

# Miriam Lord's year



## In the first month of 2016, the Dáil talked about homelessness. It still tops the agenda

Economic recovery should have been something to cheer about, but only served to highlight growing unease about where the benefits are going

On Thursday this Christmas Week, the queues were out the door. They had to put crowd control barriers along the footpath on Bow Street to keep people safe and the road clear.

Meanwhile, velvet ropes kept the lines orderly down Grafton Street way.

In Smithfield, close on 3,000 people waited in the cold for their turn to enter the Capuchin Day Centre and collect a food parcel. Groceries for the coming days – bread, chicken, rashers, cheese. Some sweets too, for the season that's in it. It was a sight to see.

Across the river, inside Brown Thomas's front door, the luxury fragrance concession was inundated. Bottles of cologne costing more than €100 were flying off the shelves. Cool assistants marshalled befuddled-looking men towards the cash registers.

In this hectic corner, young women waited patiently to have their "Jew-Melooone" Pomegranate Noirs and French Lime Blossoms swaddled in tissue, boxed and beribboned. It was a sight to see.

The images pointed up the contradictions of a year when economic recovery should have been something for everybody to cheer about, but only served to highlight a growing sense of unease about where the benefits are going.

At the beginning of the year, as a general election loomed, Enda Kenny and his outgoing Fine Gael government expected all their hard work to be rewarded by a grateful nation.

The recession had been so cruel, to so many, that people would surely express their gratitude at the ballot box.

"Keep the recovery going" was the mantra, because all Kenny and his advisers could see was a rising tide lifting all boats. But they failed to make allowances for all those vessels still firmly anchored to the bottom and also forgot that some people had no boats at all.

Or if they did, they used them to escape the ravages of winter flood damage at the start of 2016. The Government responded by setting up a body to "oversee" the river Shannon, rather like a veranda.

The voters in that region responded by electing Independents – two of whom, Seán Canney and Kevin "Boxer" Moran, are now part of government.

Due to the election, we had a nothing government for the first half of the year and a next-to-nothing government for the other.

In January, the political parties were all-consumed by the forthcoming election.

The Fianna Fáil leader Micheál Martin, who would go on to support a Fine Gael-led minority Government, declared that Kenny had "zero, zilch credibility".

On the morning of February 3rd, Kenny barrelled into the Dáil, mumbled that he was calling an election and then ran.

A short time later, he left to consult the President, leaving a silent and bewildered looking Tánaiste and Labour leader Joan Burton on the steps of Government Buildings as she waved goodbye to the back of his car.

### Blackhole

One thing is certain: Labour politicians, those who lost their seats and the few who remain standing, won't be buying their Christmas turkey from Tesco this year.

During the campaign, the party was mercilessly flogged with that Tesco-style advert they published before the 2011 election highlighting Fine Gael cuts they would prevent if in power. Except they didn't. It was unfortunate, as Labour achieved many of its stated aims.

For that matter, Fianna Fáil's Éamon Ó Cuív said that his party supporting a minority Fine Gael government was a "rubbish idea".

And look at them now.

Sinn Féin had a terrible start to their campaign when their call for the abolition of the Special Criminal Court coincided with a spate of gangland murders in Dublin. But finance spokesman, Pearse Doherty, created the perfect diversion by spotting a black hole in Michael Noonan's "Fiscal Space" – or the money he would have to spend in the next budget.

Well before polling day, the Labour Party could see the writing on the wall.

Outgoing minister Alan Kelly's propensity for opening his mouth and putting his foot in it eventually led to denials by headquarters that they were hiding him from public view.

Joan Burton didn't survive – Brendan Howlin took over as Alan Kelly sulked. The smaller parties didn't fare so well.

Lucinda Creighton, the leader of Renua, proclaimed the election would be "make or break" for her new party. But if things went well, Renua might end up holding the balance of power. The new party won no seats. She's out of politics now.

Micheál Martin was blue in the face with "coalition-ology" and journalists constantly asking him if Fianna Fáil would



■ Enda Kenny and Micheál Martin: Fianna Fáil became the proud possessor of a confidence and supply agreement with Fine Gael, lending its support to the minority administration. Alan Kelly's propensity for opening his mouth and putting his foot in it eventually led to denials by headquarters that they were hiding him from public view. The Endependents (Seán Canney, Kevin "Boxer" Moran, Finian McGrath, John Halligan and Shane Ross) milked negotiations right up the final, dragged-out minutes of a dramatic May. PHOTOGRAPHS: REUTERS/PA/NICK BRADSHAW

coalesce with Fine Gael.

Someone else who professed to be blue in the face was Leo Varadkar. Then again, who can't be bored at this stage with the obsession over whether Leo or Simon Coveney will succeed Enda Kenny? (Enda, by the way, said early on in the year that he intends to stand for re-election and, near the end of it, he mused about being Taoiseach when Pope Frances comes to Ireland in 2018.)

As for Leo, in July he protested his annoyance over the leadership thing. "I'm just waiting on the day when I sit on the toilet and some commentator somewhere decides that's part of some strategy."

