

## THE SUNDAY TIMES

ESTABLISHED 1822

## Honeymoon is over in parties' marriage of convenience

The speed with which the discord at the heart of government has become apparent does not bode well for the longevity of this administration. The marriage between Fianna Fail and Fine Gael (and the almost forgotten Green Party) was always one of convenience or, in the immortal words of the late Albert Reynolds, a "temporary little arrangement".

Everything about the construct of this coalition is unique, particularly the agreement that Leo Varadkar will resume the role of taoiseach when Micheál Martin ends his shift in December 2022. From this juncture, those 28 months seem a lifetime away. It is barely two months since the government took office, but the administration already looks jaded. The coalition got off to the worst possible start and it has been all downhill from there, culminating in last week's festival of failure.

The bad blood between the parties following the mishandled communication of new Covid-19 restrictions was bad enough. Friday morning's political bloodbath in the wake of a report that the great and the good of the political and legal establishment had ignored health regulations by attending a dinner in Galway was almost too much to comprehend.

EU commissioner Phil Hogan and Supreme Court judge Séamus Woulfe, who in his previous role as attorney-general signed off on Covid-19 regulations, were among the diners. However, it was the resignation of Dara Calleary, a politician who whinged his way into cabinet having been overlooked last June, that shook the government. Barry Cowen's resignation as agriculture minister in July opened the door for Mr Calleary's belated cabinet appearance. Yet he still managed to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory by attending the Oireachtas golf society's dinner. Mr Calleary, unlike most of the other attendees, does not have the luxury of claiming he misunderstood the updated public health guidelines: he sat at cabinet the day before where the measures were agreed, then went on radio to explain the importance of the new restrictions. This puts his actions firmly in the "couldn't make it up" category.

Mr Calleary's resignation was the key moment in a day of political drama that would have been even more intense if the Dail had been sitting. Opposition politicians had a field day, and who can blame them? When the government presents Sinn Féin and the Labour Party with an open goal, they never miss. For the general public, however, the affair was thoroughly depressing. The qualities that brought the country together before the summer and allowed us to successfully suppress Covid-19 are under pressure like never before. When the great and the good are seen to flout the rules, how can that cohesion be maintained?

Managing the pandemic requires buy-in from the public as well as strong and coherent political leadership. The latter, however, is in short supply. Mr Martin is struggling to get the respect normally reserved for his office. He has been subject to constant sniping, both publicly and privately, from Fine Gael and is struggling to cope with the legacy left by Mr Varadkar, who performed exceptionally well in managing the initial phase of lockdown. Mr Martin's authority in his own party is also in question. This was apparent from the very first day of his appointment as taoiseach when disappointed backbenchers went public to complain they had been overlooked for cabinet posts.

We suspect this issue with Mr Martin may be connected to the time-limit on his leadership. With a pre-agreed "use-by" date, Fine Gael is counting down the days until Mr Varadkar returns, while Fianna Fail members are already plotting to replace Mr Martin as soon as his term of

office expires. But the country cannot afford to have a government behaving in this manner given what is at stake. Last week's announcement of new measures in response to what was, by the standards set in the early months of this year, a modest rise in Covid-19 cases, was shambolic. Mr Martin and his ministers need to up their game.

The most important issue, as we have stated previously, is learning to live with Covid-19. Five months since the initial lockdown, this is the message the government should be selling and the actions it takes should reflect that imperative.

What we got last week was an incoherent mix of measures, badly communicated by ministers who are not on top of their brief. The vast majority of people continue to be compliant when it comes to social distancing, wearing masks, holidaying in Ireland and maintaining best hygiene practices.

So the imposition of new restrictions is frustrating and causing anger. It is the equivalent of all prisoners having their privileges revoked due to the bad behaviour of a minority. Instead of taking a broad-brush approach to managing the crisis, the government would do better to concentrate instead on sorting out the Covid-19 hot spots that account for the majority of outbreaks, such as meat plants and direct provision centres.

