

Is this really the best Fine Gael can offer?

The Fine Gael leadership race came with a coded invitation to hate our fellow citizens



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Illustration by Tom Halliday



[Gene Kerrigan Twitter](#)

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Ok, complete the following sentence: "I'm really glad Leo Varadkar was Minister for Transport from 2011 to 2014, because otherwise . . ." Take your time. Search your memory.

Think yourself back to when Leo first became a minister . . .

Time's up.

Second question. Complete the following sentence: "I'm really glad [Leo Varadkar](#) was Minister for Health from 2014 to 2016, because otherwise . . ."

We could play this game on through Leo's latest incarnation, as Minister for Social Protection, but let's not.

Anyway, I'm sure you've already filled up both sides of your sheet of paper, listing all the great things that wouldn't have happened had Dr Varadkar stuck to the doctoring, instead of moving into the politicking.

We could move on to [Simon Coveney](#) and play the same game, but you get the point.

These two are regarded as the best Fine Gael has to offer.

The party seriously considered offering us Frances Fitzgerald as a potential Taoiseach - the minister who has presided over serial debacles in the Garda force, always running to catch up, always offering yet another long finger on which to hang the latest crisis.

The party seriously considered offering us Taoiseach Simon Harris - putting the country in the stewardship of the Minister for Giving Away Maternity Hospitals to Nuns.

It considered Richard Bruton - well, no, it didn't, really. Richard is - ah, Richard's a nice chap.

The party considered Paschal Donohoe for the job, but he demurred, because Paschal's playing a long game. When Paschal finally makes his move his potential rivals will discover their feet have been quietly nailed to the floor.

So, we were left with Leo-v-Simon. Both sons of privilege, men of ambition with no distinguishing political marks and no great record of distinction.

Myself, I think of politicians as being anywhere from first rate to fourth rate. That is, from 1st (exceptional), through 2nd and 3rd (competent and mediocre), to 4th (unacceptable).

There used to be quite a few in that last category, but these days Michael Lowry mostly has the space to himself.

Varadkar, who has risen largely without trace, could not with any credibility be filed under anything but mediocre - that is, third rate.

Leo is distinguished mostly by his conspicuous ambition and sense of entitlement. Elected barely a decade ago, he has for some time appeared slightly bemused to have not yet been appointed party leader.

His time in Health was noteworthy for the speed with which he got the hell out of there. He repeatedly declared the failures of the system to be "unacceptable", as though someone else was in charge. And after a mere 22 months he left things only slightly worse than he found them.

Coveney is 19 years on the job and seemingly came out of Agriculture with an enhanced reputation among those who know something about the business. (And, no, I know nothing about agriculture, other than it being where you go when you want a turnip, a yearning that is beyond my comprehension.)

Simon remains excited at having, as Minister for Defence, sent a boat to pluck drowning refugees from the Mediterranean. That episode was one of the few in recent times to make this country legitimately feel good about itself, so Coveney is entitled to be considered competent - that is, second rate.

Let's not mention the fact that as Minister for Housing he seems totally out of his depth.

Preparing for the contest, Coveney assembled a list of things he should be in favour of, and sought issues on which he could disagree with Varadkar. And there aren't many.

The two share a fairly primitive grasp of right-wing politics (deregulate, cut taxes, reduce State services, stop the State "meddling" with the market), and that's about it.

Varadkar did three things that seemingly never occurred to Coveney. First, he quietly got the commitment of fellow Fine Gael TDs, prepping them to back him publicly and immediately, hoping to overwhelm any opposition.

Lord knows what he promised them.

Second, he appropriated about €200,000 from his Department of Social Protection, to mount an anti-fraud campaign. He did this in the period running up to the expected retirement of Enda Kenny - knowing it would play well with the FG mainstream.

If Coveney had any guts he'd ask the Standards in Public Office Commission if this €200k could be reckoned as election expenditure. But he hasn't. Any guts, that is.

Third, Varadkar appeared to lurch to the right.

He did this in a somewhat sleeveen manner. There are right wingers who have no problem stating their beliefs, standing over what they believe is the best course, for which they're entitled to respect.

And there are right wingers who haven't the guts to do that - who say with a smirk that they want to govern for "the people who get up early in the morning".

This is an adaptation of the tactics of UK Tories, from 2005, and their racist "are you thinking what we're thinking?" campaign.

Leo dare not say, "Look, the country's full of lazy skangers who live off the rest of us and I hate them as much as you do". But his coded line does the job.

Varadkar seems to assume he already has most of the liberal wing of FG, from the marriage referendum aftermath; his lurch into class hatred may mop up some of the antediluvian right.