Kenny ignominiously bumbled his way towards that coveted second successive term as Taoiseach. But he had a terrible campaign, making boring speeches about the economy to bored factory workers around the country while beating people over the head with his dud "keep the recovery going" line.

The televised debates were so lacklustre a bit of paper fluttering down from Micheál Martin's lectern proved a major talking point.



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**What kind of society do we want to live in? If we want a fairer more equal society then, strange as it may seem, we have to apply morality and ethics to taxes and finance**  
Maureen O'Sullivan

For a while, it looked like there might have to be another election as attempts to form a government went on and on.

Martin thought he could be taoiseach, but abandoned the idea when the numbers didn't add up.

Enda – bless his innocence – said he wanted his party's negotiations with Independents to conclude before he opened lines to Fianna Fáil.

### Endependents

As it turned out, the Independents milked negotiations right up to the final, dragged-out minutes of a dramatic May 6th Dáil sitting, when the "Endependents" led by newly elevated Minister Shane Ross decided to support him for Taoiseach.

Fianna Fáil became the proud possessors of a "confidence and supply" agreement with Fine Gael, lending its support to the minority administration. Thanks to this friends with benefits deal, the party could claim some glory from good government news while disowning unpopular measures from its opposition perch.

It made many in Fine Gael unhappy.

And the price of power also meant the party had to concede ground on abolishing water charges.

They further fumed when Enda gave

three of his precious 11 Seanad nominations, much needed by former TDs who lost seats, to Micheál Martin.

Three Endependents became senior Ministers. Katherine Zappone and Denis Naughten have been working away on their briefs in a low-key manner.

The other, Shane Ross, has been hogging the limelight and getting into all manner of scrapes.

One of the junior ministers from his Independent Alliance groups, Waterford's John Halligan, will end the year in a state of exhaustion as he hasn't stopped publicly wrestling with his conscience since he got the new job.

### Leprechauns

There was great news from the Central Statistics Office in July when it announced a growth rate for Ireland of 26 per cent.

Economist Paul Krugman labelled it "leprechaun economics", while the Government rushed to explain that the number was an accounting anomaly and the figure was closer to 4 per cent.

Further good news came in the summer when the EU said Apple owed us €13 billion in back tax. The Government refused to take it and the Dáil was recalled from the summer recess to have a pointless discussion on it.

The Dáil discussed lots of things and the Government set up lots of committees and cans were kicked down the road at a ferocious rate, but little legislative work was done.

"New Politics" included voting for the Ceann Comhairle by secret ballot and installing "abstain" buttons in the Dáil.

There was shock in Leinster House over the Brexit result. Sinn Féin immediately called for a Border poll on a united Ireland.

The Taoiseach insisted the Government had been involved in contingency planning for months, whatever that contingency might turn out to be. And then more shock with the election in America of US president-elect, Donald Trump.

Enda was one of the first to congratulate him by phone. And he sounded delighted at having wrangled an invite to come over with the bowl of shamrock next March.

As the stop, start, stuttery Dáil staggered towards the end of the year, the old chestnuts stayed with us – water, waste, public sector pay, and abortion were long-fingered by an administration hampered by its lack of power.

The problem of homelessness shows no sign of easing.

Simon Coveney launched his big housing strategy in July, with measures in December aimed at calming the rental market. Fianna Fáil saw a chance to extract concessions and claim a victory.

Barry Cowen was dispatched to throw his weight around with Coveney. But Coveney held his ground and a shook-looking Cowen had to retreat.

Fine Gael TDs were delighted at this slap-down. They had docked the Fianna Fáil tail wagging the government dog.

But they should be careful – Micheál Martin and his TDs won't forget what happened. In the first month of 2016, the Dáil talked about housing and homelessness. It was a constant throughout the political year. Now, in the final month, it's top of the agenda again.

As the 1916 centenary year drew to a close – the well-organised State celebrations further diluting work in Leinster House – Independent deputy Maureen O'Sullivan chose to begin her contribution at Leaders' Questions by telling the Taoiseach she had taken part in a charity concert the previous night.

It was heartbreaking, she said, to hear

the stories from Brother Kevin, of the Capuchin Day Centre, of all the families the charity is helping to feed and support.

Then she mentioned a report by Oxfam that lists Ireland in the top 15 tax havens of the world. "What kind of society do we want to live in? If we want a fairer more equal society then, strange as it may seem, we have to apply morality and ethics to taxes and finance."

And with that, the Government and Fianna Fáil TDs who had looked up with interest when Maureen mentioned the concert, went back to talking among themselves.

Morality and ethics in matters of taxation and finance? Oxfam are wrong, said the Taoiseach.

They didn't give Independent TD Stephen Donnelly much of a hearing

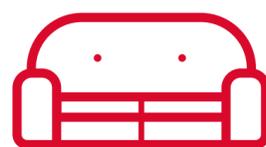
either when he mentioned all the property companies making billions out of this country but paying hardly anything back in tax. But voters hear this, too. And that's where the year ended.

The recovery keeps going. But not everyone is getting a fair crack of the whip. And O'Sullivan is not the only person asking what sort of society we want to live in.



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