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Alan Kelly: 'Power is a drug . . . it suits me'

Labour's Alan Kelly says he is his own boss and speaks about his 'ruthless' ambition to get to the top

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Minister of Environment, Community & Local Government Alan Kelly goes walkabout with Niamh Horan in Nenagh, Co. Tipperary last Friday.

It's the little things that give the most insight.

I'm about to pull up a chair with one of the highest profile names in this year's election campaign, Minister for Environment Alan Kelly, when we bump into his wife, Regina.

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Minister of Environment, Community & Local Government Alan Kelly talks with Niamh Horan in the The Pantry Cafe in Nenagh, Co. Tipperary last Friday.

She tells me Kelly unwinds by watching House of Cards every night.

It is the only show he fits in on five hours of sleep.



Minister of Environment, Community & Local Government Alan Kelly meets locals in Nenagh, Co. Tipperary last Friday.

But then in a year spent trying to tackle what seems like the entire country's woes — from housing to Irish Water, homelessness to flooding — there is little time for laying about.

As the political thriller's Machiavellian hero Frank Underwood contests: "I've always loathed the necessity of sleep. It puts even the most powerful men on their backs."



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Minister of Environment, Community & Local Government Alan Kelly with his wife Regina in Nenagh, Co. Tipperary last Friday.

Before we sit down I hear Kelly joke with his spin doctor that the show's characters have nothing on the pair.

So it's only fair to ask: does Labour's secret weapon —nicknamed the 'AK47' — have a love affair with power?



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Minister of Environment, Community & Local Government Alan Kelly with some of the hundreds of thank you cards in his constituency office in Nenagh, Co. Tipperary last Friday.

“Anybody who says that power isn’t attractive is telling you a lie. Of course it is,” he grins.

“It’s obviously a drug. It’s attractive. It’s something you thrive on. It suits some people. It doesn’t suit others. I think it suits me.”

By his own admission he is a young man who has always “been in a hurry”.

“I went to school at four; I finished at 16 and had my degree at 19. I was achieving early in life,” he says. “I am very ambitious. Extremely ambitious. Probably one of the most ambitious people you are ever going to interview.”

He has a certain charm about him. People say there’s a hint of Brian O’Driscoll in his look. And there’s an air of self-assurance that’s been widely commented upon.

He tells me about a parliamentary party meeting where the then Labour leader Pat Rabbitte approached one of his friends, the Tipperary hurling legend Liam Sheedy, and asked dryly if he could “do anything about Kelly’s self confidence”.

Kelly laughs: “Some-times it is used against you but I am not going to change. I am what I am.”

So is he ruthless? “Politics is ruthless. And anyone who wants to get to the top has to be.”

His parents were working class. After leaving school at 11, they worked every job they could. His father got a council job working on the roads, scraping together money to educate their two sons, Alan and his brother Declan.

The boys took the opportunity and ran.

Declan, a multi-millionaire and a former advisor to the Clinton campaign in the United States, bought a yellow car and would ask a friend to record lectures, which he would then play on the road, travelling to and from his job in a local newspaper.

He came first in his class.

Alan, for his part, became heavily politicised.

The power politics yielded was instilled in him in his early years.

When he was a child his parents' house burned down. They lost everything and Alan was told it was a local Labour politician who helped them.

It's little wonder then that he stood in front of his class at eight years of age and announced he would become a TD.

His parents had sown the seeds of socialism early on: "One of my earliest memories is sitting on my father's knee watching [the news] and my father being irate about Charlie Haughey. And I was irate because he was irate," he laughs.

At around the same time another politician, Michael Lowry, was making his mark.

Ironically, as we sit here today, his image is plastered across a tabloid's front pages under the banner headline: 'Worse than Haughey'.

Kelly brushes it off: "He loves all this publicity. Of course he does. Whenever he is talked about [people say] he has an opportunity ... [but] Michael Lowry hasn't a hope in hell of having the support of the next government."

If Taoiseach Enda Kenny were to do a deal with him, he says, "it would be a form of madness".

"Let's be frank about this: I don't believe Fine Gael (FG) will get anywhere near a majority. I don't believe there's a hope in hell of that happening. The next government, I believe, will be Labour and FG — so that's it.

"But Lowry likes to dial up this idea that he is going to have some form of role."