He may or may not believe any of this stuff - my suspicion is he doesn't believe very much, apart from the ever-upward progress of Leo.

Simon, God help us, has a more "liberal" view, believing we should "find out why aren't they motivated" to get up.

Jesus.

Do these people not know this country? Do they not know that the unemployed are largely a shifting mass, people losing and getting jobs, bridging the gap by availing of social supports - for which they've already paid?

Or do Varadkar and Coveney live in some right-wing fantasy world of strong-chinned heroes versus slobbering social misfits?

In the real world, the great majority work because we want to work, and it pays better than the dole, and it opens possibilities for the future.

The great majority of us respect one another. We are occasionally let down, but mostly we recognise ourselves - our ambitions, our fears and our satisfactions - in the lives of our neighbours.

And where our neighbours are brought down by circumstance we wish them well, we hold fundraisers and we send them cards with flowers on them.

And when we're occasionally brought down ourselves, we're thankful for the helping hand that keeps us going.

We don't share the miserable contempt and suspicion of humanity that both Varadkar and Coveney have displayed in this competition between the second-rate politician and the third rate.

These wretched people, so mistrustful of their fellow citizens, are in the process of waving goodbye to a beloved Taoiseach.

A Taoiseach who lost an election in 2007, couldn't get a majority in 2011, took a hammering in 2016, who helped fashion a prosecutorial system that can't prepare statements for a trial; who presides over hospitals where people die on trolleys in noisy corridors; who can't keep track of the number of scandals that have afflicted the police force; who still seems complacent about the number of people sleeping on the streets.

And as he leaves, two of those who helped him make this country what it sorrowfully has been reduced to are competing to replace him. And doing so in campaigns that offer a little hope, wrapped in a whole lot of suspicion and hate.

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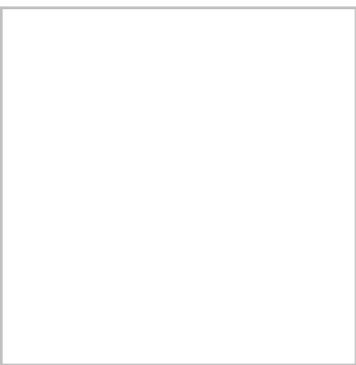
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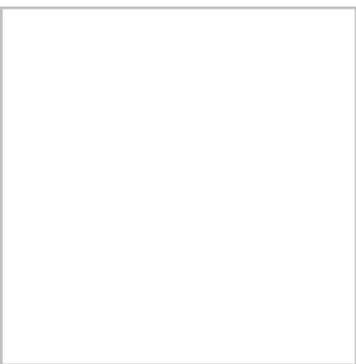
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Stuck in a loop of the 'same old, same old'

Gene Kerrigan It'll be all right, won't it? Eventually? Let's say five years from now, we won't be having one crisis after another in basic services, will we?



Gene Kerrigan: Is he gone yet? Who's up next? Oh, him?

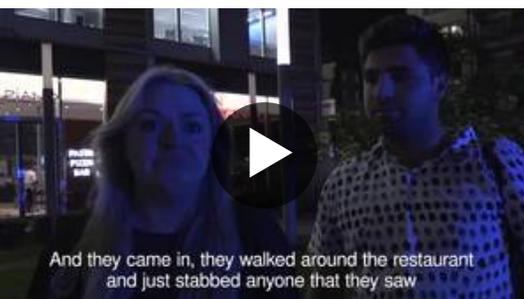
Gene Kerrigan For politicians in heat, words are dust to be thrown in the eyes of others, while they position themselves for victory. And during any election, truth is a handicap. So, never mind what they say,...

The good, the bad and the irresponsible

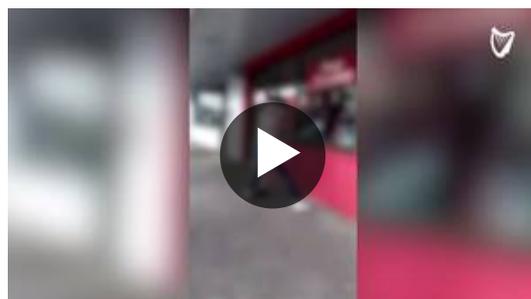
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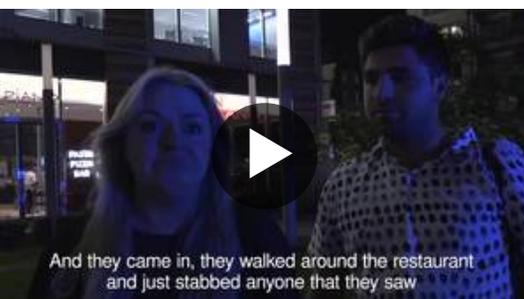
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