

THE WEMBLEY WAY: The party includes Paul Gallagher AG, Michael Colgan (ex-director, Gate Theatre), Colm Rogers (KPMG tax partner), John Dunne, Sean Dunne, Des Richardson, Steven Dunne, Donal O'Donnell, Michael Fingleton, unknown, Michael Fingleton Jr, Willie Dowling CBRE, and Bosco French



When the judge, the developer, the banker and the AG went to Wembley

The favourite for the chief justice job rose to the top under the radar, but a jaunt is revealing, writes **Shane Ross**



FASTEN your safety belts. A new chief justice will be chosen this year. Judges are already jockeying for position.

Favourite is a man nearly always described as "highly respected" by a national media that fawns in front of Ireland's last unchallenged elite.

Donal O'Donnell is unknown to the public. Better still, he is not even well known in political circles.

He is regarded as a good lawyer. He is already a member of the Supreme Court. And he is not even a member of Fine Gael. Do we need to look any further? A safe pair of hands beckons.

Maybe it would be impertinent to ask his lordship how he originally reached the Supreme Court.

Er, what was the process? How many years did he spend learning the ropes in the High

Court? The Court of Appeal? Any court?

None. Donal was, somehow, sprung out of the bowels of the Bar Library in 2010 and parachuted directly into the Supreme Court. He is only the third person in the history of the State (the others being Hugh O'Flaherty and the late Adrian Hardiman) spirited to the top rank by this super-shortcut.

The discredited Judicial Appointments Advisory Board fig leaf was not even needed to provide the usual cover. There was no interview. As usual, the Cabinet will have known little about him when making the nomination. Such unusual talent-spotting doesn't happen by accident.

Superficial pen pictures of Donal are already appearing in the media. All say much the same thing: he is the son of Turlough O'Donnell, another "highly respected"

(Northern Ireland) Court of Appeal judge; Donal has no obvious political pedigree, but is a good constitutional lawyer; he was at UCD and on the Law Reform Commission. Dull, cut-and-paste stuff keeps surfacing.

Should we not know a little more about the man who is poised to take the most important job in our legal world? What makes him tick? No, it doesn't work like that. Apparently the less we know of his background, his lifestyle, or his character, the better.

A little research last week revealed some intriguing aspects to Donal's life.

He has committed no obvious sins, but surely all candidates for the Supreme Court merit questions about their lifestyle and activities, including their attitude to hospitality past and present. Special standards of behaviour are required of judges. Golfgate and Séamus Woulfe proved that.

Indeed, such questions should have been part of the opaque process that initially lifted Donal, an unknown, to leapfrog his way over others.

Like Séamus Woulfe, Donal loves sport. Specifically, he is a football fan, maybe even a

Manchester United supporter. Every Supreme Court should have one. Football has led him into the company of unlikely bedfellows.

On May 19, 2007, Donal, not yet a judge, was enjoying the Chelsea v Man United FA Cup Final at Wembley. Good for him. More intriguing were his colourful companions.

On that day he was one of an exclusive party of a dozen Irish fans, many of them hugely influential, high profile and exceptionally well connected politically.

Donal's day at Wembley was hosted by property developer Sean Dunne, who was a mover and shaker in 2007, but is today bankrupt. Donal, the barrister, had acted for Dunne in many cases.

Dunne is currently at war in the Four Courts on several fronts. When I contacted Donal last week, he was at pains to point out that he has never sat on any case in which Dunne features.

Another member of Donal's gang at that event was controversial building society boss Michael Fingleton, who landed the nation in the financial manure as a result of the collapse of Irish Nationwide. An even more interesting

member of the Wembley party was a good friend of Donal, a committed Man U supporter called Paul Gallagher, who is today Ireland's Attorney General, for the second time.

On the day of the Wembley jaunt, Gallagher was within less than a month of becoming AG for the first time. He was personally appointed by Fianna Fáil's Bertie Ahern on June 14, 2007. On June 27 last year, he was again appointed, this time by another Fianna Fáil Taoiseach, Micheál Martin.

