

No excuses for this abject Garda failure

THE second interim report on the Garda breath-test scandal, in which the numbers of tests said to be have been conducted was inflated by over one million, has again failed to fully explain precisely what happened, or how, or on whose orders.

The report, which also examined 15,000 incorrect fixed-charge convictions, says there have been 'considerable difficulties in reconciling data' between the road bureau and the Garda Pulse system.

How is this possible? Is it nearly six months since the bogus figures came to light. It is three years since some members of the Garda Síochána were informed of the chicanery, and two years since a full internal audit began. It beggars belief that a force which is expected to question witnesses and piece together timelines of events cannot seem to adequately investigate its own behaviour.

Certainly, the failure to produce a comprehensive report does not engender any faith that the investigation has been absolutely thorough, and also leads to the suspicion that instructions to massage the breath-test figures were conceived and sanctioned at the highest levels in the force – something many gardai believe.

Added to growing concern about the unreliability of Garda evidence, never more stark than in the recent trial of the Jobstown protesters, it is difficult to see how the general public can maintain its traditional confidence in those charged with keeping us safe.

It also underlines yet again the need for what this newspaper has long demanded: a complete clear-out of the upper echelons in the Garda Síochána, including Commissioner Nóirín O'Sullivan, and their replacement with people uncontaminated by any of the legacy issues crippling the force and demoralising the decent men and women who wear the uniform.

It's not about religion

A PRIMARY school principal due for retirement shortly has shone a worrying light on the crisis facing our schools by revealing his roll for the next school year was over-subscribed by 96 pupils, the equivalent of three full classes.

Mark Cunningham, of the Holy Family Junior National School in Swords, north Co. Dublin, says the situation is so dire that priority has to be given to older children, and that in some cases – when deciding between children born on the same day – the determination of who got places came down to the hour of birth.

What this also means is that where the school previously saw about 20% of its pupils coming from non-Catholic families, its ethos is such that Catholics get priority, and every pupil starting in late August will be a baptised Catholic.

Education Minister Richard Bruton had made great mileage from the fact that he will revoke the so-called Baptism barrier, making sure Catholic children do not have an advantage.

But that is a sideshow. What Mr Cunningham's damning indictment of the system points to is that the minister needs to spend less time worrying about religion, and more time commissioning and building the new schools we clearly need to meet demand.

Success and scandal

WE are delighted that Megan Halvey-Ryan, the 13-year-old who embarrassed the Government into action when she featured on an RTE programme highlighting the long waiting times for surgery for the spinal condition scoliosis, has now had her operation, is recovering well and, according to her mother, has got her life back.

While this is good news, it remains a scandal that a child had to go on television before getting the treatment she needed – and it reminds us that hundreds of others still are on this shameful waiting list.

THE COMING STORM

It's been a rough week for Irish fishermen. First, the UK pulled out of a treaty on fishing rights; then the EU negotiator warned Brexit would mean hard borders. And while neither declaration will put them out of business, fishermen across the country say they fear it is just the start of a terrifying journey into a bleak future...

THE crew of the Christine R, docked at the end of a pier in Green-castle Harbour in Donegal, is busy making sure the boat is ready. Heads pop out of open hatches dotted around the deck as the men check in with each other to see who is doing what.

There is a quiet yet intense sense of urgency as they go about their various tasks. They need to get back out to sea as soon as possible. The day before, while out fishing, a net got caught up in one of the boat's propellers and it took 12 hours to tow them back to the port on the east side of the Inishowen peninsula. They landed at 2am.

'It's part and parcel of the job,' says owner Cara Rawdon as he watches the hustle and bustle going on around him on his boat. 'As long as no one was hurt, that's the main thing. You just have to get the net out and get it fixed up. Hopefully she'll be ready to go out again shortly.'

A fisherman for more than for 40 years, Cara is well used to the ups and downs of life on the sea. And not just those that physically affect his boat. The fishing industry has changed utterly since, in the early 1970s, he first started heading out from Green-castle, which is just three miles from his home village of Moville.

'It was different when I came here,' he says. 'All you needed was a boat.'

Over his career he has dealt with quotas (which fishermen say were set on historic fishing practices and have never been fair), high diesel prices, the introduction of stringent rules and regulations that carry heavy fines if broken, as well as wildly fluctuating fish prices.