The GAA and other sports bodies are rightly angered at the new rules that force their fixtures to be played behind closed doors – even though they had previously taken measures that allowed 200 supporters to safely attend fixtures.

There are new restrictions on training sessions too, with no more than 15 people working outdoors and six indoors. Last week's announcement also restricted the number of people who can attend outdoor and indoor events to 15 and six, respectively. This created quite the drama for theatres, who wondered why they could only seat six patrons while cinemas and churches could host 50 people at a time. This led to a further clarification, putting the venues on an equal footing. We await the government's explanation as to why 50 people can congregate in a closed venue (and more in shops, pubs and restaurants) but not sit outdoors at a match.

Then there are the special instructions for the over-70s, a cohort treated by government as a protected species. They have been told to limit their contacts. They can still go on holiday, but should avoid public transport and, according to the National Public Health Emergency Team, should avoid hotels. This, as many older people have complained, is contradictory, infuriating and infantilising. It is also a further blow for the hospitality sector, which depends on older clients to fill their hotels in autumn once the school holidays are over.

One of the least-publicised recommendations last week was the reminder that anyone who can work from home should continue to do so. This message is so familiar that few recognise how damaging it is. If that advice was changed to anyone who can work from a Covid-19-ready office should do so, unless they have medical or other sound reasons for staying away, the effect on the economy would be significant. As long as workers are encouraged to stay at home, cities and towns will remain populated with ghost buildings. Businesses, large and small, that depend on office workers for their livelihood are either breaking even, slowly going bust or have already shut up shop.

When the pandemic unemployment payment ends next April, hundreds of thousands of people will join the Live Register. Encouraging people to return to their offices won't postpone the coming recession but it will surely mitigate the scale of the damage.

## Our window of opportunity

When Ireland was plagued by tuberculosis in the 1940s, maintaining the education of school pupils was as much a concern as it is today.

While the current pandemic poses the greatest threat to older citizens and those with underlying conditions, TB targeted the young and able-bodied, and so protecting children in their school environment was a particular concern. Fresh air was believed to be especially beneficial in the fight against TB, with some schools holding classes in the open air.

Last week, public health expert Dr Gabriel Scally advocated a similar approach to Covid-19. Getting air moving through classrooms, he said, could be the best way to reduce the spread of the virus.

Teachers were unimpressed, however, by his suggestion that students could bundle up in "jumpers, jerseys and coats" while classroom windows were kept open, even though their predecessors braved outdoor lessons to keep teaching through the TB years. However, the 1940s solution to cold classrooms – when pupils were asked to bring in a sod of turf to heat their schools – is hardly a practical one today.

Nonetheless, swapping a centrally heated fug for a blast of fresh air might well bring health benefits to modern students, or at least help to keep them awake – the only time most youngsters voluntarily open windows, after all, is when they switch on their laptops.

## Justine McCarthy Put Dail on course to restore public trust



## Oireachtas must be recalled after hitting the rough with golf society gaffe

In a land marooned by biblical pestilence and destructive tempests, the country's rulers gathered to partake of a feast after two days' sport. "Let them eat cake," they toasted, clinking their goblets of plenty. Beyond the glowing windows, the people were bent over with adversity. A terrifying pandemic had frozen their lives while violent storms raged in from the ocean, whipping away whatever vestiges of strength they had left. The people were at their wits' end.

"Trust us," toasted the rulers as they partied on. Among the more than fourscore present was Dara Calleary, the minister for agriculture, who only the day before had sat at a three-hour cabinet meeting, where he and his colleagues decided that a maximum of six, down from 50, were allowed gather for indoor social events. There, too, was Phil Hogan, the EU trade commissioner – a pivotal figure in the increasingly ominous Brexit negotiations that have potentially disastrous economic consequences for Ireland. There was Séamus Woulfe, a newly appointed Supreme Court judge following his stint as attorney-general, when he gave the government legal advice on restricting the people's movements in the pandemic. Yet another was Jerry Buttimer, the leas-cathaoirleach of Seanad Éireann whose home county of Cork was being battered by storm-force 11 winds as he and other members of the Oireachtas Golf Society lived it up in Clifden on Wednesday night.

