

IT'LL BE NICE NOT TO HAVE TO ASK FOR PERMISSION

**CLAIRE BYRNE IS BACK ON AIR
WITH NEWSTALK AND SAYS
SHE'S LOOKING FORWARD TO
THE FREEDOM OF HER NEW ROLE
AFTER A TUMULTUOUS TIME AT RTÉ**

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COVER STORY

Pink jumper,
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Broadcaster Claire Byrne is back where she belongs – in the thick of it. For years, the presenter was

nestled quite comfortably in the leafy, somewhat sterile environs of Donnybrook, the home of the national broadcaster RTÉ.

But today Claire is back where she really kicked off her successful radio career, in Newstalk's newly-refurbished headquarters in Dublin city centre. 'One of the things that actually helped me make my mind up was that notion of being in town again,' Claire says, her eyes lighting up after what has undoubtedly been the most tumultuous period of her stellar career. 'So close to Grafton Street. Not that you'd be shopping every day or meeting people every day, but to have the option to pop out and have a wander and just the vibrancy of the area. It was definitely a factor.'

It is that desire for inspiration – and perhaps a craving for a clean slate – that has driven Claire to make the leap from the embattled RTÉ to the commercial dynamism of Newstalk. Her new mid-morning offering, *The Claire Byrne Show*, launched this week, putting her head-to-head with her former colleagues in a radio war that has captivated the media industry.

The controversy surrounding payment scandals at the national broadcaster cast a long, dark shadow over Montrose. For Claire, a journalist whose stock-in-trade is integrity and straight-talking, the atmosphere became stifling. Broaching this highly controversial topic, Claire's demeanour shifts slightly to a more sombre tone, more frank and forthright, but there is no obvious attempt to deflect or dodge the topic.

'It was difficult for everybody,' she admits frankly. 'It's still difficult for people out there because they're dealing with the aftermath of it. But to be working on a story where people



Claire on a night out with husband Gerry Scollan

had a perception that maybe you were involved in the story was just a very weird thing first and foremost, and really quite uncomfortable.'

The rumour mill was in overdrive. While the headlines screamed about hidden payments and barter accounts involving other top stars, Claire found herself in the firing line of public speculation. 'Having to report on your colleagues, that's never nice,' she says. 'But you do that because it's your job so you have to get on with it. But there

was so much uncertainty for so long because we didn't know what was going on. We didn't know what was coming next.'

She pauses, recalling a moment of stark realisation while on a family camping trip in Kerry. 'I was with my family, standing in a field in Killarney and I started getting messages about some very important, very significant story from my friends in RTÉ,' she recalls. 'I knew nothing about it up to that point. So it rolled on from there.'

The lack of clarity from the

top led to a frenzy of gossip.

'People thought that I was involved,' she says, with a shake of her head. 'I was getting messages saying, "We're hearing that you have a deal, a similar deal, or a deal that we didn't know about," or "You have a free car, you didn't pay for this, you didn't pay for that".'

It was this whisper campaign that forced Claire to take a stand – a move that defined her independence. In a striking moment of transparency, she publicly disclosed her salary on air, a decision she made entirely on her own.

'That's why I decided to read a statement out which I wrote myself over a weekend,' she says. 'I told RTÉ that morning that I wanted to do it, just as a courtesy really, but I felt that I needed to tell my listeners, "This is what I earn. This is how I came to be on that amount..." because you remember I gave up *Claire Byrne Live* so I took a reduction. I wanted to explain all of that and this is my figure.'

Was it a hard decision? 'I just felt like, sometimes there is no point in trying to push back against rumours and what people are saying about you but on that occasion I thought, no, hang on a second, I can't have this around that I'm doing stuff that I shouldn't be doing,' she insists. 'So I just said it.'

It was a bold move, one that highlighted the toll the scandal took on the staff who were just trying to do their jobs. 'Not a very comfortable place to be,' she reflects. 'I think it took a toll on everybody. It took a toll on me as well, being asked constantly about what events are you doing outside. I stopped doing them about five years ago because I just found that there was so much attention on it.'

Now, however, the shackles are off. She describes Newstalk as an organisation with 'great morale', a place where people are excited she is joining. 'It is nice now to be able to consider to do things, not to have to ask for permission that needs to go through a committee to do a charity event, for example,' she



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€39,
Taupe
trousers,
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says, noting the 'convoluted permissions process' that bogged down her previous role.

When she was first approached by Chris Doyle, the chief executive of Bauer Media, Newstalk's parent company, she hadn't seriously considered moving. 'The first approach was quite some time ago and I'll be honest with you, I didn't consider it,' she says. 'I was very happy in RTÉ. But then I did start having a conversation over the course of 2025 with Newstalk. In particular I met Chris Doyle and I was really impressed with him.'

She describes Doyle as 'ambitious' and 'positive', painting a picture of an organisation that wanted her not just for her name, but for her potential. 'I thought, oh god, if they believe in me, maybe I should believe in myself and believe that I can do

'THE LATE LATE SHOW WOULDN'T BE IN MY AMBITION'

something else beyond what I'm doing,' she says.