It is a notoriously uncertain, not to mention dangerous, business and there have been times when he has come very close to getting out of it altogether. But instead he has adapted in order to survive.

HE has invested in the kind of technology that makes the helm of his boat look like the bridge of the Starship Enterprise. There's an old-style wheel, but it's just for show. He has educated himself in better fishing practices and learned how to navigate the legislation handed down by the EU.

'The fishing is the easy bit,' he says with a tight smile. 'You have to be a solicitor now to run a boat.'

Just three years ago the 58-year-old downsized from a vessel that was just over 30 metres long to the 22-metre Christine R, named after his wife. 'It was getting harder and harder to keep the previous boat because of its size,' the father of four explains. 'Quotas were getting tighter and there were fuel price problems, it made it impossible. Once you're under 24 metres, it gets easier, it's also a drop in horse power and running costs.'

For a little while it felt as though things had finally turned a corner. The last two winters have been mild, allowing the boats to go out as often as they can.

'She's been getting out about 42 to 45 trips a year,' he says. 'The last two winters have

SATURDAY DESPATCH by Jenny Friel

been exceptionally good, other years she could have been tied in here for weeks and weeks at a time.'

But Cara's relief has been short lived. Now the fishing industry is facing what will probably be the biggest challenge of them all – Brexit.

This week the UK Environment Minister, Michael Gove, declared they were 'taking back control' of British waters and triggered their withdrawal from the London Fisheries Convention. The agreement, signed in 1964, allows vessels from the UK, Ireland, France, Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands to fish within six and 12 miles of each other's coastlines.

While this particular arrangement is not expected to have a huge impact on Ireland's fishermen, it is being seen as the first step towards the UK pulling out of the EU Common Fisheries Policy, which allows all European countries access between 12 and 200 miles of the UK coastline and sets quotas for how much fish can be caught.

It is this threat, which Gove has insisted will happen when Britain leaves the EU, that has now left Irish fishermen fearful for their future. Not only will Irish boats be banned from British fishing zones but all those other EU countries set to be pushed out, will possibly flock to Irish waters, which are already heavily fished by foreign boats.

Latest figures show that 34% of fish landed on Irish shores are taken from British waters. In the lucrative mackerel market, it rises to 64%, while it is 43% in the case of prawns.

'It's a huge, huge worry,' says Cara. 'I'll certainly think about getting out if it happens. But I'm in a good position. I can walk away. I can sell the boat and sell the licence, but there's a lot of people who are into major money, with mortgages to pay. The bank doesn't want to hear any sad stories.'

It takes a two-hour drive west across Donegal to get to Killybegs, one of Ireland's best known ports. The signs of industry here are striking, smart-looking factories line the harbour road and several large trawlers are docked along the short piers.

'The town has a reputation of being prosperous, at one time it was rumoured to have the largest quota of millionaires in the country thanks to its thriving fishing industry. Locals claim, however, that times have



Rough waters: Irish fishing industry is facing its biggest challenge from Brexit



Livelihood: Fishermen Cara Rawdon, left, and Gerard Kelly



changed. Indeed a walk up around the quiet back streets reveal the same grim scenes seen in many rural Irish towns – boarded-up shops and houses.

Mark Gallagher runs his family's boat, The Vigilant, out of the port. At 58 metres long, its main catch is mackerel, which it brings back to the Gallagher fish factory, set up

the harbour. The 21-strong trawler fleet that is based here are in for the summer and will not go out fishing again until October or November. Most of their annual quotas were brought in over January and February.

'Over those weeks the boats make their way to the waters around the Shetland Islands and beyond.'

The mackerel have just finished feeding and are at their best and most valuable – these are the fish the Japanese market wants. Although mackerel migrate around the Irish coast, by the time they get to our waters off the west, they have burned off much of their fat and are worth 30% to 40% less.

With stringent EU quotas, Irish fishermen need to plan their trips carefully to ensure they make top dollar. The rest of the time, their boats and factories lie idle.

'Nine months of the year we're closed,' says Mark.

'Nowhere else does that happen. I met a Danish crew recently, they fish for 11 months of the year with two crews who step on and step off. They're flat out. They're in the EU – and it's supposed to be a level

playing field? I don't know why the rest of us can't be the same.'

'There's an air of quiet resignation and exhaustion about Mark, although this could be due in part to the birth of his fourth child, a son, just five weeks ago.'

