

# JOHN LEE

*Irreverent. Irrepressible. In the corridors of power*

**B**EFORE Michael D Higgins was elected President he and I operated an informal book club of two in Leinster House. We also shared a fondness for country music. Real country music – Johnny Cash, Kris Kristofferson and Elvis Presley (Elvis defined himself as a country singer).

One day, when he was returning my yellowing copy of Johnny Cash's authorised biography, *The Man Called Cash*, we retired to the Dáil bar to discuss. Those who correctly visualise Michael D Higgins as an intellectual colossus and Statesman will probably not know that he is fundamentally great fun.

Inevitably, we found ourselves quietly singing a few lines of Cash's famous *The Beast In Me*.

In the bar, as late afternoon sun shafts struck down from the skylights, we sang:

The beast in me  
Is caged by frail and fragile bars  
Restless by day  
And by night rants and rages at the stars

The future president turned to me and asked: 'What do you think Cash meant when he sang the *Beast in Me*?'

His answer would be more cogent than mine, but as is his way, he wanted my opinion. I ventured that like many of Johnny Cash's songs there were Biblical allusions, and Cash was referring to the Beast, the antichrist, of the Book of Revelations. Johnny Cash came from a devout Methodist home in Arkansas and from an early age his Bible belt origins were at war with the temptations of showbusiness. He became notoriously addicted to amphetamines and spent nights in jail when arrested smuggling drugs back from Mexico.

The struggle defined his art, where his canon veers from Folsom Prison Blues (I shot a man in Reno just to watch him die) to soaring revivalist gospel music.

**T**HE personal struggles of President Michael D Higgins are less dramatic, traumatic or visible. Yet the conflict between the role of silent, non-political President and his true self rages. More often the passionate, socially conscious man from a humble, rural background triumphs.

You don't find yourself the first President re-elected in a contested election for 50 years with 56% of the vote unless you know quite a bit about the Irish people.

How could a powerful, intelligent man with a deep social conscience not speak out about the housing crisis in Ireland?

Yes, there was political context to President Higgins' speech in Kildare this week. Our sister newspaper the Irish Daily Mail had run a front-page article that morning where a Nigerian Bishop had criticised comments the President had released about a massacre in that

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benighted African country. The speech, at a new young adults' homeless centre in Naas, with magnificent deftness, moved that Nigerian controversy deep into the middle pages of newspapers.

Yet, critics of the President tried to dismiss what he said as an ideological, political statement – that of a leftist anti-capitalist. Yet any statement by a president can be interpreted as political. If you expose inequality or injustice, well then everybody from Muhammad Ali to the Pope is political.

The President's opponents also claim, without evidence, that he has somehow violated his constitutional position. Yet the Constitution does not detail any impediment to the Irish President saying absolutely anything he or she wants.

More than 800,000 of the Irish electorate gave Michael D Higgins their first-preference vote in 2018 with the clear understanding that he was redefining and making relevant a dusty position that was becoming irrelevant.

When we voted for Michael D in 2018 we abundantly understood what he stood for. In 2016, upon the death of Fidel Castro, the President issued a statement saying that the Cuban Communist leader 'will be remembered as a giant among global leaders whose view was not only one of freedom for his people but for all of the oppressed and excluded peoples on the planet'.

In an interview with the Financial Times in 2013 he said the EU's han-

dling of the financial crisis, and it's austerity policies, had thrown it into a 'moral crisis'.

In the depths of the financial crisis he said the EU had to turn to 'radical economics' rather than austerity that meant: 'We have 26 million unemployed, 112 million at risk of poverty, a contraction in investment and falling demand.'

His own party, Labour, was in coalition with Fine Gael in 2013, as it proved itself to be one of Europe's most enthusiastic participants in austerity.

That same year, in Galway, he said of the financial crisis, 'that there have been so many breaches of trust in our institutions; breaches of trust in the regulation of the banking system... the banks themselves who gave false information... terrible decisions that were taken in encouraging people to get into levels of debt'.

President Higgins has been consistent, and more importantly he was re-elected with the greatest personal mandate given to a politician in our history, in 2018, after he made his politics clear.

So, yes, this week he used more layman-like language in labelling the housing crisis a 'disaster'. And critics focused on his words in that speech, criticising the role of speculative capitalist institutions in what he called our 'great failure' of housing.

Before I appeared on a TV show I rang Mr Higgins' press representative asking for a script of the

speech. Wryly, he told me he'd send me the script and the audio. For if you look at the video Michael D isn't reading the script. If you listen to the entirety of the speech – it's on the internet – you will hear that our President is not indulging entirely in anti-capitalist dogma.

He speaks of walking down through our cities and 'you see so many derelict buildings, so many abandoned buildings'.