Stick together by staying apart, the rulers told the people, while they did the complete opposite themselves. Solidarity will see us through these dreadful times, they said, flouting the rules they set for the people. Trust us, they said, we are your wise leaders.

What were the people to do? No medical cure had been found for the deadly virus, and no vaccine to stop it spreading, either. About 22.5 million people in the world had been infected with Covid-19. More than 750,000 had died. And so they heeded the leaders, by and large, and did what they were told to do. They buried their dead without proper funerals. They cancelled their weddings. They isolated themselves from their grandchildren and their grandparents. They forfeited air fares they had paid for foreign travel and stayed at home.

Now their leaders' utter hypocrisy has made it impossible for many of us to trust them any more. They have stomped all over our solidarity in their giant clodhoppers with their feasting, destroying the only anti-serum we had for the coronavirus.

In future, when politicians tell us to stick together, our response to them may be unprintable. First, an MEP – Billy Kelleher – turns up in Dublin to witness his party leader

become taoiseach, contrary to government travel advice. He is forgiven. Next, the chairman of Fáilte Ireland, Michael Cawley, goes to Italy on holiday while the agency is spending public money telling people to holiday at home. He resigns. Days later, a microcosm of the great and the good gathers in Clifden for an overnight golf society outing. What possessed them? Did it not cross their minds they were breaking the rules? Or were they so stuffed with self-entitlement they decided the rules did not apply to them?

Whatever the reason, their behaviour has put the people in greater danger because it has exposed their exhortations for solidarity as unadulterated hypocrisy. This has happened at the worst possible time.

The days are shortening. There is a chill in the air. Soon it will be winter. Ever since the pandemic arrived in Ireland at the end of February, the biggest fear has been the encroachment of winter's icy tentacles, when flu season gets a grip on our hospitals and the populace withdraws indoors. Autumn's stormy advent coincides with worrying increases in Covid infections, just as schools are about to reopen after more than five months' shutdown.

This is a moment when we need to stand together as much, if not more, than ever. For a variety of reasons, reopening society was always going to be a harder job than shutting it down. Ennui and virus-fatigue make us complacent and impatient. Vested interests set cohort against cohort, sector against sector. Grudges sprout from the hierarchy of priorities built into the roadmap. Humankind is a sociable species. Connecting with each other is harder when we have to wear face masks and remain physically distanced. In his hauntingly

applicable novel, *The Plague*, published in 1947, Albert Camus described how passengers on trains "all try to keep their backs turned to their neighbours, twisting themselves into grotesque attitudes in the attempt – the idea being, of course, to avoid contagion". These are all fertile conditions for breeding suspicion of one another; dividing us and conquering us.

As Covid has amassed enormous health, economic, psychological and social casualties, it has put a greater strain on fraternity. Some older people complain they are being penalised because of some younger people's recklessness. Younger people complain their lives are being suspended because of the vulnerability of older people. Meat factories and direct provision centres have been identified as places of greater contamination. Rural politicians claim country pubs are being victimised because Dublin is a latter-day Sodom and Gomorrah. Anyone flying off on a sun holiday is a "selfish" unmentionable.

The government's latest set of rules is littered with anomalies and contradictions. Even some of the ministers who made those rules, including health minister Stephen Donnelly, didn't know what they were after they had agreed them. The national Covid-testing and contact-tracing system does not engender confidence, either.

Yet, instead of admitting these flaws and fixing them, our rulers target young people having house parties. In an RTE interview the evening before the Clifden dinner, Calleary delivered a diatribe about young people engaging in these activities. Such sentiments send the subliminal message that the rest of us ought to rat on the generation whose academic lives, career prospects and potential romances have been crushed by the pandemic. There is little acknowledgement of "the frantic desire for life that thrives in the heart of every calamity", which Camus also observed.