'It's very hard to expect to pay a 12-month mortgage with three months wages,' he says.

'When I began fishing you started in August with the horse mackerel and that went right up to Christmas. Then after Christmas it was right through up until the middle of May. Now it's completely reversed.'

In the idle months he keeps busy looking after the Gallagher boat.

'It's 22 years old and needs constant maintenance,' he says. 'So you're trying to keep on of things. We can't afford to have a breakdown at the wrong time and because it's lying around for so long, that's bad for machinery as well. When you do go back, you often find things aren't working.'

He says it is only recently that he has begun to understand the full implications of Brexit on his own livelihood. 'When I heard about it

first, I didn't pass any heed,' he says. 'It's only as time has gone on that it's dawned how serious it's going to be.'

'My wife moved here from Dublin where she was a computer programmer, and there's no work for her here. She's doing childcare courses and hopes to get something in the future.'

'We're not whinging. I just want to see a future in fishing. Our boat is getting to an age where it should be replaced but there isn't a chance we can do that, we're still paying off the boat's licence.'

'I've thought about getting out of it, which I would hate. It's a job I love. Besides, there's nothing else in Donegal.'

GERARD Kelly has a 40-metre boat, the Deirdre, that fishes for mussels out of Green-castle. He says Ireland must now take the opportunity to get a better deal for itself.

'There are five countries that have access to parts of Ireland's six to 12 zone,' he says.

'While we have access in turn to only one – parts of the UK waters. Once one person pulls out, we should pull out as well. I don't think it would affect our place in the EU. Now is the time to change things.'

'I think the UK will end up with at least 50% of fish in their waters being allocated to them. And the EU will agree to that. Why won't they agree to us having the same deal? That would be an incredible agreement. Let other countries who come from 300 or 400 miles away, let them take the hit.'

'Why should people of Donegal have their fleets tied up while Dutch vessels are fishing away, 12 and a half miles away from our coast?'

Indeed all of the fishermen the Irish Daily Mail spoke to this week were scathing in their assessment of how the concerns of the Irish fishing industry have been handled in Europe by successive Irish governments, right back to the mid-1970s.

'And I don't think we're going to get to the table to fight our case this time either,' says Michael Callaghan, a 72-year-old fisherman in Killybegs.

'I've no faith in the methods of negotiation. We're all very anxious. The London Fisheries Convention won't affect us much but it's a shot across the bows to Europe from the UK, telling them that they also intend to take to 12 to 200 mile zone.'

Callaghan and his son, also Michael, 45, own the Pacell trawler, which depends on plump mackerel off the Shetland Islands coast. They believe being excluded from UK fishing zones is not the only thing that threatens to destroy their livelihoods.

'A hard Brexit will displace everyone from the various EU nations to the sea off the west coast of Ireland,' says Micheal Jr, pointing to a large map that shows the fishing zones around Ireland and the UK. 'It's going to decimate the Irish fishing industry.'

And with that, he heads back to his trawler, back to the boat that, for a while at least, still brings him in a living.

Brexit deal has saved us from catastrophe

THE sigh of relief could be heard from Belfast to Bratislava. When news finally came yesterday of an agreement on the border question, allowing Phase II of the Brexit negotiations to proceed next week, it was a pivotal moment not only for this country and this island, but for Britain and Europe too.

Outside the UK, the vast majority of other Europeans seem to believe that Brexit is an act of unparalleled folly, but it was the decision of the electorate there and it must be respected. The real fear was the possibility of collateral damage, on any one of several fronts.

Without yesterday's agreement, we might have faced the nightmare of a return to border checkpoints, sundering in two once again the communities that have reconciled since the Good Friday Agreement. For exporters, there was the possibility of punitive tariffs if the UK proceeded with the hardest of Brexits, outside the Single Market and the Customs Union. Now, thankfully, there will be regulatory convergence that means everything can proceed as it was.

Above all, we avoided a diplomatic nightmare. Leo Varadkar, Simon Coveney and Helen McEntee played these negotiations to win – and the danger, if the talks collapsed, was that Ireland's now solid and cordial relationship with our nearest neighbour would have been gravely impaired.

Most importantly, the compromise guarantees the principles of the Good Friday Agreement, and allays the perhaps alarmist but nonetheless niggling fear that we would see a return to the bomb and the bullet. No one – absolutely no one – wanted that.