'When you look at half-empty villages, when you look at villages and towns from which the banks have fled, because they have taken their profits.' (Okay, that one is a bit anti-capitalist). I see this too, don't you?

**M**R HIGGINS points out that we founded a Republic with a hope of getting away from the inhuman British Poor Law system. But we have returned to something akin to it.

It was old-time passionate rhetoric, where an intelligent man articulated the rage of the people he represents with the political system.

In the days leading up to the President's speech, other politicians, those in Cabinet and the Dáil, had been briefing me that they believed the falling poll ratings of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael were principally down to their failure to solve housing.

Last week, homelessness, that

great scar on our national reputation, rose above 10,000 for the first time in two years.

The Irish Daily Mail revealed last month an internal Department of Housing memo that admitted the Government won't reach its own modest target of 33,000 a year until 2025, the year Michael D Higgins leaves office and the year that this Government is scheduled to go to the country.

That will be too late for the Coalition of course, their credibility on housing will be in the gutter.

The President also spoke of 'dignity' afforded by housing. He, as a boy in the 1940s, had to move away from his father's home and live with relatives.

He also spoke this week of his good fortune in gaining an education at University College Galway and going on to have a home. It was a stirring and moving speech from the heart.

If the President doesn't represent us in the face of the squalid reality and the dismissiveness of the rest of the political class, who else will?

Michael D Higgins may well agree with the words of another president who fought for the poor, the shunned minorities and the dispossessed: Lyndon B Johnson. Johnson, from a modest background, never thought he'd have a chance to help the poor people he knew from his youth. He told Congress: 'But now I do have that chance – and I'll let you in on a secret – I mean to use it.'

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**I**N NORFOLK, Virginia in 1769 early attempts to vaccinate people against smallpox caused riots. Only the rich could afford to have small amounts of smallpox administered safely by doctors. The rest were left to their fate. Those poorer sections of society – those who lived – blamed the government, which, like in Ireland at that time, was the British Crown. They rioted because their rulers were perceived to not be representing their interests.

Through the centuries since, the United States (as it became) has been a hotbed of populism.

As early as 1828, citizens elected a populist president, Andrew Jackson.

However, four years earlier, he was deemed by many to be a better candidate than the eventual president, John Quincy Adams, because he had ‘not been educated at foreign courts and reared on sweetmeats from the tables of kings and princes’.

Jackson won the most votes in a wide field of candidates in 1824, but did not meet the quota needed to become president, in what supporters called a ‘rigged election’ against him.

Then at the end of the 19th Century a movement, a political party, rose in the south and the west. The party was actually called the Populist (with a capital P) Party. Old Confederate soldiers and freed slaves, established Americans and immigrants unified to fight the robber barons who underpaid millions of farmers for their goods. They even found a charismatic leader, a virtual demagogue – William Jennings Bryan.

But eventually, they caved to accept modest settlements and were subsumed into the Democratic Party. In what was to become a common theme, the populists themselves became the Establishment.

**L**EGENDARY president Teddy Roosevelt, a Republican, who became a progressive, could even be termed a populist – though from old money himself.

He believed that multi-millionaires like John D Rockefeller (relatively, no wealthier man has ever lived) and his company Standard Oil’s wealth was so gargantuan that they were destroying America. He then broke up Standard Oil.

Populism, in the greatest democracy and elsewhere has so often been a force for good.

Simply defined, by the Oxford dictionary, populism is ‘a type of politics that claims to represent the opinions and wishes of ordinary people’.

Populist movements have always grown from a united belief that a ruler or government no longer represents the ‘ordinary people’.

Sinn Féin is the first truly populist movement in our 100-year-old State. The electoral success of the party has grown in more than a decade since the economic crash.

It has grown, partly, because the centrist parties have failed us.

When Sinn Féin’s finance spokesman Pearse Doherty rose in the Dáil to condemn the Coalition’s

Budget as a ‘con job’ he will have found many reasonable citizens who agree.

Words he chose to criticise the Government in that speech, that it was ‘out of touch, out of ideas and out of time’ were straight from the classic populist playbook.

But this column has been saying something similar for six months.

I have been approached by some of Taoiseach Micheál Martin’s advisers in recent months, unhappy that this newspaper has been unkind to him and his Government.

But we have often said that Mr Martin is an admirable man and the politician who brought his Fianna Fáil – an important party in democratic politics – back from the brink.

But history shows that populist parties, sometimes reckless, sometimes not, advance only when citizenries become desperate at the inability of Establishment rulers to reform.

Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green Party need to concentrate on their own failings rather than those of the advancing populists.

What this column, guided by briefings from within the centrist parties, of course, has been saying is that it is the decadent, complacent, rudderless Government parties themselves that are responsible for what is coming.