Wembley was the mother of all jaunts. The lads were jettied over on a private Gulfstream plane, dined in the gourmet Ivy restaurant, stayed at the luxury Westbury hotel in London's Mayfair, enjoyed a corporate box and tickets, all as the guests of Dunne.

Dunne, a friend of Bertie, was a donor to Fianna Fáil. Bertie's money man, Des Richardson, one of the infamous 'Drumcondra mafia' and later listed as a tax defaulter, was another enjoying the outing.

Gallagher's first term as AG was marked by some remarkable appointments to the bench. None was more remarkable than that of Donal O'Donnell to the Supreme Court. AG Paul was the prime

mover in pushing for Donal's meteoric elevation, supported by the Fianna Fáil/Greens Cabinet.

When Chief Justice Frank Clarke retires this year, history will repeat itself. Paul will be AG and Donal will be in pole position to succeed Frank. Donal's first patron will be back in a key place at the right time.

Whatever selection process is used, we can be certain that insiders will again plump for one of the usual suspects.

'Candidates for judicial posts don't do questions. It is time they did'

Minister for Justice Helen McEntee's new Judicial Appointments Bill, if enacted, will ensure that judges and the AG remain in the driving seat. Frank Clarke will still chair the Commission, but my guess is he wants to exit early.

If he is still in situ, he may opt for the man for whom he once acted as an election agent, ex-Fine Gael minister

George Birmingham. A Fianna Fáil versus Fine Gael tribal battle may loom.

There will be no awkward questions to the applicants; probably, as usual, no questions at all. Unless there is an independent non-legal chair, Donal and others will never be asked to declare their interests; their past relationships and activities will be untested. Any skeletons will remain undisturbed in the cupboards.

Donal should be asked whether he felt in any way compromised by accepting such lavish hospitality in the past from Sean Dunne. Was this the only all-expenses-paid trip he received? Were there others? Should those applying for judicial jobs be asked about baggage that could be painted as having the potential to influence their judgments?

All candidates should be asked what shares they hold, their relationships with powerful politicians or their associates, like Des Richardson, Bertie's man on the trip to Wembley. What about their property interests?

Senior judges are believed to have been involved in property syndicates. Were any of them debt defaulters to major

banks? Could the banks exert pressure?

And the Attorney General? When I contacted him last week, he was understandably unwilling to discuss the issues as he might be asked to advise the Government on them in the future. But why does the AG not make a public declaration of interests?

There is no suggestion that Gallagher or O'Donnell or Dunne have done wrong, but if Paul Gallagher ever received largesse from Dunne or other developers, then surely the public are entitled to know?

Do Paul or Donal feel under an obligation to those who have provided them with jaunts of this sort?

We can be certain some of the judiciary are nursing a few well-buried, but embarrassing, secrets.

Neither judges nor politicians will ever ask such pertinent questions when choosing judges. The club is too cosy.

Candidates for judicial posts don't do questions. It is time they did. That is why they need independent outsiders to challenge them.

The last person that should chair any commission choosing the next chief justice is a judge or a politician.

Referendum on a united Ireland is democratic right

Refusing to grant people their say on reunification would be a denial of democracy, writes **Frances Black**



IRELAND'S FUTURE: Senator Frances Black

LAST week Eoghan Harris's column was titled: "Don't heed the hypocrites — this push for Irish unity will end in tears". It referred to the group of which I am chairperson, Ireland's Future, as a "Northern bourgeois nationalist pressure group" which offers "a more sophisticated united Ireland agenda".

Our analysis is different. We say Ireland's Future is an all-island organisation that aspires to Irish reunification and aims to facilitate a discussion toward that end, in line with the democratic principles and processes as set out in the Good Friday Agreement.

We are guided by the values of the Good Friday Agreement and dedicated to fostering mutual respect and equality between all views and traditions that share this island. We are also democrats who believe the people here should be able to decide their own destiny and we should be afforded the right to choose if we want unity or partition.