Of course, there is a long road ahead as the trade negotiations begin in earnest. And it remains unknown how the UK will forge post-Brexit trade deals while maintaining regulatory alignment with the EU.

But the compromise, in many ways forced by Ireland, will, with hindsight, surely prove to have been in the UK's best interests too. For businesses in Britain, there is now more certainty than there was on Thursday, and this new, milder, more inclusive Brexit suggests, from an observer's viewpoint, that the UK will now be more semi-detached than detached.

It is important to remember the contribution that Britain made to peace in Europe, and to remember the role of the EU in preserving that peace for three generations now.

Losing that stability and certainty in a bitter hard-Brexit squabble would have been a very high price for all.

Here at home, the broad consensus among all parties that the agreement was a good one also showed a new maturity on the part of all, and demonstrated for once a willingness to put country before party, and to look to the future, not the past.

For all these reasons, it was a very good week's work.

Saluting our heroes

THE shooting of a garda during a raid on a house in Dublin on Thursday morning was a sobering reminder of the dangers faced by members of the force.

Another came yesterday, when Garda Tony Golden, who was shot dead by a dissident republican two years ago in Co. Louth, was posthumously awarded the gold Scott Medal for bravery at a ceremony in which 16 others received gold, silver or bronze awards.

Despite the many structural problems within An Garda Síochána, there is no doubting the commitment and willingness of many individual officers to literally guard the peace.

We salute their achievements and we once again send our sympathy and condolences to Garda Golden's widow, Nicola, for whom yesterday must have been a mixture of immense pride and enduring sadness and grief.

WHY ARE WE 'SCREWING' HOSPICE STAFF?

Brendan Gleeson is just one of the countless people to praise the remarkable work done by end-of-life services. So why, due to a legal quirk, have many hospice staff not had their pay restored? There is no good answer...

HE may be a Hollywood superstar, but that doesn't mean Brendan Gleeson is sheltered from the harshness of ordinary life. Both his father Frank and mother Pat spent their final days in the St Francis Hospice in Raheny, north Dublin.

Though the time was spent coming to terms with the fact that treatment would no longer help them, the actor has had nothing but praise since for the care his parents received there – so much so that he has thrown his considerable celebrity clout behind their fundraising coffee mornings ever since.

'In a way, it took a lot of the terror of death away, when it can be treated as a natural part of the cycle and when it's alleviated in that kind of a way,' he has said of his mother's last few days.

He was also in no doubt about why the facility is such a haven for those who find themselves in the same predicament.

'The people who work there are extraordinarily life-affirming,' he said. 'The generosity that goes into looking after people who had a difficult time at the very end of life – when you can feel very alone. In some way, within the hospice set-up, you have an extraordinary generosity whereby people feel really not so alone any more, and I don't know how they manage it.'

'There's a tremendous degree of pure goodness involved in it and of charity in its purest form, which is a selfless kind of an act... For me, it's very life-affirming.'

'You can see people who are giving of themselves in order to alleviate the most difficult days of the end.'

Gleeson's hospice experience will be a familiar one to hundreds of thousands of other families around the country whose loved ones have spent their final days, weeks and sometimes months under the care of hospice/palliative staff.

A lot of palliative care in Ireland is delivered in the form of home care. But there are also nine in-patient hospices dotted around the country – three in Dublin, and one each in Cork, Limerick, Galway, Sligo, Donegal and Kildare.

They provide an immeasurable service, not only for the people who are

looked after, but for the families who are watching as their loved ones are eased towards death.

COUNTLESS families, like the Gleesons, will always be thankful to those who watched over their dying loved ones with kindness, respect and, most importantly, the utmost professionalism.

It's pretty much universally accepted that the people who work in this field are a very special sort.

It is not everyone who can deal with terminal illness every day and all of the things that such sickness brings with it.

Which is why the current row over pay for some of these workers is particularly bewildering, if not downright galling. It certainly got Fianna Fáil leader Micheál Martin upset in the Dáil recently, when he accused Taoiseach Leo Varadkar of 'screwing' staff working in State-funded hospices over

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pay restoration. During Leaders' Questions he quizzed Varadkar about why hospices which fall under what is known as Section 39 are not being given money to fund pay increases under the terms of the latest Lansdowne Road deal.