And many fear the advance of an unreconstructed Sinn Féin. For populism can go horribly wrong.

The obnoxious, vicious, malignant Donald Trump was only hunted out of the US Presidency a year ago. Yet, to appropriate a line, ‘he hasn’t gone away you know’.

Trump and Trumpism rose from the deficiencies of the Establishment. Millions of Americans were ruined by the 2008 crash, gifted to them by the wolves of Wall Street.

The banks recovered but the blue-collar workers – the American working class – didn’t recover.

**T**RUMP prospered, no matter what outrage he committed. That’s what anger and disenchantment will do. At one point it was going okay, until he was confronted with a historic challenge, the Covid-19 pandemic, and he failed tragically.

It is seen as almost vulgar to point out that Sinn Féin display characteristics that could be deemed unpalatably unique in most other parties in western democracies.

The party condones and celebrates an illegitimate violent campaign of terrorism. It is a broad church but some members espouse proto-communist beliefs.

Supporters have used social media to turbo-charge the descent

into debased political interaction, participating in the use of Trumpian nicknames like #meehole, #leotheleak.

Sinn Féin are late adherents to democracy. It is not long ago that they did not recognise the Dáil and it still abstains from taking its seats at in Westminster.

Only 18 months ago, the party hosted a series of rallies in the wake of the 2020 election and before Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael had entered coalition with the Greens arguing that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael were planning to carve up power and reject what people voted for.

Still, only 20% of the electorate voted for Sinn Féin. Most of the rest voted for centrist parties.

Some of their TDs espouse conspiracy theories. Tipperary TD Martin Browne supported claims that the 9/11 attacks were faked, using ‘augmented holograms’.

The party still opposes certain aspects of the court system.

It might seem like a little thing, but their leader does not give a press conference at their Ard Fheis. (An Irish Mail on Sunday reporter was physically restrained when trying to question her a number of years ago).

Then there’s the money. The media cannot obtain a cogent explanation of who in their party is paid the average industrial wage

and who isn’t. They can use their status as a Northern Irish party to access funding streams not open to other Irish parties.

Ten years ago, I interviewed a Sinn Féin TD, Sandra McLellan, and she claimed that the party took her expenses. The Standards in Public Office Commission held a hearing, at which senior Sinn Féin figures accompanied Ms McLellan, where she dismissed the claims.

Though I had notes and tapes of the interview, I was not asked.

Ms McLellan has since left Sinn Féin, in an unhappy departure. The incident, in microcosm, shows the threat to the many if the guardians of democracy are underfunded.

Sinn Féin will come to power in some form because of the somnolent, torpid response of the centre to the disenchantment of an electorate that does not benefit from surging economic growth, multinational profiteering and iniquitous distribution of wealth.

If the centre cannot tack its sails quickly enough to avoid the rocks, do we blame its decision not to switch to steam or do we blame the rocks?

Housing For All, the National Development Plan and the Budget were the air, infantry and armoured wings of the Coalition’s counterattack against the Sinn Féin invasion. They have failed. So what will they do next?

# Sinn Féin are true populists. Reform is the only way to defeat them

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## Rural Ireland needs carrot and stick solutions to tackle climate change crisis

**T**HERE is a chapter in US journalist Robert Caro's work on President Lyndon Johnson which details the grinding privations of farm families in the Texas Hill Country, before electricity, running water or motorised vehicles reached that old frontier.

The Pulitzer-winning Caro, in 'The Years of Lyndon Johnson: the Path to Power' quotes Johnson's childhood neighbour, Curtis Cox, who from the age of nine, would make the 300-foot trip from well to farmhouse seven times, carrying two buckets of water weighing 60lbs.

Then he walked off to school. His mother Mary Cox would run through this water by noon.

And she had to make the trips, all day. Mary said: '...oh I don't know how many times. I needed water to wash my floors, water to wash my clothes, water to cook.'

'It was hard work. I was always carrying water.'

It wasn't just the water. Without electricity, wood had to be cut for stoves for heat in the house and for cooking. And, of course, no electricity meant no refrigerators.

Page after page, it goes on. Carroll Smith from the rural Texas city of Blanco says: 'Living – just living – was a problem... on the edge of starvation.'

We're not talking pre-US civil war here – this is the late 1930s. (Such conditions were well-known to many in Ireland until even later).

**T**HE farmers approached 28-year-old Lyndon Johnson, who had not yet been elected a Congressman, but he was already the youngest head of a Federal Agency, the National Youth Administration, about getting the \$1.8m (roughly €36m today) loan to begin electrification.

His response? 'I'll get it for you.' Somehow, the boy from the Texas Hill Country had forged a warm friendship with President Franklin D Roosevelt who said 'just go ahead and approve this loan'.