For the first four months of the pandemic here, Ireland had no government, following the general election on February 8. Since the election of the taoiseach on June 27, the Dail has sat for five weeks. During that time, a small army of government advisers was appointed; the tanaiste, Leo Varadkar, secured his own aide-de-camp and a state car for his party colleague, foreign affairs minister Simon Coveney, and TDs voted for extra pay for super junior ministers.

Five weeks after the government was formed, the Dail went off on six weeks of holidays. The taoiseach must recall it promptly to acknowledge the people's disgust with the political class. If there is any hope of restoring solidarity and trust in politicians, that has to be the first step on a very long road back to a place of trust.

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**In future, when politicians tell us to stick together, our response may be unprintable**

## Sarah McInerney

## Foley fails to make the grade on schools plan



## Students deserve better than the education minister's disappearing act

Anyone worried about sending their children back to school in the next few weeks would have done well to avoid RTE's *Six One News* on Tuesday evening. Therein was broadcast the most dispiriting 90 seconds of political waffle of the week – quite the achievement given the competition for that particular accolade.

Some may be surprised that this prize does not go to health minister Stephen Donnelly. He came second for comparing the pandemic to jumping on a trampoline. Both are "inherently risky", he sagely told Virgin Media.

EU commissioner Phil Hogan was placed joint second, for claiming he didn't think attending a dinner for 80 people might be in breach of Covid-19 regulations, because the hotel and organisers told him so.

Transport minister Eamon Ryan came third, for his assertion that he didn't realise how important it was to maintain social distancing on school buses until the National Public Health Emergency Team expressly said so on Tuesday. More of that anon.

But the Champions Cup for the most nonsense talked by any politician last week goes to relative newcomer Norma Foley, the education minister. Despite the widespread confusion about what is going to happen when our children return to school in September, Foley has studiously maintained a low profile. As a former teacher herself, she evidently took the principle of school holidays very seriously.

The panic reached fever pitch two weeks ago when it emerged that the British system for awarding calculated grades for A-level students led to significant numbers of disadvantaged students having their marks downgraded. On the face of it, the standardisation process looks

very similar to that which we've been told will be used to calculate the Leaving Cert results. We can only speculate, because we don't know what algorithm our government will use.

Initially, Foley sought to allay any fears by stroking our collective foreheads and humming nursery rhymes. The results will be "accurate, reliable and fair", she said, via a spokesman, via a press release. Heaven forbid there'd be any face-to-face encounters that would allow media to ask questions.

Unsurprisingly, this wasn't enough to soothe mounting fears about the process. Opposition parties called on Foley to publish the formula being used to calculate the grades. Not an unreasonable request, surely? If our algorithm is entirely different to that used in the UK, then we can all rest easy. If not, surely we should know now, rather than wait until the grades have been awarded and the damage is done.

The public pressure was sufficient to force

Foley into giving a short interview to RTE last Tuesday. In that ill-fated 90 seconds, she was asked what was the problem with publishing the formula. This was her response: "Well, the general data is out there, but as the model is running, it's important that the model runs as it should run. It is currently, eh, you know, the different manoeuvrings in it are currently running, and when it is completed it will be published." Random words, strung together, making simply no sense.

To be fair to Foley, as a first-time TD she has been handed one of the most difficult briefs to manage during a pandemic. As we have seen, there are no easy answers to the quandary of how to award students marks when they have not sat an exam. However, disappearing from public view in the month before the results are due does not instil confidence. Neither does Foley's apparently natural inclination to resort to obfuscation when asked simple questions.

She made a few other media appearances last week, but so many questions remain. It's not just about the Leaving Cert. It's about what happens when children stream off of a packed bus into the most overcrowded classrooms in Europe, with little to protect them from the virus but a few open windows for ventilation. It's about the teachers with underlying conditions, scared out of their minds; the children living with parents or grandparents who are immunocompromised; the mixed messaging about everything from staggered openings to washing uniforms every day.

Schools must reopen, but it is a complicated process that requires leadership, guidance and honesty. Those three qualities have been sadly lacking from the current administration. It's time – way past time – to stop the nonsense.