Constitutional change must be on the basis of the consent of the citizens

of the island of Ireland, as informed by the Good Friday Agreement.

As democrats, it is our duty to test the will of the people and accept the results of referendums. To deny the will of the people is to deny democracy.

It is our view that Brexit has dramatically changed the social and political dynamic on this island. We believe that new democratic, constitutional arrangements have the potential to mitigate the most negative impacts of Brexit and address the aforementioned promotion and protection of mutual respect and equality.

Our group promotes the need for referendums in both parts of the island under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement as the means by which to effect constitutional change. We are not a political party and are not affiliated to any political party.

Ireland's Future notes that any move to new constitutional arrangements requires serious thought, consideration and planning. We believe that the requisite planning for these potential changes must be

broad, inclusive, detailed and comprehensive.

We also support the need for widespread and inclusive debate involving all sections of civic, political and democratic opinion on any future constitutional arrangements.

As an organisation, we are committed to the achievement of democratic constitutional change which is rights-based and protects and promotes the civil and religious liberties of all traditions and identities in Ireland, in a spirit of mutual respect and parity of esteem.

Ireland's Future has lobbied the Government on the issue of the establishment of an all-island citizens' assembly as a forum to enable discussion on future constitutional change. We encourage discussion on all salient issues pertaining to Irish reunification including economic modelling, and human, cultural, and political rights/protections relevant to any prospective new constitutional arrangements on this island.

This is not about victory over unionists, or any other section of our people. It's about a stronger

economy. It's about a new health service that serves the needs of the people. It's about raising the standards of education for our young. It's about creating opportunities on this island, for the people of this island.

The evidence strongly suggests that a new and united Ireland can help us to achieve all of these things. On an island-wide basis, Ireland's Future will continue to campaign and organise a programme of appropriate events, meetings, publicity and research. We also draw upon international experience relevant to the development of a process of constitutional change in Ireland.

To deny the people of this island an opportunity to vote on their own constitutional future is to deny democracy. Instead, let's encourage democracy.

Let's prepare for a new, united Ireland; a self-governing, independent 32-county state that can flourish and, regardless of identity, religion or culture, leave no section of our people behind ever again.

Senator Frances Black is the chairperson of Ireland's Future

We have to start planning now for a better post-Covid nation

Increasing welfare benefits so they keep pace with the real cost of living is a priority, writes **Willie O'Dea**



IT goes without saying that the Government's primary focus for now must be on battling Covid-19. The authorisation of two highly effective vaccines, with the promise of others to come soon, means we are pushing back against the virus on two fronts: suppression and immunisation.

The Government must spare no effort in deploying these two powerful tools 24/7. While the fight against the virus will be the primary focus of the State's energies and resources, policymakers must look at what state our society will be in afterwards.

We cannot underestimate the lasting damage this virus has inflicted. Few townlands or families have been untouched by it. Most of us have family members or friends who have contracted Covid. Sadly, too many of us know people who have succumbed to it. All of us know someone in our social circles who has lost their job, or seen their business or livelihood decimated by Covid.

Some of us, and I include myself in this, have been fortunate enough to continue to work remotely. It has not been easy or fun, but it has been manageable. Many people never had that option. Some

have been able to continue working, often in difficult and worrying circumstances. Many have lost their jobs and been moved on to the PUP.

Far too many of our fellow citizens do not know with confidence if their job will still be there when the crisis has passed. There is an obligation on policymakers and planners to start preparing now for how we restore our economy, and our communities, post-pandemic.

The 2020 exchequer revenue figures may look less unnerving than some feared. However, they still contain pointers to the scale of the problems we will face.

The figures show that income tax yield held up reasonably well, with no massive fall from 2019. At first glance this seems like a positive... but look closer.

This figure tells us that those with moderate-to-high incomes, those who pay the bulk of income tax, are just about managing to get through this.