He pointed out that these hospices and other voluntary hospitals were forced to cut workers' pay in 2010 and should be included in the salary increases in the public pay deal.

'The Taoiseach and the Minister for Health, Deputy [Simon] Harris, have told me in replies to parliamentary questions that Fempid did not apply to Section 39 bodies, but it did,' he said of Financial

Emergency Measures in the Public Interest, which was initially introduced in 2009 and led to cuts in public service pay and pensions.

'There is no point in the Taoiseach coming in here and saying that we all support hospices, when he screws them. That is what he has been doing on this issue for the last six months. It is utterly dishonest.'

'The replies from the minister and from the Taoiseach are dishonest. The hospices' non-pay costs have increased significantly. We all have correspondence from the hospices on the matter. It is very simple: the pay linkage should be restored.'

After first slamming Martin's

language as 'unbecoming of the deputy's office as leader of the Opposition', the Taoiseach insisted that the pay restoration for Section 39 workers was being looked into.

'The specific issue raised by the deputy was discussed at Cabinet yesterday,' he said. 'I have asked the ministers, deputies Paschal Donohoe and Simon Harris, to examine the matter and come up with a solution or at least a clear answer in the coming weeks.'

But three weeks later, no answers have been forthcoming.

So who exactly falls into Section 39? And why has it been decided that they shouldn't receive the same pay restoration increases as staff who work in institutions who fall into the Section 38 bracket? As it often is in these matters, it's a complicated, arcane and at times vague tale.

Both sections deal with organisations in the community and volunteer sector. But it would appear that there is

no real rhyme nor reason as to why some groups have ended up getting their Government funding under Section 38 while others have been put into Section 39.

'Many of these groups and organisations may have been set up by charities or religious orders,' Paul Bell of Siptu told the Irish Daily Mail.

'So a lot of it is historical and just evolved into what it now is.'

An in-depth study and report by the union Impact, Caring – At What Cost, which was released a couple of years ago, looked into Section 39 and asked what differences there were between it and Section 38.

'In reality,' the report found, 'when they are looked at side-by-side, the distinction between the two seems somewhat vague and supports arguments to modernise the model of funding for community/voluntary sector organisations involved in service delivery.'

However, a key distinction is that employees of agencies that are funded under Section 38 of the Health Act 2004 are classified as public servants whereas those

funded under Section 39 are not, despite in some cases providing comparable services.'

And this is the major problem with organisations funded under Section 39 – they are not considered to be public workers, despite carrying out the exact same work as those working in Section 38 institutions. There are hundreds of community and volunteer groups across the country that come under Section 39, which provide assistance including disability services, addiction counselling and services for carers.

Of the nine in-patient hospices there currently are in Ireland, five are classed as Section 39.

They are The Galway Hospice, Milford Hospice in Limerick, Marymount Hospice in Cork, the North-west Hospice in Sligo and St Francis Hospice, who have centres in Raheny and Blanchardstown in Dublin.

St Brigid's Hospice in Kildare and Donegal Hospice in Let-

terkenny are directly governed by the HSE while Our Lady's Hospice, which has centres in Blackrock and Harold's Cross in Dublin, is classed as Section 38.

'There is no difference between any of these hospices,' says Paul Bell, divisional organiser of Siptu's health division.

'They provide the same support services, the staff have the exact same skillsets, qualifications and standards. And they work with the same passion, care and love.'

'They're not, however, entitled to have the same pay restorations, it seems.'

'It has always been the exact same pay scales for our staff as those working in Section 38 hospices,' a senior staff member of a Section 39 hospice told the Mail last week.

'In fact, this is the first time ever that there has been a distinction made. We believe it is wrong and we are trying to change it.'

In fact, at least one of the Section 39 hospices has committed to restoring its workers' pay.

The money will come from its own coffers. 'They are doing it with

the expectation that this is going to be sorted out and they will be reimbursed,' says a hospice source.

Earlier this year, under the Haddington Road Agreement, public service workers received an increase of €1,000 in their pay.

'But Section 39 workers didn't get it,' says Bell. 'And there are more increases to come but we've been told, the way it stands, they won't get those either.'

A statement from the Department of Health issued to the Mail pointed out: 'Any individuals employed by these Section 39 organisations are not HSE employees and, therefore, the HSE has no role in determining the salaries or other terms and conditions applying to these staff.'

