



Fionnán Sheahan

DURING HIS disastrous handling of Fianna Fáil's presidential campaign and candidate, party leader Micheál Martin appeared to be on the run, not just from FF leadership critic and MEP Billy Kelleher but from Ireland editor of the *Irish Independent*, Fionnán Sheahan. The latter was like a dog after a bone as he gnawed away at the dissembling, evasive party handlers. Their first line of defence was to simply deny that there was any issue or problem with candidate Jim Gavin but they ended up blaming Gavin for the cover-up in order to protect the Taoiseach – much of it under Sheahan's relentless interrogation. The Ireland editor endured his own inquisition when Mediahuis bought Independent News & Media (INM) from Denis O'Brien in 2019 but he emerged a better journalist for it, as more than a few government ministers have discovered.

Sheahan first drew Goldhawk's attention nearly 20 years ago, when the then *Indo* political editor turned his angry, combative editorial style on opponents of the Lisbon Treaty. In a front-page splash at the time, he claimed that an EU Commission poll in 2008 showed 'no' voters believed the treaty could be renegotiated and that large-scale immigration was also responsible for the defeat of the treaty. Days later Sheahan wrote that "reactionary pond life" and the "downright racist" in Europe were now on the same side as Mary Lou McDonald, Patricia McKenna and the left.

A subsequent detailed breakdown of the EU poll showed that bottom of the list of 14 reasons advanced in the poll for the 'no' vote was "to avoid an influx of immigrants" (1% of those polled gave this reason).

Sheahan was then an orthodox political journalist in the *Indo* mould – he was right-of-centre, strong on law and order, and virulently opposed to Sinn Féin. Much of this may have been inspired by his political activism as a Young Fine Gael member at University College Cork but it was the order of the day at INM in any case.

As the 2014 EU and local elections loomed and SF's growth became clearer, Sheahan and his political team at the *Indo* became almost as trenchant in their criticism of SF as the Anne Harris/Eoghan Harris regime at the *Sunday Independent*.

In one round up of the Dublin media's prejudices, *The Phoenix* (see edition 13/12/13) recounted how "Sheahan, anxious

to show the *Sindo* warriors that he is just as tough, told readers that this generation saw the recent Troubles as distant as the 1921 Troubles, before going on to fight both sets of Troubles all over again, and in highly revisionist style".

In 2014, when suspicions arose that the office of Garda ombudsman Simon O'Brien was bugged, the security establishment closed ranks and journalists such as group editor Stephen Rae (a former editor of *Garda Review*), cops 'n' robbers hack Paul Williams and others poured scorn on O'Brien.

Sheahan wrote that "the Garda Ombudsman is damaged goods, both publicly and politically" and he "seems now to be afraid of his own shadow". He also claimed that the trouble between gardaí and the inquisitive Garda ombudsman was down to multiple leaks from the latter, even though every journalist in the country knew then – and knows now – that leaks from gardaí are part of media life and that the same sources were responsible for the neutering of the ombudsman.

The then group political editor also proved himself as a stalwart 'anti-subversive' fighter in an article penned jointly with two others, which smeared anti-water-

charge protesters, saying: "In a sinister twist, dissident republicans have infiltrated groups protesting against water charges. They are being blamed for a barrage of attacks on gardaí trying to safeguard staff installing the meters... known activists associated with members of the Real IRA faction, formerly led by Alan Ryan, have hijacked a series of protests on the northside of Dublin."

In another piece about water-charge protesters Sheahan and Williams wrote that "criminals and republican sympathisers appear intent on increasing their campaign of intimidation and threats", a report based on the usual "senior security" and "intelligence" sources. That week's *Indo* coverage, or campaign, concluded with an editorial warning of a "pseudo-Soviet political agenda" behind the water charge protest (see *The Phoenix* 5/12/14).

BATTLE GROUNDS

From 2012 on, INM was dominated by a power struggle between the new, O'Brien-loyal editors – O'Brien took over INM that year – engaging in intense office politics with the faithful Tony O'Reilly retainers, represented by *Sindo* editor Anne Harris. Stories leaked from INM offices of loud confrontations between O'Brien's editorial officers – Rae and other specialist group editors – versus the redoubtable Harris. Sheahan, while not one of Rae's long-standing officers, was also onside with the new regime.