Most importantly, it confirms to us that those on lower incomes have shouldered the brunt of the Covid cost, they are the ones who pay the lowest levels of income tax. This also points to a strong

likelihood that we are facing a K-shaped recovery, with our society going on two opposing post-Covid trajectories.

One group, the top arm of the K, are the ones on moderate incomes and their recovery should be easy and steady. The other group, those on the lower arm of the K, the ones who have lost their jobs or business, will be spiralling downwards.

Thus we find ourselves with an even more divided and unequal society than we had at the end of 2019.

Many people who never knew long bouts of unemployment before Covid-19 will find themselves on that lower arm, along with the many tens of thousands who were already struggling, pre-Covid, to cope with Ireland's cost of living.

'Thus we find ourselves with an even more divided and unequal society'

In recent interviews, the Taoiseach has stated that this Government will not increase income tax. That's a welcome announcement, but the Taoiseach knows you don't have to increase income tax rates or bands to increase someone's income tax bill.

Leave the rates and the bands alone, and time and wage growth will do that. Recognising this basic fact,

the Taoiseach has said that the Government will move to index income tax bands and rates to keep take-home incomes stable. It is a welcome move, one that I applaud.

It is one we should apply to people on the lower arm of the K too, so I want to see us adopt a similar approach to welfare payments. What I propose is that we also 'index' welfare payments, to retain their real buying power.

The indexing will not be based on the headline inflation rate. That would only serve to permanently lock people into poverty. Indexing of welfare rates must be based on the cost of a basket of essential items (mainly food, heating, etc) which is all that people on welfare can afford.

We must do this now to avoid a repeat of the Government's failure to increase rates, or increase them by amounts that keep pace with the people's real-world cost of living.

In the two years before the Covid virus hit, people who depend on welfare saw the real buying power of their payments drop by 6pc.

This Government and the last one did not cut rates. However, they allowed the value of welfare payments to fall by failing to increase them.

We must not allow that to happen again. The consequences for politics and society would be too dire.

Willie O'Dea is a Fianna Fáil TD for Limerick City and was recently appointed the party's finance spokesperson

Sunday Independent

The Sunday Independent, 27-32 Talbot St., Dublin D01 X2E1, Ireland
 Telephone: (01) 7055333. Fax: (01) 7055779
 On-line edition: www.independent.ie
 International edition printed by Trinity Mirror, Watford, Hertfordshire WD24 7RG
 Spanish edition printed by Bermont Corporation D. L. N° M- 18365-2004

Take back control from the drug lords

THE murder of a man in Ballymun in Dublin last week — shot dead in a brutal attack said to far outweigh his reported involvement in relative petty crime — was the latest in a growing catalogue of recent violent acts which has given rise to legitimate concerns that certain parts of the city are being lost to criminal activity, mostly drug-related.

From accounts provided by local community activists and politicians, there is now virtually a free-for-all in parts of Dublin, such as locations in Ballymun and other districts throughout the city — most notably areas within the north-east inner city, where drugs are openly sold in broad daylight to users said to form an orderly queue as though in a supermarket.

The image presented by those on the ground is one that would not be out of place in a gritty US-based television drama, such series which have provided a broad-ranging examination of how institutional bias and systemic power structures affect people who live in these areas. There is now a danger the State could lose control of some parts of the capital to drug lords. This is unacceptable.

The causes are deep-rooted and multifaceted — and not new. Neither is the problem solely related to policing, although active and visible garda presence in the areas affected is needed. There seems to be no lack of will to confront the sources of the problem. However, the will required is often sporadic and inconsistent.

Earlier this month the Taoiseach, Minister for Finance and several ministers met with members of Dublin's North Inner City Community Coalition to discuss recent violent incidents in the area, such as the shocking knife attacks which led to loss of life. This provided an opportunity for the local community to outline their concerns and put forward a number of ideas to address the current situation.

