

## We must make use of derelict properties

THE notion of an American company taking over a derelict property in Ireland, with the express aim of establishing ownership under 'squatters' rights' legislation, is bound to make most people uneasy.

When it turns out that the company involves colourful Irish-born developer Philip Marley – largely famous because of his controversial US reality TV star partner Dana Wilkey – people could be forgiven for being even more sceptical.

Already Dublin City Council has reacted with alarm to the US firm Common Interest Communities Ltd having apparently taken over a derelict property in Phibsborough, with plans to rent it out to families for 12 years before assuming ownership.

And yet it is not hard to imagine that there will be a certain sympathy, if only because people are outraged that so many usable properties around the capital are lying idle. We are in the middle of a housing emergency – the term being rightly used by the new Housing Minister, Eoghan Murphy – and the sight of properties that could be housing families instead of remaining unused is an anathema to most right-thinking people.

It is this sentiment which fuelled public support for the occupation of Apollo House by the Home Sweet Home movement. As flawed as that project may have been, it tapped into a very palpable public anger that so many buildings around the city are not being put to good use. Whenever we see a boarded-up home or row of buildings, it is only natural that we ask: 'Why isn't that being used to house somebody who needs it?'

Ultimately, individuals seizing property and asserting squatters' rights in order to make money is not the answer. But it is a very powerful pointer as to what the State should be doing on our behalf.

And if it takes the actions of a property developer to force the State to take action, then he may have done us all a service.

## Victims need support

TWICE in the past week, Judge Patrick Durcan of Ennis District Court has spoken out from the bench about the various media organisations which, he says, are 'whipping up public opinion' over the failure of courts to properly sentence serial offenders. Judge Durcan added: 'The courts don't respond to the people in the media who whip up public opinion but the legislature does.'

Well, we certainly hope so. Because here at the Irish Daily Mail, we like to think that we have done more than any other media outlet to campaign against soft sentencing. We have done so not for ideological reasons, but simply because we put victims before criminals.

We believe that the honest, law-abiding majority need to be protected from violent and serial offenders. Sentencing should act as a deterrent to repeat criminals; and if they won't be deterred, they should be locked away so they cannot terrorise the rest of society.

So if the charge from Judge Durcan is one of sticking up for victims of crime against a justice system which all too often seems to favour the criminal, then we are more than happy to say: 'Guilty as charged!'

## Nóirín must go

THERE is no need to set out again the vast array of reasons why a new Garda Commissioner is needed.

Now, however, there is clear evidence that the vast majority of the public – a full 70% – agree. All of which makes you wonder why this government seems so utterly determined to stick by Commissioner Nóirín O'Sullivan.

Do they really hold the public in such contempt as to think their actions on this issue will not come back to haunt them?

## SATURDAY ESSAY



by Catherine Fegan  
CHIEF CORRESPONDENT

**E**VERY Sunday, Darryl Hewitt decks himself out in his Orange Order regalia and makes his way to Drumcree Church.

The ritual is always the same. There, outside the majestic church perched upon a hilltop, he meets a small delegation of brethren and they march in unison down Drumcree Hill. They reach the bridge below, where a policeman is stationed, and ask permission to continue into town. He politely refuses and they turn and march back up the hill.

'We have gone up there every Sunday since 1998,' said Mr Hewitt.

'We missed three Sundays because of Foot and Mouth, but that was it. Even when Christmas Day was on a Sunday we were there. We will keep going there until we finish the 1998 parade.'

Beyond the famous bridge – which at the height of the dispute in the 1990s and early 2000s was the point at which razor wire and soldiers enforced the Parades Commission's determination that the Orange Order could not proceed – the Catholic communities of the Garvaghy Road area pay little or no attention to the weekly protest.

Ambivalence to the ritual is so widespread, says Mr Hewitt, that on one occasion the superintendent was late and the delegation marched down part of the banned route unnoticed.

'When he arrived he called us back so we turned,' he said.

'It only happened once.'

It has been 20 years since the Protestant Orange Order parade to Drumcree church was allowed to return to Portadown along the predominantly republican Garvaghy Road. Until this week, the annual sectarian confrontation has slipped from public attention.