At this point the daily *Indo* was regarded as pro-FG, with the *Sindo* claiming party political neutrality.

Other battle grounds in which Sheahan became a leading warrior included TV3, where he launched a ferocious verbal onslaught – on air – against Vincent Browne for his alleged bias against INM titles. This resulted in a mini war between TV3 and the *Indo*, with Sheahan declaring that Browne was a classic bully who could dish it out but could not take it.

The newspaper was equally unoriginal when proclaiming its courageous struggle against Browne's effort to "gag our political editor, Fionnán Sheahan".

All of this suited Sheahan down to the ground as the post of *Indo* editor lay vacant at the time, although Sheahan had to wait another two years before taking that title.

However, the next regime change at INM saw an overhaul, culturally and politically, especially for Sheahan.

Just days before Belgian media multinational Mediahuis took control of the group in May 2019, *Sindo* editor Cormac Bourke was also made editor of the *Indo*. At the same time Sheahan, then *Indo* editor, was promoted to the regal title of group editor-in-chief in what looked like *faits accomplis* by the two



AFFAIRS OF THE NATION

ambitious journalists and their supporters on the outgoing board.

The Belgians seized on this rather unobtrusive editorial coup by taking the *Sindo* off Bourke and downgrading Sheahan's title to that of Ireland editor, with a remit to do a lot more writing and little, if any, editing. Another reason for the demoting of Sheahan was that they regarded the brash, no-nonsense style of INM management – epitomised by Sheahan – as counterproductive.

This actually had the desired, if accidental, effect of providing the *Indo* with probably the finest political coverage in the media, with Sheahan returning to what he does best – focusing entirely on writing political stories and analysis, alongside perceptive political writer John Downing and others, whatever about the political prejudices of some of the hacks.

Another change in Sheahan's world was the defenestration of Ireland's EU commissioner, Big Phil Hogan, in the fallout of the August 2020 Golfgate controversy. While other journalists always believed that Sheahan's previous Young FG membership made him pro-Fine Gael, it was his relationship with Hogan – a legitimate, professional one for a journalist – that was more important to him than supposed personal links with the party.

Two months after Hogan's demise – something facilitated by then tánaiste Leo Varadkar's failure to defend him in Brussels – Sheahan criticised Vlad's treatment of Nphet chair Tony Holohan, describing the tánaiste as "cheap... nasty... populist... patronising... highly unprofessional" and someone who "didn't have the balls to properly reshuffle his cabinet". Weeks later he said that if Varadkar was initially a "breath of fresh air for politics, now there's a stench hanging off him".

If Sheahan's political discourse since then has been more focused, impartial and forensic than is normal for the chief political journalist at *Independent* titles, it is definitely less restrained in its tone and language when he targets leading politicians. In August 2020 new health minister Stephen Donnelly was shocked to read Sheahan quoting an anonymous civil servant describe him as "the biggest bullshitter in the Dáil".

Bringing his belligerent polemics more up to date, Sheahan has reserved most of his editorial and political spleen for FG, with a stream of invective against Simon Harris, whom he clearly regards as a political pygmy compared to members of the party's old guard such as, well, Big Phil.

Last month he derided FG's "ideological emptiness" and "lack of intellect" under Harris. Enterprise minister Peter Burke, regarded by some as a prospective party leader, was dismissed – in typically sarcastic Sheahan style – as an enterprise minister who positioned himself against free trade in the Mercosur row and someone that had delusions about becoming public expenditure minister in the changeover of Government in 2027.

While FF ministers have also been given the Kilmicheal treatment by Sheahan, it appears that he reserves a special place in his target range for many FG ministers, a species for whom he now reserves contempt.

More recently, however, he has devoted himself to project Micheál Martin, whom he seems to regard as the one that got away just before Christmas in the party's report on its Jim Gavin presidential fiasco.

Whatever about his aggressive style, Sheahan does not entertain the self-indulgent *Sindo* culture of the journalist-not-the-story but his intense pursuit of the Martin/Gavin debacle became almost obsessive. Unusually,

he wrote about how he had gone after the story and, more pointedly, how he was fobbed off with evasive and misleading responses by Martin's handlers.