The North Inner City initiative, established five years ago, is a worthy endeavour. It was set up in response to a number of gangland murders as part of a so-called "feud" between rival groups, including the Kinahan family with its sinister international reach and pretensions towards respectability in the sporting world. There is no doubt that all concerned in the State-led initiative are genuinely motivated, but it will take time to bear more fruit.

It is important that the initiative not fall prey to the inconsistent attention of the State and only show a public face at times of heightened local concerns. This initiative needs ongoing attention across all arms of government, not just the Department of Justice, but also health, education and social protection. It is also essential that the intention behind the initiative is extended to other deprived areas in Dublin, such as Ballymun and elsewhere.

It is important to state there are many great aspects to the communities concerned, not least Ballymun where the latest murder has taken place. This is an area which has provided the current Dublin senior football champions, for example. So there are many fine and proud role models in all of these communities.

In the immediate term, however, it is essential that high-level and visible policing be put in place to allow the State and locals to take back control of their own communities.

QUOTES OF THE WEEK

■ "Mistakes were made in the process leading up to the decision and I deeply regret that, but in the end we got it right. I can reassure you that my Commission will do its utmost to protect the peace of Northern Ireland, just as it has done throughout the entire Brexit process." *Ursula von der Leyen*, European Commission president, on the move to trigger Article 16 of the Northern Ireland protocol.

■ "How was the decision arrived at? Who made the decision? And why? It is not the third secret of Fatima." *Billy Kelleher*, Fianna Fáil MEP, speaking on RTE's *Today With Claire Byrne*, on how the Commission still needs to explain how the decision around Article 16 was reached.

■ "I don't expect the Taoiseach to stand up and say Living with Covid is still our strategy because it has never worked. It's not working now. So I want to know, what is the strategy?" Labour leader *Alan Kelly* on the Government's slowness in revealing plans for the reopening of society.

■ "They are merciless." *Josep Borrell*, EU foreign policy chief, on Vladimir Putin's regime, after he visited Moscow to plead for the release of Alexei Navalny.

■ "My feeling is not scared. I am devoted to fight against military dictatorship. All my colleagues have the same devotion." A doctor at an emergency clinic in Myanmar after treating civilians shot by police for protesting against the military coup.

■ "I crossed paths with the devil in Terenure College." A victim of paedophile teacher *John McClean*.

■ "About 60pc of those travelling are returned Irish holidaymakers. There is a sense that €500 is not a sufficient disincentive. That will be increased." *Taoiseach Micheál Martin* on the growing problem of non-essential overseas travel.

■ "I spent my teenage years filling skips. Did they? Or were they driving their Mercedes into their big plant-hire shops, walking past all of their machinery, worth hundreds of thousands, to count all their money?" *Duncan Smith*, Labour TD, has a go at the Healy-Raes in the Dáil.

■ "We have waited three years after the babies were discovered, and then another year. Why is it taking until the end of the year when the Oireachtas can do it within a few weeks if they wanted?" Historian *Catherine Corless* calling for legislation to allow the exhumation of the Tuam babies to be passed urgently.

■ "Donald Trump surrendered his role as commander-in-chief and became the inciter-in-chief of a dangerous insurrection." *Jamie Raskin*, impeachment manager, at the former US president's trial.

■ "I'll be telling one or two of them to cool, to dial it down. This isn't an ongoing battle between the UK and some of the bigger beasts of Europe." *Micheál Martin* on the EU-UK dispute over the North.

Corrections and Clarifications
 While endeavouring to be fair and accurate in our reporting, the 'Sunday Independent' welcomes suggestions or complaints about errors in our coverage that should be corrected. Requests for corrections or clarifications should be sent by email to corrections@independent.ie or by post to Corrections, 'Sunday Independent', Independent House, No 27-32 Talbot Street, Dublin 1.

Star of Healy-Rae double act really needs to go solo

Ambitious and accomplished, Michael is being held back by a blustering brother who will never be more than an empty vessel, writes **Shane Ross**



LAST Wednesday in the Dáil, Duncan Smith, a little-known Dublin Labour Party TD, savaged Kerry brothers Michael and Danny Healy-Rae. It was a typical Healy-Rae Dáil spat.