But in the slipstream of Democratic Unionist Party negotiations with Theresa May over deals to sustain her weakened government, a wish list of loyalist aspirations began to emerge, among them calls for the march to complete its contentious, former route. In a Twitter statement issued by Mr Hewitt's lodge, his members indicated they wanted marches 'high on the agenda for the new government'.

**T**HE tweet – which Mr Hewitt says was sent out of frustration with the Parades Commission, was seen by others as a warning salvo to Republicans.

On the Garvaghy Road, sporadically dotted with Sinn Féin election posters and Irish tricolour flags, Jack McStay, a resident, said the Orange Order had 'no hope' of getting down the road.

'No way,' he said. 'Not a chance. They are at it. But I can tell you now that parade won't be getting down this road. [Arlene] Foster shouldn't even be in office. Everyone here has forgotten about that parade and tried to move on. Why can't they do the same?'

Further along the Garvaghy Road, residents' spokesperson Breandán Mac Cionnaith was

# As the DUP works out a deal with May's Tories, loyalist hopes – like their bonfires – are growing higher and higher. So too, is tension across the troubled Six Counties

# Is the N more difficult than ever



Poles apart: Arlene Foster and Sinn Féin's Michelle O'Neill

sitting at his desk in the Mayfair business centre. A well-known republican and former Sinn Féin councillor, Mr Mac Cionnaith was front and centre of the 1998 stand-off.

'There was a lot of nervousness over the last week or two after that tweet,' he said.

'The Orange Order were hoping for a replay of 1995 and 1996

when John Major was dependent on the likes of David Trimble and others.

'Two years on the trot, when the Tory government had power, we know what happened here. The initial decisions of 1995 and 1996 were to stop the parade and then political pressure was applied. They [the Orange Order] have seen

an opportunity here and they are going to capitalise on it.'

He added: 'Everyone has moved on except Mr Hewitt and about 200 Orangemen.'

As July 12, the anniversary of the Battle of the Boyne approaches, towering piles of wooden pallets are gathered in loyalist areas of Portadown for the traditional bonfires.

With murmurs of rising expectations within loyalism that the DUP's partnership with the Conservatives will lead to movement on the parades issue, community tensions are easily inflamed.

On Tuesday afternoon, Derek Peters pulled up next to a bonfire site close to Montague Street. He stepped out of his car and began to unload wood and pile it next to the pallets.

'They can't stand the fact that we have the upper hand,' he said.

'You wait and see. Things are going to be changing around here. And all this talk of a border poll... never going to happen. Here in Portadown we

Heated:  
Protesters  
during a  
previous  
marching  
season

# North divided ever?

stick together. They have their side and we have ours.

'That's the way it is. It's the way it will always be.'

In Portadown, the 'sides' still exist. Communities still live apart and tension still simmers beneath the surface. Even beyond this once-infamous Troubles flash-point, the North still emerges as a place struggling to integrate.

There are 109 peace walls in Northern Ireland. While tourists visit these spots and take pictures, in reality they symbolise the deep divisions that still exist today.

It is a division that is playing into the hands of the two dominant political parties, the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Féin, whose success in the recent Assembly elections was buoyed by the dissension of the campaign into a tribal face-off. In the wake of the recent assembly elections, the new electoral map of Northern Ireland painted a startlingly vivid picture of the divide.

There was the orange/unionist north-east, stretching from East Derry down through Antrim, most of Belfast, to Strangford, Lagan

Valley and Upper Bann. And then the mirror image – the dark green/republican south and west, stretching from Foyle, down west of the Bann, Mid Ulster and West Tyrone and Fermanagh, crossing into Armagh and ending in South Down.

The only features to break up the two monoliths were the dark green wedge of West Belfast and the lavender of independent Unionist Sylvia Hermon in North Down.

There, in orange and green is the modern-day illustration of peace time Northern Ireland – two tribes. Two parties. Two landmasses.

The fact that Sinn Féin came within one seat and fewer than 1,200 votes of the DUP in the March elections meant that the two main parties were able to fight the June election mainly on constitutional grounds.

