&S policy – had emerged as the unofficial opposition within FF to Martin's

leadership. With Martin under serious pressure after a poor general election, O'Callaghan and others denounced his refusal to hold talks with Sinn Féin, if only because it removed any vestige of a coalition fall-back position in talks with FG.

Surprising many, Lahart was very vocal in expressing the same argument against Martin at a stormy parliamentary party meeting during this period.

From then until 2023 Lahart was part of a group around O'Callaghan that wanted to unseat Martin. By then, however, the 'payroll' vote (ministers, junior ministers and chairs of Oireachtas committees) composed a sizeable chunk of a depleted parliamentary party as against a group of similar size around O'Callaghan and a group of frightened backbenchers holding the balance of power. These latter TDs blamed O'Callaghan for not going bald

headed for the leadership, while the rebels responded that only the paralysed backbench TDs were keeping Martin in power.

Meanwhile, Lahart crept silently away from the bad company around O'Callaghan and became a loyal member of Martin's team. Lahart may have thought he was going to be rewarded for defecting a second time – this time in a return to Martin's camp – in the new, enlarged parliamentary party following the 2024 election and others also believed the Dublin

spokesperson would become a junior minister. But Lahart had clearly not learned the rules of engagement in the most successful political party (until recently) in the history of the state – that loyalty to the leader is a cardinal principle.

Martin gave Lahart a bronze medal in the form of the foreign affairs committee chair in an indication that the former now had the measure of his rebel TD.

Lahart had made the classic, political mistake of alienating both sides in the ongoing leadership contest between Martin and O'Callaghan. Even worse, with the two big beasts striking a Blair-Brown accord just before last year's general election (O'Callaghan will be hoping this 'deal' does not adhere precisely to the original script), Lahart does not now enjoy the patronage of either the present or likely future leader of the party. This is not an enviable position for an ambitious 65-year-old politician.

ISRAEL FRIENDSHIP GROUP

It may be that Lahart's 'gift' as chair of the foreign affairs committee reflects the new balance of power in the FF parliamentary party which, incidentally, now has 10 extra TDs, but Lahart would have recommended himself to Martin on another level.

The Dublin South-West TD joined the Ireland-Israel Parliamentary Friendship Group in the last Dáil – the only FF TD, along with five party senators, to do so.

Lahart told *The Phoenix* that he had resigned from the Israeli friendship group last year, saying in his resignation statement: "My reason for doing so is that the term 'Friendship Group' is misleading, and I am conscious that my membership of this group has been taken – by some – to suggest support for the Netanyahu government and the appalling atrocities it has conducted daily in Gaza and the West Bank. Nothing could be further from the truth."

"I utterly and unequivocally condemn the continuing and relentless onslaught on Palestinian civilians at the hands of the Israeli Defence Forces. I have also been steadfast in my condemnation of the senseless slaughter and provocation of innocent Israelis and the taking of hostages on the 7th of October. This is clear from my own contribution in the Dáil on the matter."

Lahart is a trained teacher and would surely agree that, when it comes to the political bent of the Ireland-Israel Parliamentary Friendship Group, the clue is in the name. Goldhawk thought it would be interesting to establish precisely at what point in Israel's escalating slaughter and genocide of Palestinians Lahart



AFFAIRS OF THE NATION

left the 'Israel friendship' group but he declined to say when asked.

The other piece in this political jigsaw is that, in the latest and bloodiest round of Israel's decades-long war against the Palestinians, Martin has been regarded as less sympathetic to the latter than FG leaders Leo Varadkar and Simon Harris. At the same time, the diligent Lahart, whatever his political views, is a good choice to handle the divisive players in this political war game being played out in front of an outraged Irish electorate.

By most accounts, Lahart was an accomplished chair of a most difficult project and while there were several arguments on the margins of the committee's work, these were not about fundamentals, focusing instead on issues such as the number and outlook of witnesses/speakers addressing the committee. Certainly, when it came to representative groups the line-up of two speakers from the Jewish Representative Council of Ireland, two from the Ireland Israel alliance, one from business group IBEC and two each from the Ireland Palestine Solidarity Campaign and Sadaka – Ireland Palestine Alliance is unrepresentative of public opinion.

OTB REPORT

However, the tone of the dialogue and the precise recommendations of the committee's report reflects Irish political opinion to a large extent. More to the point, it ensures that the report does not emerge bereft of any meaning as it insists that prohibition of imports from the occupied territories should include services. Even the foreign affairs department's legal adviser felt compelled to warn the committee that compliance with the 2024 International Court of Justice opinion would be only "partial" if services were excluded.

The report recommends that the bill proceed and that it include the banning of services; and to give businesses clarity, the legislation should be modelled on measures introduced against Russia in 2014.

