

Opinion & Analysis

Inside Politics

Pat Leahy



Halligan's brinkmanship makes Independents uneasy

Like many similar countries that experienced the trauma of the banking crisis and economic crash in 2008-2009, Ireland's politics was profoundly changed by the experience. It is probably still changing in ways only becoming apparent.

The deep recession that followed the crash and the programmes of harsh austerity destroyed the faith of many people in the existing political parties and led to a desire for something new, some-

thing different, something better. That the programmes of austerity have been successful – on their own terms – in Ireland, by restoring the public finances and so creating the conditions for economic growth has not diminished their disruptive effects on the pre-existing political landscape.

Many people believe there was a better way of achieving those goals; they believe austerity was implemented unfairly, by which they normally mean it was inflicted

on them. Many of them have a point, too, even if their counterfactual – what would have happened with, say, default on the bank debt, or a differently weighted correction of the public finances – can never, obviously, be proven.

Anyone who followed candidates as they knocked on doors during the post-bailout election of early 2011 couldn't mistake the public mood that politics as usual, as practised by the old parties and their system, had failed and would have to change. The Fine Gael-Labour coalition was elected on the back of this desire for change and hailed their election as a democratic revolution. Remember that?

Partymen
But Enda Kenny and Eamon Gilmore weren't revolutionaries, they were long-standing party men, politicians long adept at working the existing system, ill-equipped to imagining an entirely new politics.

Change is one of the great tropes of politics; it also has the irresistible quality for any politicians of being all things to all men. So, having fanned the desire for change but being ultimately unable to meet it, their coalition government eventually became deeply unpopular.

A major piece of research carried out by pollsters Red C, to discover the causes of this unpopularity, found one theme came up again and again with voters: "broken promises". Fine Gael and Labour, voters believed, promised they would change

things, but they didn't. So, this appetite for change moved on and, during the 2011-2016 government, it found its political expression in rapidly rising support for new parties and candidates.

Sinn Féin grew and grew. The Anti-Austerity Alliance and People Before Profit moved from the fringes of political discourse to the centre. Polls found that Independents were the most popular single grouping. Renua was founded. The Independent Alliance came together, so did Independents 4 Change. The Social Democrats were born and "Independent Independents" continued to proliferate.

The most significant thing, though, was not that this new political alternative was arising, it was that it was so fractured, so riven by division, so distracted by personal rivalry, positioning and ambition.

In failing to come together in one or two blocs, as happened in other EU countries, they failed to offer a viable alternative. In the end, perhaps inevitably, Independents ended up in Government. And, equally inevitably, they are discovering that translating their commitment to change to the mundane tasks of governing is not as simple as they thought. The desire for change is lofty, but inchoate; applying it to the world with real consequences, of hard choices between deserving causes and of finite resources, is hard. Our permanent government of Civil Service, quangos and deeply embedded interests in health, education and other public services is very

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conservative and protective of its own privileges. This is why governments often end up being unpopular.

Concessions

It is hard to discern any transformational change that the advent of the Independents in Government has produced. Instead, they seem to be acting more or less the way Independents have always acted when supporting big-party governments – trying to leverage their support into concessions for their constituency, their pet projects or pet reforms. Finian McGrath wants investment in Beaumont Hospital and services for cystic fibrosis sufferers, funding for disability and a

dozen other things; rural Ministers Denis Naughten and Seán Canney want a rebalancing of development for rural Ireland, for the west, for their constituencies; Boxer Moran spent weeks, during the floods of 2015, filling sandbags in Athlone – he'd like the State to help a bit; and so on.

Mostly, the Independents have made their bargains and are happy to get on with it. Private conversations in the past few days would suggest their principal complaint is not that Fine Gael was treating John Halligan badly, but that Halligan was threatening the implementation of their common and individual agendas with his constant brinkmanship.

Halligan is uncomfortable being in Government with the status of insider, with the need to prioritise and compromise. It is at odds with his entire political life before now. Specifically, he thinks he was duped on cardiac services in Waterford. If he continues, he will talk himself out of Government, even if it's hard to see what that would achieve. Like an awful lot of "new politics", though, all this isn't new. It's just old politics without a Dáil majority. Ireland isn't unusual in that politicians here tend to want to utilise whatever power they have to confer benefits on their own constituencies. It is unusual, though, that so many politicians at a national level seem to think this is their primary function – or even their only one. That remains one of the chief impediments to good government.