Electricity lines soon buzzed, water was pumped and in 1937 Johnson was elected to Congress.

Johnson was a politician with an unprecedented blend of heartfelt compassion, which was forged in his poverty-stricken childhood, and pragmatism.

But I recount the plight of the Hill Country farmers not to revive Johnson's reputation but to show that the advances made on this planet in the last century were not simple affectations.

They were about improving the uncompromising lives of the masses. If you are Irish reading this, advances in electrification, water provision and transport most likely eased the life of your farming forebears. There are few of us in Ireland, more than a generation or two removed from the land.

Yet our Taoiseach returned from the Glasgow climate conference,

COP26, wagging his finger at us, telling us we have to change our ways – it is up to Irish people.

You can't imagine a more different character alive from Lyndon Johnson than Greta Thunberg. Yet she said this week: 'This COP26 is so far just like the previous COPs and that has led us nowhere.'

She said it was 'just politicians and people in power pretending to take our future seriously'.

Following hot on the heels of the vague Housing For All plan, full of ambiguous projects to 'solve' the housing crisis, we had the even more vague National Development Plan (NDP).

The NDP is full of delayed mass transit projects with no projected budgets or completion deadlines – these transit projects should be the centrepiece of the strategy to convince people to get rid of their gas-guzzling, internal combustion-engined vehicles.

In yet another glitzy and comically stern-faced launch, the three leaders Micheál Martin, Eamon Ryan and Leo Varadkar this week told us what we need to be doing.

They told us that the €125bn programme will reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 51% by 2030.

There were no specifics – we'll get those next year. And 2030 is a little over eight years away. But from the documents we understand the broad strokes: cut in electricity emissions of between 62% and

81%; Farming sector to reduce emissions by 22% to 30% and we will get rid of 500,000 journeys a day.

What would LBJ, fond of a folksy rejoinder or 'Johnsonism', have thought of the Coalition's addiction to these gargantuan, conceptual and patently unfulfillable jamborees. Perhaps, they're 'a lot like p\*\*\*ing down your leg. It seems hot to you, but it never does to anyone else'.

**T**ake cutting car journeys. How else are people, especially those living outside the crumbling cities, to get around? There isn't sufficient public transport, and the little that exists isn't enough to convince people to use their cars.

This newspaper revealed that vital mass-transit projects aren't projected by the Government to finish until well after 2030.

And what of all the rural railways that were shut down since we began proper electrification in the 1930s? No detail. There were already, now old, conceptual plans: we were supposed to increase the number of electric cars and vans on our roads to 963,000 by the end of the decade.

What Greta Thunberg was, I think, getting at, is that you will see no change in human behaviour until you compel people.

The planet is fighting for its survival. But we are also asking people to reverse civilisation's advances since the 19th Century without tangible carrot or stick.

These advances weren't about providing a TV in every home or keeping ice cream cold.

In Europe in 1800, average life expectancy was 34 years old. In Ireland, by 1950 – with electricity and running water in many (but far from all) homes – life expectancy had increased to 66 years.

But by 2015 we could expect to live to 81 years of age.

Our lives have been immeasurably improved by consistent access to nutritious food provided by modern farming; heating; lighting; transport to major urban centres (and hospitals); the growth of urban centres, pharmaceutical advances and so on. All this requires energy.

It has been divined that farming got off easy, with projected emission cuts of 31%. But why shouldn't it in a country where the national psyche is formed by the catastrophic collapse of food provision caused by the 1840s Famine?

Farmers here, see the stupidity of the COP26 jamboree, which is attended by nations such as Brazil, which has been systematically razing rain forests to establish multi-million-acre cattle ranches.

Irish farmers have an average herd of 70 cattle. In the same newspapers as cuts to farm herds pre-

dictions were aired last weekend, it was revealed that Amazon intends to build two new data centres.

One uses the power of a town the size of Drogheda, every day.

This writer is in danger of becoming a misty-eyed dreamer like Greta Thunberg.

But we agree on something – nothing will happen to save the planet without political bravery.

That will involve compelling people, and losing votes.

Sinn Féin won't do it, as was made clear by their response last week.

But Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael won't either.

Fine Gael tried to introduce a much-needed multi-billion euro water company to manage our water, which is fast becoming a global environmental threat.

Fine Gael U-turned, as a condition of Fianna Fáil supporting them in the confidence-and-supply arrangement in 2016. Political bravery, in the realms of the environment, will not be found here.

LBJ, despite his unfair, crude and cruel warmonger reputation, was, many respected revisionists will say, the most important fighter for minority civil rights and against poverty of the 20th Century.

He said, from the front lawn of his Texas cattle ranch in 1964: 'There are no problems which we cannot solve together, and there are very few which any of us can settle by himself.'