'It is a matter for Section 39 organisations to negotiate salaries with their staff as part of their employment relationship and within the overall funding available for the delivery of agreed services.'

A statement from the HSE reiterated this: 'People who work for Section 39 agencies are not public



Not a 'State service': St Francis Hospice, Raheny, north Dublin

servants. Regarding pay restoration, staff in Section 39 agencies were not subject to the provisions of the public service agreements or the Fempid legislation which imposed pay reductions.

'A WRC [Workplace Relations Commission] process to deal with the issue of pay restoration is currently under way.'

Indeed, despite the insistence that the Government is not required to restore their pay, there are hopes among the hospices' management teams that this issue is going to be resolved sooner rather than later.

AFTER all, how will they continue to retain staff at Section 39 hospices if those working in Section 38 centres are getting paid more than them for doing exactly the same job?

'What they will possibly find starting to happen is that their staff will leave, they won't be able to replace them,' says Bell.

'They will then have to get agency staff in, who will very probably be people who used to work for them. But doing agency work means they'll get paid the same as Section 38 workers. It's a mess.'

But hospice bosses believe they have a 'hugely solid case', and are tentatively optimistic that the Government will 'do the right thing'.

In fact, they were reluctant to speak publicly on the matter last week for fear of jeopardising ongoing negotiations.

The Mail was also reliably informed that hospice staff were 'forbidden' from giving any interviews about their work conditions.

Paul Bell is not quite as optimistic that things will be resolved all that quickly.

'We're being told it's a political and finance issue,' he says. 'So it may require the Taoiseach's intervention. Leo Varadkar has a hospice in his own constituency [St Francis in Blanchardstown] so I'm pretty sure he's very aware of how unfair this is.'

For Brendan Gleeson and his family, there would be no doubt that all hospice staff should have their pay restored having given his parents the best possible care.

He said: 'Their spirits were looked after, their morale was looked after, there was so much humanity in it that you come out of that awful experience – you have to say goodbye at some point – and I came out feeling nothing could have been done more.'

Praised vital services: Screen star Brendan Gleeson

Trust demands that gardaí obey our laws

BETWEEN 2009 and 2012, 442 gardaí were authorised to cancel penalty points. Between them, they quashed almost 75,000. One officer alone was responsible for deleting 744 fixed-charge notices across 17 counties and has been disciplined and fined €3,000.

The others, it seems, will face no such sanction. The Garda Síochána Ombudsman Commission believes that the investigation of cases going back eight years would be 'unlikely to provide positive outcomes' and that the cost of pursuing such an investigation 'would not be the best use of public money'.

This fails entirely to reflect the seriousness of the issue. This is not just a case of gardaí doing a few favours for friends; their behaviour is utterly reprehensible for two reasons.

First, it deprived the State of revenue from those who should actually have been fined and it effectively stole money from your pocket.

Second, and far more seriously, it allowed dangerous drivers off the hook and, no longer threatened with mounting points that might have seen them put off the road, they instead were free to carry on speeding or driving dangerously, with heaven knows what consequences.

Did someone who should not have been driving subsequently maim or kill? Without an investigation, we will never know – but we should.

Moreover, only a week ago, the gardaí announced that there would be no sanctions pursued across the force against the officers who, between them, invented almost two million fake breath tests.

On that occasion, the decision was justified on the grounds that the gardaí had to 'minimise disruption to services' and avoid too much spending of taxpayers' money.

This position is simply morally wrong. No matter what the cost, every case should be investigated – and prosecuted where there is evidence of wrongdoing. No effort should be spared in the attempt to do this.

You cannot put a financial price on public confidence in our police force. That confidence is already at an all-time low and the suggestion that there is one set of rules for the general public and another for gardaí will further damage the relationship.

We need clear and unambiguous proof that the laws that apply to one apply to all and that gardaí are held to the same standard as everyone else.

Indeed, as the guardians of the peace and custodians of the law, they should be held to a higher standard.

If this matter is now brushed under the carpet, the damage will be incalculable as a very warped signal is sent out.

Either the Government or the Policing Authority must insist that there is a case-by-case trawl of every penalty point cancelled and that unless there was a valid reason for doing so, the law treats everyone equally.