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**As a former teacher, Foley evidently took the principle of holidays very seriously**



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## Sinn Fein's centennial snub shows flaw in land grab tactic

Stormont has announced a series of events to mark the centenary of partition and the creation of Northern Ireland. It will be low-key – a series of talks and exhibitions – which is fitting. A commemorative stone, saying simply “Erected to mark the centenary of Northern Ireland 1921-2021”, has been vetoed by Sinn Fein, however. Unionists, who were going to pay for the stone themselves, say that for all Sinn Fein's rhetoric about respect for all communities, this shows the party's true colours. “Just how much more oppressive would our treatment be if we were ever so foolish as to consent to the ‘new Ireland’ these same deniers of respect seek to promote?” they, not unreasonably, ask.

Partition was a victory for majoritarianism, with only six counties of Ulster, rather than the more natural nine, bound together to form the new “state”, in order to ensure a Protestant majority for at least a century. In the process, both northern nationalists and southern unionists were abandoned, cut off in unsympathetic countries where they were often treated appallingly. Given how badly majoritarianism worked out, it is bizarre that some people want to do it again; by creating a united Ireland just as soon as a few more than 50 per cent of the people of Northern Ireland are ready to vote to leave the Union.

If 1921 was a land grab, those now pushing for a united Ireland can be accused of trying to stage another one. Sinn Fein, with its incessant demands for a border poll, is showing no interest in the constitutional goal of “uniting all the people who share the territory of the island of Ireland”; it just wants the territory. Sensitivities of unionists don't matter; the aim isn't to persuade them, it's to outvote them.

Sinn Fein is now pushing its campaign in the US, using money it raised from dewy-eyed Irish-Americans to pay for ads in *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* proclaiming: “This is the time for the people of Ireland to have their say.” This competes with the Irish government's softly-softly strategy, including a well-financed Shared Island Unit which aims to build consensus rather than foment division. After the next general election in the Republic, however, it is likely that the government will be a coalition of Sinn Fein and a Fianna Fail led by a traditional “republican” – Jim O'Callaghan, perhaps. Such a government will

ramp up pressure on Britain, and try to rope the EU and US into the effort.

The demand that a border poll be staged soon – such as in 2023, on the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday agreement – is duplicitous, since Sinn Fein knows Irish unity is certain to be defeated. The 1998 accord says there should be a minimum gap of seven years between border polls, but this is being misquoted, or misinterpreted, by some to suggest that after you hold the first border poll, you must stage one every seven years thereafter. Sinn Fein's real aim is to keep the constitutional question of Northern Ireland always on the political radar, no matter how much damage this does to community relations. The tactic is to wear down unionists by attrition, keeping them on edge, fraying their nerves as they watch the yes-no gap narrow, until eventually enough of them give up. Such a process may eventually deliver a majority for Irish unity, but in practical terms it will be unworkable unless there is a wider and genuine acceptance within the unionist community. One indication of such acceptance would be a lengthy, harmonious sharing of power at Stormont.

Outside Sinn Fein's immediate circle, other nationalists plead they have a right to aspire to a united Ireland and insist we should be able to “debate” what such a state would look like, and even “prepare” for it, in the way Britain failed to do prior to the Brexit referendum. Yet they have to accept that the only way to create a united Ireland is via a border poll as set down by the Good Friday agreement, and it can be called only by the secretary of state for Northern Ireland, who must believe a nationalist victory is “likely”. Clearly it is not “likely” at the moment, and will not be for many years. If ever. Those who profess to support the Good Friday agreement, and even loudly demand that Britain not damage it in pursuit of Brexit, must respect the mechanism it sets out.

By all means let us have a debate, and let proponents of a united Ireland outline the country of their dreams. Show us its new flag. Let's hear its national anthem. Tell us if Stormont will continue to be a regional parliament with devolved powers. Will the new state be in the Commonwealth? If not, how will hundreds of thousands of unionists be able to express their British identity? And will commemorative stones be allowed? Or, in this idyllic new state, will Irish history be written only by the “victors”.