If nationalists abandoned the SDLP and supported Sinn Féin, then the prospect of a united Ireland would be brought closer, it was argued, and it seems many nationalists bought that argument.

But for every action there is an

equal and opposite reaction. Therefore, unionists were invited to ditch the UUP and throw in their lot with the DUP in order to counter Sinn Féin's drive for a Border poll. And that is what they did.

**I**T means that the two parties who were the main architects of the 1998 Belfast Agreement and the peace process – the SDLP and UUP – now have no representation in the House of Commons.

It is a form of polarising politics that will mutually suit the DUP and Sinn Féin. But as voters migrate into two very distinct ethnic blocks, what will this polarisation mean for Northern Irish society?

This week, in East Belfast, there were further indications that tensions are increasing when UVF flags were erected in specially built cross-community housing developments.

Dozens of paramilitary and loyalist flags were put up in the Global

Crescent and Cantrell Close 'shared neighbourhoods' amid a flurry of complaints from residents.

Both developments are located close to Ravenhill Avenue and the loyalist Woodstock Road areas.

Global Crescent and Cantrell Close off Ravenhill Avenue are part of the 'Together Building United Communities' programme which aims to improve community relations and work towards a more united and shared society.

On Wednesday, in stark contrast with the surrounding streets, both areas were flying dozens of flags.

One resident, who didn't want to be named, said people feel intimidated and fear the UVF is attempting to 'stamp their authority' in the area.

'This is a mixed area,' she said. 'We all live alongside each other peacefully. No one group owns or runs the estate. We respect each other's beliefs and traditions but this is unacceptable and intimidating and it has no place in our neighbourhood.'

The problem is not just in Portadown and Belfast. In many parts of

Northern Ireland there are neighbourhoods on both sides that act as showrooms of ethnic antagonism: painted kerbs, murals of paramilitary heroes, and walls festooned with slogans. But this was an integrated area, a project born out of the peace deal. For that reason, people are agitated.

If you drive beyond certain parts of Belfast and Portadown you will see a different picture. There are still flags on the main roads but there is no longer the same sense of bristling hostility. However, that's simply because the signs are no longer so obvious.

Twenty years on from Good Friday, the education system is still largely segregated, and friendships across the traditional divide rare.

The majority of children in Northern Ireland – 93% – are educated at schools mainly attended by either Protestant or Catholic pupils.

And while the educational divide is often expressed in solely religious terms, schools can reflect the nationalist or unionist identity of communities they serve.

In a recent Department of Education review, Stormont was criticised for failing to 'lead the planning, development and growth of integrated education'.

**A**CCORDING to Maddy Bridgman, public affairs and advocacy officer at the Integrated Education Fund, if we are to look to children for the future, we must stop educating them apart.

'In integrated schools we celebrate diversity so nobody has to hide their identity,' she said.

'It's a shared area. That's so important rather than taking children at four and saying, "This is who you are and this is what you will identify with". We need to see this addressed at a political level. We have reminded the political leaders that they have made commitments through various documents, including the Good Friday Agreement. Tackling division in education is one of many important issues. If you start with your young people you can build a more united future.'

The North has had two decades of what outsiders call peace. The world's media no longer descends on Drumcree – the neighbours feel no fear. But this indicates only an absence of conflict, which is not the same as peace.

This Sunday, Darryl Hewitt will make his weekly pilgrimage to a church that was once the setting for bitter confrontation and a grim test of wills. He will walk down the hill with his brethren and be told to turn back. That's fine, he says. That's the way he wants to play it. 'But I won't always be District Master,' he warned.

'Someone else will come along, may take a different approach to this.'

On the other side of the bridge, Brendan Mac Cionnaith has no interest in meeting Mr Hewitt.

'Why do I need to?' he said. 'There is no common ground.'

Politically, the clock is ticking. The DUP and Sinn Féin have until June 29 to negotiate a deal to reinstate the Northern Executive and Assembly, otherwise the people of the North face more assembly elections or direct rule from Westminster.

With the polarisation of recent months set to deepen, the formula for peace across communities – the invisible one that goes beyond the painted kerbstones and the loaded guns – looks more complicated than ever.