#HerNameWasClodagh missed media's real failing



Conor Lally Opinion

Social media commenters were certain: Clodagh Hawe didn't matter to the media because she was a woman

After a blizzard of criticism from a huge volume of people, have any lessons been taken by the media from its coverage of Alan Hawe's murder of his wife, Clodagh, and the couple's sons, Liam (15), Niall (11) and Ryan (6), at the family home in Co Cavan?

The press was accused of writing school teacher Clodagh Hawe out of the story and of refusing to use her photograph until the #HerNameWasClodagh Twitter campaign/movement/hashtag/protest shamed them into it. At the same time, Alan Hawe was "eulogised".

We were told journalists – all of them, it seems – wanted to package this case as a family tragedy and quickly move on. The media, the argument went, was only interested in depicting Alan Hawe as a good family man, a well-liked teacher and able sportsman who had snapped uncharacteristically.

It was all hot air, of course; one ill-informed corner of social media egging on another until you reach a place of blind ignorance deep, deep down the rabbit hole. Those who attempted to map gender politics on to the media's treatment of this horrendous case were perhaps widest of the mark.

Many of them hopelessly mistook the

placing of Alan Hawe at the centre of the coverage as misogyny in a world where the actions of violent men are somehow accepted by the media and their female victims do not matter.

The truth is that the case of the Hawe family was treated no differently from any other; with the media focused on the perpetrator over, and at the expense of, the victims. This has nothing to do with gender, no matter how hard some people try to make it so.

Clodagh Hawe became an invisible victim rather than an invisible woman. It was the actions of Alan Hawe, as a perpetrator rather than as a male, that raised the biggest question: why did he do it? When it became clear that he was not a man with a known history of mental illness, the killings became even more inexplicable. Had this been a case of a woman killing her children and husband, for the perpetrator-focused media the female killer would have been at the centre of the coverage.

Some news reports referred to Clodagh Hawe's mother, who found a note on the back door of the family home, as Alan Hawe's mother-in-law. This was despite her being the mother of one victim and grandmother of the three boys.

This was another result of the media's tendency to place the perpetrator and the motive for their actions at the centre of the coverage, around which everything else revolved.

Many reports carried quotes from local people and others who knew Alan Hawe (or thought they did) about the apparent decency of the man in his personal and professional life.

Not condoning

Having had the same conversation with many people on the periphery of such cases, I have found that when people speak of a killer's talents and strengths, they are not condoning or minimising their violence.

They are pondering – often in shock – how the life of the perpetrator was apparently so "normal" and at odds with

the violence they committed in their final moments. In these cases, local people who knew the family often feel freer, in my experience, to say more about the perpetrator, to whom they understandably have less loyalty, than the victims.

This is especially so when, like Kilkenny man Alan Hawe, the perpetrator is not originally from the area where the murders and suicide have taken place but the victims and their extended family are, as was the case with Clodagh Hawe and her Cavan-based extended family.

The extent to which this influences the coverage cannot be overestimated; it is a situation many of those who thought they knew so much about the media's treatment of this case have no experience of.

Good-quality photographs of Alan Hawe and his sons were found online on the day the bodies were discovered. But similar shots of Clodagh Hawe were not obtained by the media until Thursday. Despite days of searching, only a small poor-quality image of Clodagh Hawe could be found earlier and with which little could be done by publishers. This

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amplified the media's focus on perpetrator over victim.

Anybody watching the newspapers as a barometer of how the media ranked the victims – a crude practice best avoided – would have seen images of the four Hawe males and headlines and news packages

■ The hearse carrying the coffin of Clodagh Hawe arrives at St Mary's Church in Casterlahan, Co Cavan.

PHOTOGRAPH: BRIAN LAWLESS/PA

driving those images from Tuesday morning through the week. But the same focus on Clodagh Hawe was missing until Friday. Only the *Irish Daily Star* had photographs of the mother of three to publish in its edition on Thursday morning, with the rest catching up online that day and in print the following morning.

Bloggers and some commenting on social media were absolute in their certainty: Clodagh Hawe didn't matter to the media because she was a woman and the front pages proved it.

And she only belatedly mattered because #HerNameWasClodagh had shamed the media into pretending to care about her.

Spectacularly wrong

It was a neat conclusion based on the echo of their conversations with themselves. And it was spectacularly wrong.