You could see the glee on the two brothers' faces as Duncan rose to a bait set by Michael a few minutes earlier. Michael had taken lumps out of Labour's belated conversion to Covid suppression, alleging it was anti-working class and would devastate small business.

Smith saw red, took the brothers apart, branding them as caricatures, insisting he would not take lectures on "understanding workers" from two rural plutocrats. There was the usual uproar. Michael saw the gap. After provocatively lamenting the loss of Duncan's "once great" Labour Party, he invoked the names of Kerry's Labour legends, Dick Spring and Michael Moynihan. He doubled down by surfacing on several media outlets with the same message: urban Labour had betrayed its past heroes; today's Labour was irrelevant. Michael was mopping up whatever little Labour vote the Healy-Raes have not already captured in Kerry. Brother Danny joined in with a few, less coherent, interjections.

It was a well-laid trap, following a familiar formula: the brothers trail their coats in the Dáil; thin-skinned TDs cannot resist an angry response; the Kilgarvan siblings rise to their feet in unison and protest about the abuse they are suffering from Dublin TDs; media coverage ensures the row reaches Kerry. A good day's work for the most extraordinary performing circus in Dáil Éireann.

Opponents of the Healy-Raes used to underestimate the family. No longer. Father of the dynasties, Jackie Healy-Rae, lifted local politics to a new art form when he dictated terms to Bertie Ahern's and Brian Cowen's governments. Jackie openly traded his vote in Dáil Éireann for local largesse in Kerry. Furthermore, he combined with others, such as Independents Harry Blaney and Mildred Fox, to keep Fianna Fáil governments in power. At a price.

At Jackie's side during the weekly horse-trading in Leinster House was a younger Michael. It is no accident that, despite being 13

years Danny's junior, Michael was the anointed one, Jackie's chosen successor.

I was first elected to the Dáil on the same day as Michael in 2011. Our offices were opposite each other. We were both Independents, not part of the same group, but — unlikely as it may seem — we got along like a house on fire. He did not join our gang because he had inherited a special brand, his father's brand, the family brand, but he set out to be the voice of Kerry in Dáil Éireann. By and large, he achieved that by working all the hours that God granted.

When the 2016 election was called, the outcome in the Kerry constituency looked predictable. Michael was a certainty, while other seats were not expected to change hands. At the eleventh hour, Independent TD Tom Fleming withdrew, leaving a gaping hole for a candidate with a strong base in Killarney. As the deadline was closing, Danny Healy-Rae declared, supposedly giving even his close family little notice. He took the second seat, 10,000 votes behind Michael, who polled more than 20,000, the highest tally in Ireland. Michael's massive surplus lifted Danny, an accidental deputy, over the line.

Today, the Healy-Rae family are a quasi-political party, with two TDs and three councillors. They were already significant players in the 2016 government formation talks that followed the general election deadlock. The position of the Healy-Raes prompted much speculation. Were they serious about government talks or were they permanently destined for opposition, at best following in Jackie's footsteps, kingmakers but never kings?

Those of us deeply involved in the same talks sensed a difference in the approach of the two brothers. Michael, a pragmatist, was reported to have been sounded out about a ministry by Enda Kenny. Enda saw two votes in the bag if Michael came on board. Michael was tempted. Danny, still attached to his family's Fianna Fáil origins, was irrevocably set against teaming up with the hated Blueshirts. As neither brother could afford a split in the Healy-Rae family or the destruction of a priceless brand, they walked back into the wilderness of opposition. Michael, undoubtedly the family's political



BRAND OF BROTHERS: Michael and Danny Healy-Rae's Dáil theatrics are aimed squarely at their Kerry base

heavyweight, was frustrated by his elder brother's lack of vision. The word in the Members' Bar was that he rued the day Danny gatecrashed the election as a running mate. It is an open secret in Leinster House that, despite public appearances, they are far from close personally.