As far as Kelly is concerned there is a new fixer in town. "In the last five years when you needed to get things done in Tipperary; when you needed jobs, schools, hospitals to be built, the roads to be done, any amenities, it was Alan Kelly that [you] contacted.

"Being honest, I am sick of reading about Michael Lowry. I think it is time that the people of Tipperary moved on. And the people of Tipperary now know they have other options.

"He is in the media all week for reasons that I don't think are good to be associated with for our county. I think the people of Tipperary now know they have someone who is literally at the top table who has delivered more in five years, in a period of difficult times, than is imaginable."

I interrupt to remind him that, despite everything, Lowry is a poll- topper — he has proven himself invincible.

"Invincibility is a word that is utopian in nature and impossible to sustain," he replies.

So what does he make of the 'Lowry phenomenon' in Tipperary?

"I'm not sure there is a phenomenon. I mean, is there an Alan Kelly phenomenon?"

As we walk the town the reaction is astonishingly warm.

Every second car beeps a horn. He is not canvassing but they walk away from ATM machines and come out from behind counters at coffee shops and the local Lough Derg chocolate factory to thank him for everything he has done for the county.

One woman emotionally tells him that, before, her son would have had to leave for Australia in economically challenging times. But last week she found him looking up a computer science college course, following Kelly's intervention to bring the First Data company to the county.

“I met with them 15 times. They are coming to Nenagh because I brought them to Nenagh,” says Kelly. “Now, that will come across as arrogant. But I am sorry, it’s true... I must have had 500 communications with them.”

Hundreds of thank you cards line the wall of his local constituency office. There are letters of gratitude, even poems.

“If I had to call the CEO of a bank for someone, the HSE, whoever, I would,” he says, making no bones about his priorities.

“In Tipperary, your village or your town is everything... I am loyal firstly to my family. I am loyal then to my parish; then to my area; my county; my country. That’s the way I am mentally built.”

He is busy tackling the red button issues in Dublin too.

“There is an issue where people your age are paying more in rent than they would be paying in a mortgage and I find that incredibly disturbing... the construction industry is dysfunctional. It needs to be repaired. We need credit to be loosened up. There are 200 sites between the two canals for developers — they need to be opened up,” he says. “We need the good developers. I wouldn’t paint everyone with [the same] brush.”

He admits everything but the kitchen sink has been thrown at him during his time as minister.

“I hope [locally] they are proud of me for all the issues I have had to deal with.

“I mean, a common thing that is said to me is: ‘You were given the biggest hospital pass in modern political history by ‘Big Phil’.’ It is said to me every single day I knock on doors. ‘You were left with an awful bag of rubbish.’ It is constant.”

He believes Labour will win seats “well into the 20s” in the upcoming election. And with local support and ruthless ambition, he is only headed one way.

So what’s the ultimate goal? “Being honest, of course you want to go as far as you can in politics.

“Look, I would like to be leader of the Labour Party some day. Whenever that happens. And I would like to get the most ambitious and the most prominent position from that.”

Would you like to be Taoiseach? “If you don’t answer that question by saying ‘yes’ then you shouldn’t be in Dail Eireann,” he says.

Which is handy because he speaks to his brother Declan on the phone “every other day”.

“He is my brother,” he shrugs. He has also been the go-to man for several taoisigh down through the years who saw fit to seek out his guidance.

When I ask about his relationship with Labour leader Joan Burton, he tells me: “We are very different characters.”

How? “The way we interact. I suppose I am very direct. I am very decisive... and I am in a hurry all the time. I am very quick to make my views known. I am very quick to say where something needs to go.”

“Joan,” he explains, “is probably more reflective.”

He insists they never have robust conversations.

“But everyone does,” I offer. “I have with my boss.”

“But you have a boss,” he corrects. “That’s not the way we see our relationship. I mean she is the leader of the party and that’s a very privileged and great position to be in and I really respect her for that.”

“But she is your boss?” I ask again.

“Ah sure, in politics you are your own boss really.”

I tell him he is tipped by many as the next leader of the Labour Party. “Well I am the deputy leader of the party so it would be strange at 40 years of age to say you didn’t want to be.”

I ask where he sees himself in the next five years — and he simply bites his lip and smiles.

He doesn’t know for sure.

“Now that’s a lie,” I laugh.

If I were Joan, I’d be studying Underwood — then sleeping with one eye open come election night.

Sunday Independent

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