So far, so good. But a number of other apparently innocuous recommendations and statements are contained in the report that could, if the Government so decided, be used to obstruct the passage of the bill or render it ineffective. In his introduction to the report, Lahart, as chairman, noted the recommendation "that the Government undertake efforts to establish and publish a range of scenarios on the potential repercussions of the measure in terms of both international relations and economic effects and to comprehensively engage with business".

This stipulation can be read in two different ways. First, as a means of combatting some of the more lurid descriptions from Israel, the US and other

supporters of Ireland's alleged antisemitic intent to damage the Israeli economy, not to mention the Irish economy.

The other interpretation is that outlining the 'repercussions' and 'economic effects' is simply to underline the real argument against the bill. That argument is not a moral argument and is presented as simply an unfortunate fact of economic, global life – namely, that the US has the clout to punish

the Irish economy if we step out of line. It is also the most powerful argument as Messrs Martin and, to a lesser extent, foreign minister and Tánaiste Simon Harris are well aware.

AG ADVICE

The other recommendation is that the advice of the Attorney General be expedited so that the OTB can be advanced as a matter of urgency. This demand for swiftly delivered advice from AG Rossa Fanning is repeated several times and, early on in his introduction to the report, Lahart bemoans the fact that "the Committee had to proceed without the advice of the Attorney General with regard to the inclusion of services in the Bill proper".

Hopefully, this anxiety in the report as a whole about the urgent need for the AG's advice does not indicate a hope that Fanning will, like his predecessor, Séamus Woulfe, rule that the OTB would conflict with EU law.

There was a lengthy section in the report on the committee's debate about this potential conflict, with considered opinion from international lawyers

effectively demolishing this view. Will Fanning be expected to perform as the Government's Sixth Cavalry here if and when General Martin makes his last stand against the bill?

An interesting remark in Lahart's introduction went as follows: "As Chair, I am also conscious of the different roles and responsibilities of parliamentary committees and government. Government has access to more information and carries heavier burdens in areas of governance, than a parliamentary committee."

Indeed, government has much greater access to information and resources than a Dáil committee. How strange then that a small Oireachtas committee, with no legal employees or advice of its own, should be able to press ahead with its own legal analysis and recommend that the bill, including measures on services, be progressed – and all this in a matter of weeks. Meanwhile the AG's well-staffed office is still grappling with this issue nearly a year after Government asked the AG to consider – again – whether the OTB was compliant with EU law.

It is now over five years since vague arguments about EU law disbarring the bill were used to delay its passage.



Micheál Martin



Ursula von der Leyen



LOOKING FOR A FIGHT

ATHY DISTRICT Court heard the case of a man charged with public intoxication and engaging in threatening and abusive behaviour following an incident at his address on December 30. Garda Matthew McGrath said officers were called to a disturbance at the Crescent, Ballylinan, Laois. When they arrived they found 25-year-old William Donoghue in a heavily intoxicated state. According to McGrath, the defendant fled the scene before promptly returning and becoming extremely aggressive. McGrath told the court that Donoghue "wanted to have a fight with me and my colleague", telling them: "I could take the pair of ye." Judge Desmond Zaidan imposed a four-month sentence for public intoxication, saying: "I've been good to him." This was amended to three months after Donoghue's solicitor reminded Judge Zaidan that the maximum sentence for public intoxication was 90 days. *Laois Nationalist*

COMMISERATIONS

A TIKTOKER with 22,000 followers appeared before Portlaoise District Court, on foot of a bench warrant, charged with public intoxication and engaging in threatening and abusive behaviour. In the early hours of December 27, gardaí responded to a disturbance outside the defendant's address at Lansdowne Court, Portarlinton. The officers encountered Laura Dunne in an agitated state. According to Sgt JJ Kirby, Dunne was "kicking and screaming" calling gardaí "bastards". She declared: "You can't arrest me." Defence solicitor Philip Meagher said that, on the date in question, friends of his client had arrived at her house with alcohol to commiserate following the death of a family pet. Sgt Kirby added that once Dunne sobered up following the incident, she was "okay". Dunne pleaded guilty to the charges and received two-month sentences for each, suspended for two years. *Carlow Nationalist*

'SHOWER OF LATCHICOS'

A WOMAN in her 70s accused of making a false report to gardaí and engaging in threatening, abusive or insulting behaviour has had the charges dismissed at a sitting of Belmullet District Court. Alice Keane, of Shramonragh, Ballycroy, called gardaí on June 17, 2024, to complain that a farmer's cattle had damaged turf on her bog. Keane alleged that the officers who came to her home failed to take her seriously and called her "thick and stupid", a claim denied by Garda Ian Kelly. Garda Kelly, meanwhile, alleged that Keane was abusive to him and his colleague, saying: "Fuck off you shower of latchicos. Kiss my arse." He also alleges she told them: "Ye will get what's coming to you." The officers said they failed to spot any damage to the bog, while Keane maintained they looked in the wrong place. Judge Alan Mitchell said the incident was a "clear case of communication breakdown" and dismissed the case. *Western People, submitted by reader*

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