After the government was formed, as a minister I watched both of them pontificating from the benches opposite. We often clashed. On parliamentary performance there was no comparison. Michael was a superstar. Danny was an embarrassment. While Michael vigorously opposed many of the measures I introduced, especially the drink-driving bill, his opposition was well argued, albeit infuriating. Unlike Danny, he played the ball, not the man, avoiding personal animosity. Where Michael usually steered a calm course, Danny drove a bulldozer without brakes.

Michael was a formidable filibuster with razor-sharp parliamentary skills; Danny bellowed out slogans across the floor. Outside the Leinster House gates, Danny unwisely picked rows with long-suffering road victims' groups, sometimes making wild

claims about it being safe to drive with two pints on board.

His political insanity was a godsend. Original waverers on the bill, such as Fianna Fáil, fled into our camp in a desperate effort to distance themselves from his antics.

During my time in the Cabinet, Michael and I maintained good personal relations despite political differences. He brought numerous Kerry delegations to lobby about roads when I was in Transport.

Behind closed doors he was persuasive. He possesses immense personal charm and is a shameless flatterer when it is politically useful. He hosted my two-day visit to Kerry, meeting local vintners, exploring tourism prospects in Valentia and Killarney and visiting sporting sites.

At the outset, he casually suggested I take a lift with him for the first meeting. I instantly lost my wheels and my independence. For two days, a TD held a minister prisoner in his car being escorted around Kerry. It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

In the meantime, he and Danny regularly repeat the ritual theatrics in the Dáil chamber, defending the brand, signalling to their Kerry

constituents they are still outsiders fighting against Dublin's anti-rural bias. Last week, Duncan Smith provided the latest opening.

Entertaining as it is, the Healy-Rae show cannot go on. This month, Michael marks 10 years in the Dáil. As it happens, unlike his father, he has little to show for it. He is one of a group of Independent rural TDs, including Mattie McGrath and Michael Collins, few of whom have any notion of ever being in government. He is head and shoulders above any of them, but feels obliged to disguise it from time to time. He is ambitious, but a wasting asset, held back by a brother who will never be more than an empty vessel.

After the next scheduled election, Michael will have served 15 years on the backbenches. If the Dáil numbers are right (and both he and Danny are re-elected), the Healy-Rae clan must make a decision. One of them alone is ministerial material. They can either retain two voices in the wilderness, creating mayhem, or provide one competent minister capable of delivering for Kerry and the nation.

Michael is up for it. We could do worse.

Any policy to revive economy must take risk of a fourth lockdown into account

Government must resist calls by lobby groups to relax rules too soon — and outline its policy for post-Covid recovery, writes **Colm McCarthy**



AT the end of May last year, European governments had been wrestling with the virus for around three months — only a few had taken major action before March.

But it was already clear that the success of public health measures in controlling the pandemic was reflected in economic costs — those countries which had been most effective at suppressing the first wave had been able to restart economic activity at a brisker pace.

In Ireland, the reopening proceeded without controls on foreign travel and the second wave from August onwards was boosted by holidaymakers who brought back an identifiable Spanish variant of the virus.

The second lockdown followed, to be ended with the pre-Christmas reopening and another wave of infection, imported from the United Kingdom on this occasion.

The current lockdown is the third — and there are understandable demands, with the vaccination programme under way, that it should be the last. The Government has finally been persuaded of the need for controls on virus importation through travel.

The experts in virology who advocated a policy of suppression towards zero, with tight travel restrictions, have been vindicated in the unforgiving record of public

health outcomes. Fatalities, hospitalisations and serious illness have been better contained in countries, mainly outside Europe, which chose ambitious targets, exercised patience, and avoided stop-go.

Those who stressed the short-term cost of severe restrictions and urged early relaxation won the ear of governments in Europe. It should now be acknowledged that this experiment has been conducted long enough and the verdict is in.