## Hereditary peerages are a disgrace. Abolish them now

There is an absurd anachronism at the heart of democracy in Britain, which our report exposes today. It is in the dozens of hereditary peers still sitting in the House of Lords, long after they were supposed to be abolished. These hereditary peers, who owe their right to sit in the Lords to gifts handed out to their ancestors by kings, queens and prime ministers, account for more than one-tenth of the voting members of the upper chamber.

The votes of these men, who currently number 85, affect the lives of ordinary people. They are men because, unlike the royal family, which abolished it in 2013, male primogeniture still exists for hereditary peers. They have the same rights and privileges as other members of the Lords.

The hereditary peers make the UK look like Ruritania rather than a 21st-century country – or perhaps more accurately like Lesotho, the only other country to reserve places in its parliament on the hereditary principle, in its case for chieftains.

It would be easy to dismiss the continued existence of the hereditaries as quaint British eccentricity, but while the House of Lords and its dining room have been

described as “the best daycare centre for the elderly in London”, these peers consume taxpayers' money and speak and vote on matters that affect the public.

There is a way of reducing and eliminating hereditaries that requires neither hard work nor imagination. Their number, 85, is seven below the permitted complement of 92, because the pandemic has prevented by-elections among hereditaries (of the same party as the deceased) to replace those who have died. Permanently stopping those by-elections would see that process continue and, in time, the hereditaries would disappear.

That, however, is far too slow. It would mean some of the hereditaries would be with us for a long time. Not all of them are old. Change is needed, particularly at a time when the rest of society is working hard to address the lack of opportunity and diversity across so many professions.

Two decades on from Tony Blair's reforms, the hereditary peers are clinging on and the UK's upper chamber continues to be an embarrassment. Abolishing them is the right thing to do for a modernising government.

## Grave errors in translation

The inscription of an Irish phrase on a tombstone in a Coventry cemetery marks the end of a battle between bureaucracy and a bereaved family. The children of 73-year-old school dinner lady Margaret Keane, who lived in the UK for half a century, wanted the words “*Inár gcroí go deo*” (in our hearts for ever) on her headstone.

However, an ecclesiastical court had originally insisted the English translation must also feature, for fear passers-by might think it was a political statement. Earlier this year, an appeal court reversed

that ruling, and now the Irish phrase appears alone.

The initial ruling was petty, but the family's response was arguably excessive too. Now, English visitors to an English graveyard will remain ignorant of the touching sentiment the words represent, and a teachable opportunity to share a beautiful Irish phrase with our neighbours has been lost. And given the mangling that Prince William inflicted on the phrase “*bean-nachtaí na féile Pádraig oraibh*”, a little teaching would not go astray.

Justine McCarthy  
Transport review puts women in the back seat

## Exclusion of female voices shows Leinster House is asleep at the wheel

Have you ever seen a woman on a bus? Yes, I know it's a silly question, but bear with me. Have you ever seen a woman driving a car? Or boarding a plane? Or flying one? Or travelling on a train? Or driving a Luas? Or pedalling a bicycle? Or walking along a footpath?

These are not trick questions – unless you happen to be a politician. In which case, you are liable to get the answers wrong because, in your weird, blinkered little world, women do not exist.

Three days before International Women's Day, when the world stopped patting women's bottoms for 24 hours to pat them on the head instead, the joint Oireachtas committee on transport and communications networks published its submission for the review of the €116 billion national development plan.

Have a read – it won't take long. Its 21 pages are short on practical detail while salivating with aspirational clichés about sustainable development and economic connectivity. There are several shout-outs for Shannon airport. The reason why becomes clear when you study the glorious, technicolour parade of the committee's members at the top of the report. Four of the TDs and senators are from Clare and Limerick, where the airport has long been a political trump card.