A lesson from the US

YESTERDAY in the United States, we saw what real equality under the law looks like. The FBI charged former national security advisor Michael Flynn with lying over his contacts with Russian officials at the behest of the then presidential candidate Donald Trump. Flynn pleaded guilty and will now fully co-operate with special investigator Robert Mueller as the Bureau continues its crusade to establish the precise level of Russian interference in helping secure President Trump's election.

What this shows is that – in the US at least – no one is above investigation and prosecution, that there are no different laws for 'them' or 'us' and that wrongdoing by anyone, no matter how big a player, will not be tolerated.

That should be the basis of every justice system, everywhere. Justice must always be seen to be done – or we might as well dispense with it altogether.

Bullied, killed... the Catholics vilified by their own for protecting society

EVER since he was a young child, Peadar Heffron was fanatical about Gaelic football and hurling. He played both games for his local team, Creggan Kickhams, becoming an established first-team member for the senior footballers, and winning the Antrim intermediate championship on two occasions.

He was totally committed to the club and gave his all in every game. At the age of 25, he made a decision he hoped would give him a solid, pensionable job and a secure future – surely something any GAA club would wish for its members. But when Peadar told his teammates he'd decided to join the PSNI, there were no handshakes, no claps on the back, no congratulatory pints.

Instead he was met with silence, followed by two of the team leaders telling him he couldn't go through with it. Unfortunately, that meeting wasn't the worst of it, as he recently told sportswriter Joe Brolly – formerly a writer with our sister paper, the Irish Mail on Sunday, and now with the INM group.

Peadar's boyhood friends, he told Brolly, people he had grown up beside, never spoke to him again. In training, he wasn't picked for teams.

He joined in with one and played as a spare man – but nobody passed him the ball.

Posters were put up around his town, warning young people against joining what they called the PSNI/RUC – one was even put up outside his family home. Clubs with strong links to republicanism requested 'challenge' matches against Creggan, with only one target likely in their sights – and it wasn't between the posts.

Worst of all, one weekend as he got ready in the changing room, four republican activists came in and pointedly handed him a leaflet warning against the dangers of joining the PSNI. This was the moment that broke him. He never went back to Creggan again.

'I got into my car, drove home and never came back,' he recounted in Brolly's INM interview. 'It had got too personal. Too serious. It was an awful wrench. I never recovered.'

The horrifying reality of what is being done to nationalists in the North who want help their communities by joining the police force – and how two courageous men, bound by their mutual love of the GAA, may be starting to turn the tide...



On the beat: the PSNI keep watch during an Orange Order July 12 parade

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HE did plough ahead with his plans to join the PSNI, however, and signed up in February 2002. Determined to help implement the plan to make the force as attractive a proposition to Catholics as it was to Protestants, he even helped form the PSNI Gaelic football team.

Their first game – against the Garda Síochána – had to be played behind closed doors, with the PSNI names not disclosed, while their first game against a club team was played amid heavy security.

Undeterred, Peadar continued to do all he could to ensure the force could effectively represent, equally, all members of the communities they served.

But just a few years later, Peadar's career and life as he knew it came to a shuddering halt when, on January 8, 2010, he lost both legs after a bomb

ripped through his car, having been placed there by, it is assumed, members of his own community. He only survived because the snow and ice on the ground stanchied the blood flow.

Even then, his former club couldn't bring themselves to acknowledge all he had given them. There was no condolence card, no letter. Two men visited his father while Peadar was in a coma, but insisted they only came in a 'personal capacity', given his father's history with the club.

There have been several incidents similar to Peadar's in the years since the establishment of the PSNI in 2001.

Ryan Crozier was 27 years old when he was on his way to begin his shift at the station in Enniskillen in May 2008. Close

Even now, 16 years after the new police service was set up, becoming a police officer when you are a Catholic in Northern Ireland is a massive decision to make, and one that is likely to cause concern for your loved ones, if not outright distress.

BECAUSE even though there is now only a small minority in the North who still take it upon themselves to murder and maim in the name of a united Ireland, being a Catholic in the PSNI makes you a target.

The closing date for submissions for the PSNI's latest employment drive has just passed. It's a good job. The pay is relatively generous, even when training, with a chance of earning up to €38,000 (almost €43,000) while still at constable level. There's a decent pension, 22 days of annual leave and, if you're ambitious, there are prime opportunities of rising through the ranks to middle and top management.