The 'save the economy' advocates may have meant well, but they got it wrong. The economic costs have soared as the ICUs, and mortuaries, have coped with the consequences of hasty reopening and inadequate controls on travel.

There is no meaningful trade-off between lives and livelihoods. Fine-tuning the policy response week by week, including the notion that each public health intervention can be validated 'scientifically' to the satisfaction of lobby groups, has been proven a delusion. The policy which fixes public health is the policy that fixes the economy. This was not obvious a year ago, but it should be obvious now.

It is feasible, it has been done, to pursue policies which suppress the virus, in advance of the availability of effective and safe vaccines. Everyone is now familiar with the list of countries which have shouldered the early costs and reaped the reward.

The success of the pharmaceutical companies in producing vaccines earlier than expected means that the last excuse for a policy without a target has been overtaken by events. It postpones rather than promotes economic recovery and it squanders public health.

The incidence of new cases in Ireland is not falling quickly enough to justify any early reopening and vaccination, constrained by product availability, cannot make an appreciable contribution before summer. The current sluggish decline in the rate of infection suggests that it could be May before new daily cases fall below 100.

Some experts regard this figure as about the maximum consistent with the capacity of the test, trace, and isolate system to contain the disease and spare the hospitals.

The most vulnerable groups are being inoculated week by week and the sector lobbies will cite their improved protection as they limber up for the next save-the-economy debate.

If fatalities decline as expected, there remains the risk that a fourth wave will fill the hospitals again with unvaccinated younger people less likely to die but sufficiently numerous to overload the hospitals all over again.

The Irish Government will come under additional pressure because the UK is delivering a spectacularly successful vaccination programme. Around 15 million will have received a first dose by today and vaccines are now being offered to people under 70. The UK is three or four weeks ahead of other European countries — and the Tory backbenches are urging early relax-

ation. It will be hard to resist and there will be demands for copycat measures here, especially if sectors of the Northern Ireland economy can reopen earlier than would be prudent south of the Border.

The first instalment in a policy to revive the economy should be the avoidance of a fourth lockdown. That means only minor relaxations if things go well and a willingness to tighten even further if case incidence stays high. Recent calls to open fully the construction industry, already enduring fewer restrictions than applied in the first lockdown, will have to be assessed against other priorities, such as restarting infant classes in primary schools.

If the vaccination effort will

'There could be quite a consumer boom whenever the economy reopens for keeps'

eventually contain the pandemic, the Government should outline soon the course of economic policy which it envisages for the post-Covid recovery.

Finance Minister Paschal Donohoe indicated last week that the top VAT rate, pointlessly reduced to 21pc from 23pc last year, will be restored to 23pc from March 1. The Government also cut the 13.5pc rate on hospitality industries to 9pc and Donohoe did not indicate a date for restoration.

He should do it quickly — these

industries are closed anyway and will be staying closed for quite a while. Should the vaccination programme succeed in delivering a sustainable reopening later this year, they will make out like bandits. In these parts a pint cost €5 at the old (13.5pc) VAT rate. If the pubs were open today the cost would be €4.80. But they are closed, and these bargain pints go a-begging. Make it €5 again, Paschal, and see if anyone notices.

There could be quite a consumer boom whenever the economy reopens for keeps. Central Bank figures show a huge increase in bank deposits, reflecting involuntary saving — most people have not seen a sharp fall in income and have been unable to spend. There will be a travel splurge whenever it is permitted, and the shops, pubs and restaurants will be fine.

The likelihood of strong consumer demand will make it easier to manage the public finances back into balance, a background different to the post-2008 period when the State had to borrow from the IMF and fiscal policy had to be tightened in a downturn.

The emergency spending to support those thrown out of work, and the business sectors worst affected, cannot be withdrawn too quickly, so the early effort to rebalance the budget should start with the restoration of VAT to its former levels.

There may have to be other tax increases (water charges, anyone?), with tighter controls on spending and the tendency, much in evidence, to embrace new and permanent spending commitments which have nothing to do with Covid, needs to be reined in as quickly as possible.