There is something even more striking and disturbing about that gallery of 13 grinning portraits: there is not a woman among them. And to think these people call themselves “public representatives”. More like half-the-public representatives. Sometimes, Leinster House is so shamelessly antediluvian it makes Middle-earth look positively enlightened. As long as politicians keep their size tens planted in the paternalistic medieval age, they can expect to command zero authority when they purport to espouse gender equality.

It is utterly bewildering, frustrating and infuriating that, while taxes paid by women will help fund Ireland's transport plan, the Oireachtas has not even pretended to take women's perspectives, needs and wishes into account in deciding how that money should be spent. If you think that's an overstatement, it gets worse. In all, ten statements were made by witnesses who met the committee while it was preparing the report. Every one of those witnesses was a man, including the chief executives of Bus Eireann, Cork and Waterford ports, Irish Rail, the National Transport Authority, the secretary general of the Department of Transport, and his minister. Every one of 16 witnesses from Irish Rail, Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII) and Bus Eireann was male.

“We met with a range of key agencies and stakeholders,” declared Kieran, Joe, Michael,

Cathal, Timmy, Ned, Duncan, Jerry, Steven, Ruairi, James, Gerard and Darren in their report. No, they did not.

They did not meet the women who predominate among passengers on city buses, often lugging shopping, strollers and schoolchildren with them. They did not meet women who, though they own fewer cars than men, rely more on them and spend more hours in them, according to research. And they certainly did not meet the 55 per cent of women who say they are too frightened to use public transport at night.

That finding was contained in a July 2020 report entitled *Travelling in a Woman's Shoes*, which was commissioned by TII but only circulated last week following the abduction and murder of Sarah Everard in London. The TII report outlines some of the measures women are genetically programmed to take to protect themselves while using transport, including carrying keys in their hands “as a makeshift weapon”.

The findings have come as a big surprise to many politicians and journalists, but the biggest surprise for most women is their surprise. How could you not have known that women often take the longer route to a destination if we consider it safer? Or that we always sit in the back of a taxi in case someone might be lurking there? Or that sweat runs down our spine when we hear footsteps too close behind us on a lonely road at night?

You should have known. When you read court reports of how an aviation executive rugby-tackled a female passer-by and sexually assaulted her on a Dublin footpath in 2010 and,

initially, got six months' jail for it, you should have known that would frighten women. When a man led a Spanish student out of Dublin city and raped her over a 21-hour period in 2017, when she feared he would kill her, you should have known. When a woman was fatally attacked while walking on a Dublin street near the IFSC on her way home from work earlier this year, you should have known that was every woman's nightmare scenario. And you would have known, if you had listened.

It is eight months since *Travelling in a Woman's Shoes* was compiled. Until last week, there hadn't been a whisper about it. Even still, the only bits grabbing public attention are the findings about women's fears that took the establishment by surprise. Lads, it's not news. A 2019 report by the Central Statistics Office on crime and victimisation said six in ten women felt unsafe taking the bus and 36 per cent felt in danger walking in their locality at night. That fell on deaf ears.

No wonder the TII report concludes: “As has long been the case, society places the primary responsibility on a woman to keep herself safe, irrespective of the threats she may face. . . . We see that traditionally male-dominated leadership and management has contributed to an unintended male bias in the design of transport systems, resulting in adverse outcomes for women.”

Scant attention has been paid to its recommendation that women should be involved in designing public infrastructure. One can only hope the boys' club that constitutes the Oireachtas transport committee can put down its own riveting report long enough to read this one.

After Sarah Everard was snatched from a London street and horrifically murdered, the city's authorities finally approved funding for extra public lighting. Male columnists have churned out opinion pieces asking “what can we men do?” before proceeding to answer themselves.

Switching on the lights and beating your chests will not fix the problem. It is caused by the sort of exclusion exemplified by the men-only Oireachtas committee. The same committee has begun examining the viability of the post office network and, yes, you've guessed it: they've heard from male representatives of the Irish Postmasters' Union and the Independent Postmasters' Group. Don't women buy stamps?

In his St Patrick's Day meeting with the American vice-president Kamala Harris, the taoiseach quoted Mary Robinson's determination, upon her 1990 election as president, to write women back into history. Let's start with writing us into the here and now.