He had one particular moment of satisfaction the morning after the stormy FF parliamentary party meeting, during which the report into the Gavin affair was discussed. Journalists and politicians alike appeared to have become bogged down in disingenuous evasion on RTÉ's *Morning Ireland* from the party leadership and junior minister Thomas Byrne in particular.

Byrne bleated repeatedly that no "specific information" or "detail... whatsoever" was supplied to FF by the media (Sheahan) in questions to the party and that Gavin had no recollection of the issue concerning money owed by him to his tenant.

FORENSIC PRECISION

Sheahan cut in to inform listeners with forensic precision the details of the query that his newspaper had supplied to the party. This included the exact period of the tenancy; the dates on which the overpayments began and ended; the amount that was overpaid; the many efforts made by the tenant to retrieve the overpayment and whom he approached to achieve this; the failure to make repayments; and the broken pledges to do so.

Of course, none of this detail, despite being provided to FF in early October, two-and-a-half months before the report was provided to the parliamentary party, was referenced in that report. But if the Taoiseach is gratified at having gulled his parliamentary party, he may find that a frustrated and vengeful *Indo* correspondent could prove to be as dangerous to Martin politically as any group of backbenchers.

Sheahan's RTÉ performance that morning was arresting and he has become much in demand at Montrose and on Virgin Media's late-night political programme. And while an air of superiority still clings to the *Irish Times*, the *Indo*'s political coverage is vastly more informative. Both newspapers are pro-Government, implicitly or explicitly, but Sheahan and his team chase stories while their Tara Street competition seeks to educate rather than inform.

The *IT*, in fact, is more, not less, biased than the *Indo* – something that coverage of the Gavin story illustrated.

The question for Sheahan is whether he will continue to practice what he knows best – political coverage – or will he try to return again as the big kahuna at the helm of Mediahuis titles? And will he pursue Martin to the political death?



Micheál Martin



'OUT OF ORDER'

LISTOWEL DISTRICT COURT heard the case of a 48-year-old man who pleaded guilty to charges of engaging in abusive behaviour and obstructing a garda. In the early hours of June 30, 2024, officers witnessed Paul Pierce, of Doon Road, Ballybunion, involved in an argument with another person. When gardai intervened to defuse the situation, Pierce reacted in a hostile manner and refused to leave the area. Sergeant Stephen O'Brien told the court that the defendant claimed to be a solicitor and told one officer: "I will have your fucking job". Pierce remained unco-operative, leading to additional gardai being summoned from a neighbouring town to help deal with him. Two sets of handcuffs were ultimately required to arrest him. Defence solicitor Helena O'Carroll told the court that her client "accepts his behaviour was out of order" and that he "was a menace to the gardai". Judge David Waters issued fines totalling €700. *Kerry's Eye*

ODDEST PROPOSAL

A 22-YEAR-OLD man was summoned before Cork District Court charged with causing criminal damage after painting a large message on the side of a building. John Barrow, of Glencree Crescent, Cork admitted to causing €6,500 of criminal damage to a building in Penrose Wharf after painting a large query on the side of the building at a time between August 11 and August 13. Garda Ben Donovan told the court that the defendant spray painted on the building: "Marry Me? Chippy". Frank Buttimer, solicitor for Barrow, said that his client had raised €1,000 in compensation so far and was endeavouring to raise more. Judge Catherine Ryan adjourned the case until April 15 to allow for this. It was not made clear whether the subject of the proposal bid has accepted or refused his overtures. *Echo*

'GONE OFF THE RAILS'

JAMES O'BRIEN, of Rathmullen Park, Drogheda, pleaded guilty before a sitting of Drogheda District Court to charges of public intoxication and engaging in abusive behaviour on August 28 last. The court heard that gardai encountered the 35-year-old on Shop Street, Drogheda, engaged in an altercation with a workman resurfacing the road. The defendant, who had refused to slow down on his bicycle, was yelling in the face of one of the workers: "You won't fucking tell me what to do... I'll do whatever I fucking want to do." At this point he was arrested. Judge Stephanie Coggans told O'Brien, who has 34 previous convictions, that "people have a right to work without interference". Defence solicitor Paul J Moore said his client was not in his right mind on the night in question, having recently "gone off the rails" with drink and drugs, but was now attending Narcotics Anonymous and about to start working as a bricklayer. O'Brien was fined €200. *Drogheda Leader*

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