In an industry driven by images and focused on men and women who perpetrate violence rather than their victims, the coverage of this case flowed exactly – and depressingly – as it always does; perpetrator-centred rather than victim centred.

It shouldn't be that way but it is; in every case, not just this one and whether the killer and their victims are male or female.

It is interesting that the deaths of forgotten victims – women and men – from poorer social circumstances have not whipped up the same strength of feeling in the past from those most vehemently behind the #HerNameWasClodagh campaign.

There are huge lessons in this case for the media, but not the gender-based ones suggested by the echo chamber of social media and blogging; the media needs to focus more on victims. #AllVictimsMatter

Conor Lally is Security and Crime Editor

World View

Ruadhán Mac Cormaic



Ireland must forge new alliances in EU

Earlier this summer, in the days after the British vote to leave the European Union, Irish diplomats on the continent were struck by how often they found themselves having to answer the question: will Ireland follow the United Kingdom out of the EU?

"You'd be surprised by how many of our partners – senior officials across the EU – needed assurance, and continue to need assurance, that Ireland is staying within the EU and will not be dragged out because of our links with Britain," says one Irish diplomat.

At first, the focus of the Government's response to the Brexit bombshell was on the need to contain damage to the Anglo-Irish relationship.

According to one source, the first draft of Taoiseach Enda Kenny's earliest statement on the referendum result did not contain any reference to Ireland's commitment to its own EU membership (these were added after the draft was circulated to officials from the Department of Foreign Affairs).

The focus on the Anglo-Irish connection was understandable. Brexit raises difficult questions not only about the future of trade across the Irish Sea but also about the Common Travel Area, the Border and the peace process.

These were naturally the chief concerns of the Department of An Taoiseach and the Anglo-Irish division in Iveagh House, which was closely involved in Brexit contingency work for the past year.

Yet, for Ireland, there are much wider questions in play than the Anglo-Irish relationship. Brexit will require a fundamental shift in how Dublin positions itself at European level and, more broadly, how the country thinks about its relationship with the continent.

Closest ally

Overnight, the Government will lose its closest political ally in Brussels. When Ireland's ambassadors and other senior diplomats met for a private four-day conference in Dublin last month, one of the themes that emerged regularly, according to people who attended the event, was how Ireland should align itself once the UK has left.

With the 28-member EU, there are a number of informal alliances or blocs, among them the Nordics, the Benelux states, the Franco-German couple, the three-state Baltic Assembly and the Visegrad Group, an alliance comprising the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia.

Members of those groups do not always take common positions, but they seek one another out and often take agreed approaches to issues of shared concern in advance of wider EU deliberations. Although London and

Dublin did not agree on everything – on agricultural subsidies, for example, the two governments were always poles apart – their civil servants worked closely together and often found themselves in agreement.

Dominant view

At the heads of mission conference, the dominant view was that instead of seeking alliances to join, Ireland should work harder on its relationships across the bloc. As one participant said, Ireland has always tended to seek out friends on an issue-by-issue basis. In France it found a kindred spirit on the Common Agricultural Policy. During debates on trade and financial services, it stuck close to the British, the Dutch and the Finns.

At other times, we found common cause with the Nordic states or the "Club Med" group of Spain, Greece and Italy. The post-Brexit world will require Irish diplomats to work even more assiduously to cultivate these overlapping connections.

Ireland's trading relation-

“ **Ireland's trading relationships will have to undergo a similar expansion**

ships will have to undergo a similar expansion. Even if the Brexit talks result in minimal damage to Ireland's business ties to the UK, recent months have shown that Ireland is far too heavily exposed to instability next door.

Finding new global markets for Irish goods has for years been a political slogan; now it's an imperative. That means looking in a more systematic way at the vast potential of China and India.

However, it also entails broadening Ireland's trading relationships on the continent itself, where many countries remain vastly underexplored by Irish businesses. Britain absorbs 36 per cent of Irish exports. Our next nearest neighbour, France, has a similarly sized population to the UK yet takes just 6 per cent of our exports.

When he was taoiseach, one of Garret FitzGerald's common refrains was that if Ireland was to carve out a place for itself in the European Union (as it became) as something other than an adjunct to Britain, it would have to build close, meaningful relationships with France, Germany and other key states on the continent. The coming upheaval could deliver some uncomfortable truths about the extent to which that aim was fulfilled. But the message itself has never been more relevant.

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