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To think these people call themselves ‘public representatives’. More like half-the-public representatives

## Gerard Howlin

## Oh no, he didn't – but Leo's halo has slipped



## Now cast as a panto villain, the tanaiste is damaged by the leak controversy

If a taoiseach can't leak a document, he is no taoiseach at all. The pejorative use of the word “leak” to describe Leo Varadkar's passing of a confidential document to a friend, who was then president of the National Association of General Practitioners, misses this point. A taoiseach's cabinet colleagues can leak, though only with difficulty. Political advisers may do so more easily, while civil servants may do so occasionally. But a taoiseach cannot “leak”, because as chairman of cabinet he is the authority who decides what is confidential and what is authorised for disclosure.

This leak, so-called, has become a big political story. Gardaí are conducting an investigation to check whether the Criminal Justice (Corruption Offences) Act 2018 has been breached. Ironically, the revelation of the criminal investigation, in this newspaper and elsewhere last Sunday, may have been the result of an actual leak. There was a remarkable lack of concern last weekend over those leaks in the rush to visit further opprobrium on Varadkar.

The word “leak” is often a crude, overblown way to describe an authorised disclosure. Disclosing to discomfit your enemies, or butter your own turnips, is a staple skill in politics. Still, investigations into leaks titillate the media and, in Varadkar's case, caused some of his political competitors to engage in hypocrisy. The cabinet is collectively responsible for every activity of every government department. A department is an area of responsibility assigned to a minister, but the responsibility is collective. It is hard to see how a minister disclosing a confidential document, or divulging an official secret, could be acting “illegally” unless it was for material advantage. All information not released under the terms

of the Freedom of Information Act is technically secret. In practice, disclosure is wholesale. The context of Varadkar passing a confidential document to his friend was industrial relations negotiations with doctors. In such situations it is a matter of tactical judgment as to when, how and to what extent the position of one party is shared with another. This is how states govern.

If held responsible for breaking political omerta, the outcome is process-free rough justice. Worse than being illegal, it is considered politically inconvenient. Leaking is about currying favour with journalists, having a better share of the limelight, scuppering one policy or testing another. It is inseparable from the messiness of politics and democracy.

But none of this is the preserve of the political class. Officials, if usually sparing, are not averse to leaking. And they have a more subtle and effective weapon, which is not to tell at all. One contentious aspect of what I regard as Varadkar's legitimate disclosure of a copy of an

agreement between the government and the Irish Medical Organisation to Dr Maitiú Ó Tuathail, president of a rival GP organisation, is that the taoiseach at the time didn't inform his cabinet colleague Simon Harris, as minister for health. Yet it is the prerogative of the taoiseach to reach into any department, and it is at his discretion what to tell any minister.

It is assumed in Government Buildings that departments are constantly withholding information. That is true, up to a point. Frequently what is not disclosed to a taoiseach has not been disclosed to the minister either, or at least not in detail. Information is power.

The issue here is not a leak, which I maintain did not happen. It is unlikely to be alleged “corruption”, which is being investigated. Assuming Varadkar got no material gain – and I absolutely do not think he did – the question is whether the quid pro quo was political advantage. But if this is the new bar for doing business in government, it is the end of politics. Considering the glee of his opponents, I assume they still believe seeking political advantage is fair game regardless.

What matters for Varadkar is that he was caught cack-handed in the tidal estuary between secrecy and gossip. Because Ó Tuathail was a friend with a proclivity for WhatsApp, whence a colourful account of the transaction emanated, it has left Varadkar in the part of pantomime villain. The #LeoTheLeak controversy has damaged a meticulously created political persona of a straight-talker.

The squirming in Fine Gael is amusing. The whole point of being in that party is that others, not you, are collared by the gardai. Now the former and future taoiseach is another tradesman, just like the rest of us. The Leo halo has slipped, and innocence is lost.

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Leaking is inseparable from the messiness of democracy