Concern: Chief Constable George Hamilton, left, wants Sinn Féin to 'step up'. Right, Peter Sheridan of Co-operation Ireland

But while the numbers they are attracting are impressive, it's very possible, if not highly likely they will be left disappointed with the number of Catholics who have applied to join. It's an ongoing issue for the PSNI and one they have struggled to deal with since their inception in 2001.

Despite efforts which have included a controversial 50:50 hiring policy and a specially commissioned study to look at why Catholics are reluctant to join their ranks, the force remains noticeably

Protestant-heavy. The latest figures from August of this year show that just over 67% of officers are Protestant, while 31.5% are Catholic.

It's far from ideal, as the PSNI know only too well. To be fully effective, they need to be fully representative of the community they serve.

It begs the question: despite public assurances that they are fully behind the police service, are organisations like Sinn Féin and the GAA doing enough to support their members to join up?

THE PSNI's Chief Constable, George Hamilton, certainly doesn't believe so. In fact, just recently he told the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee in Westminster that the two organisations were failing to encourage nationalists to become police officers. He said that although 'huge progress' had been made, he hoped political parties and civic groups would now 'step up to the plate and advocate for a career in policing'.

While he didn't question the GAA's commitment to support policing reforms, accountability and crime reporting, he said it sometimes felt like 'there is a reluctance and stopping short of actively advocating for a career in policing. Until we get that, it is going to be hard to be truly representative.'

The Ulster GAA insists it has

been working closely with its youth membership and the PSNI since it was formed in 2001, and points out that programmes for a recent schools cup competition carried adverts for the force's recruitment drive. They also say that they could not dictate to their members what career path to choose.

In political circles, you might think that it would be in Sinn Féin's interest to make sure there was an equal representation of nationalists in the police force, which one day could lead to a Catholic/nationalist being made chief constable. After all, the last Catholic to head the Northern Ireland police was James Flanagan back in the mid-1970s.

Surely having a larger number of Catholics in the force would improve matters on the ground for their members? It would certainly make sense for them to set targets such as a 50:50 representation within ten years, or have a Catholic achieve the position of chief constable within 15 years.

At the very least, this is an opportunity to regularly and vociferously oppose the fact that good, decent, hard-working people who want to serve their communities are being

horrifically targeted, maimed and even killed.

The Irish Daily Mail asked Sinn Féin, several times, if we could speak to one of their representatives about their stance on the PSNI. But none came forward. Gerry Kelly, the party's Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) for North Belfast, told local media that he rejected Mr Hamilton's claims that the party was not doing enough.

He said he had offered people considering joining the PSNI 'encouragement' and 'any help they need'.

'I don't know where the ambiguity is,' he added. 'They are Irish people in an Irish police service.'

On the ground, however, it's perceived that Sinn Féin are, at best, ambivalent about the force.

It may be that they believe the PSNI is still just a British-run organisation that doesn't merit their attention. It might also have something to do with the fact that they know their grass-roots membership is ultimately still deeply mistrustful when it comes to the police.

BUT Peter Sheridan, a former PSNI assistant chief constable and now CEO of the peace-building charity Co-operation Ireland, says evening up the numbers is essential for the future of the force.

'It should be a concern, not just for the police, but for all of us in society,' he told the Mail. 'Policing needs to remain representative of the community that it polices. It's at its best when it has close links with the community it serves. So if you are under-represented in certain communities, then that's not good for the community or for policing.'

'If you want to create a safer society and promote lawfulness, then the policing agency has to have close links with the community it serves. I don't think we have reached a place yet where that full support is there for policing.'

'I think in some communities, in some organisations, among some people, there is an indifference and ambivalence. To be fair to the GAA, as an organisation it has done an enormous amount to build links with policing, and I think credit where credit is due, they have consistently stepped out.'

'I think it's individuals who are in it, maybe the community they come from hasn't moved on and therefore, they haven't moved on in their thinking.'

One person who tried to help others move on, Peadar Heffron, admits he joined up to try and make a difference.

'Deep down, naively, I thought this was the little bit I could do...' he said. 'To help this island become one again. I thought if policing here was normalised, we could, in due course, join with the gardaí and then further down the line, who knows...'

Perhaps now, thanks to Peadar's openness and the support of Joe Brolly – not a man who could be accused of being soft on the national question – his vision of hope may yet one become a reality.