Of course, the other elephant in the room is the *The Late Late Show*. For months, Byrne was the bookies' favourite to replace Ryan Tubridy. Every move she made was scrutinised yet she walked away from the biggest job in Irish television.

'There was nothing left in RTÉ that I wanted to do, *The Late Late Show* wouldn't be in my ambition,' she explains carefully. 'It's not to say I haven't thought about it but Ryan never got a minute's peace.'

'He couldn't even have a cup of tea in the RTÉ canteen but people were up chatting to him and wanting his time. And he dealt so well with that. But did I want that for myself?'

She confesses to being 'more of an introverted person' than people might expect. 'I don't think *The Late Late Show* was the right show for me,' she →

says. 'I'm not saying I wouldn't have been able to do it, but would it have been the right fit for my personality? Probably not.'

She recalls watching the legendary Gay Byrne and realising the unique demands of light entertainment. 'There was a row one time at the end of the program about bins in South County Dublin, it was brilliant!' she recalls. 'There was fireworks, they were killing each other and you could just see Gay conducting it, enjoying it, and thinking to himself, this is the best television.'

It's that chaotic magic that she feels belongs to a different kind of broadcaster.

'I love watching that bit of drama but I don't think I'm that person,' she says.

She praises Patrick Kielty, the man who eventually took the hot seat. 'He treated me like his equal when I worked with him,

children and I've no make-up on and I'm doing the mammy things on a Saturday, that I'm unrecognisable.'

'People don't bother you, they know you're getting on with your own business.'

'You're just a little bit more well known than other people when you do a job like this, but it's a small market and we're all just people going about our business.'

Her home life sounds delightfully chaotic. She and husband Gerry Scollan have three children – Patrick, 11, Jane, 10, and eight-year-old Emma – and two dogs. 'Rosie, who is going to be 14 in September, she was the first baby in our house, she reared my children,' she jokes, referring to her beloved dog. 'Then a few years ago we got Cooper, we took him in because he was losing his home.'

While her youngest daughter is obsessed with K-Pop – 'The other two are too cool for it,' she notes – Claire is finding her own rhythm. She admits to being a fitness enthusiast, though in a very practical, non-showbiz way. 'I do weights three to five times a week at home myself in my shed,' she says.

While she still loves television, radio is her priority for now. 'I've my head down in here getting used to this whole set-up [at

Newstalk], but I would never say never to TV,' she says. 'I always like the immediacy of radio, being able to go in, sit down, it's done.'

Her style, much like her broadcasting approach, is sharp and no-nonsense. She cites Robin Wright's character in *House of Cards* as a touchstone. 'My ambition is always for those kind of clean, classic lines, I like understated,' she says. 'I'm not sure I always achieve that, but that's always what I'm sort of aiming for.'

She admits that television forced her to up her game. 'I started as a jobbing reporter so I always had to be presentable, then when I came into television I learned all about appearance and grooming and colours and all of that,' she says. 'You never really lose that.'

As she prepares to launch *The Claire Byrne Show* – which will run for three hours daily – she seems energised by the challenge. 'It gives me more scope to sort of play around with different types of formats,' she says. 'My idea with this show is to sort of be your friend through the morning.'

'Of course you're going to get your national news and your international news but it's not all going to be about that.'

'I've always had this idea of

current affairs being everything that's happening in your life. From your commute, to your pets, to your children, to your food, to what you're reading, to what you're watching.'

It is a departure from the hard-news grilling she is famous for, but one she feels ready for. 'I hope to be able to consider to do things, not to have to ask for permission,' she says. 'It gives me a new lease of life I feel and stretches me.'

As we wrap up, I ask if she ever considered a move abroad, perhaps to the UK or America like so many Irish stars. She shakes her head. 'I worked in the UK, I worked in the Channel Islands then I moved to Channel 5 in London and did a game show called *Touch The Truck* with Dale Winton,' she laughs at the memory. 'Everyone had to keep their hand on a truck in a shopping centre and they weren't allowed to sleep. It was a sleep deprivation game show. Mad! But it was great fun.'

Despite the fun, home called her back. 'I got the call to come back and present *Ireland AM* and I'm not sorry that I did that,' she says. 'London was great and it was a great experience, but I always think with current affairs if you're not from the ground and you don't know who the last Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer was, it's tough. You're better off being on your home turf.'

It seems like the weight of the last few years have finally lifted from her shoulders and she is optimistic about the future. 'I have great faith that Ireland will continue to interrogate politicians and politics,' she says, looking out at the city she is now reconnecting with. 'I think people have a right to feel uncertain at the moment. But we have to have hope and be proud of who we are and that we will guard our democratic rights in this country that we fought so hard for.'

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The Claire Byrne Show airs every weekday on Newstalk radio from 9am to 12pm, see also newstalk.com

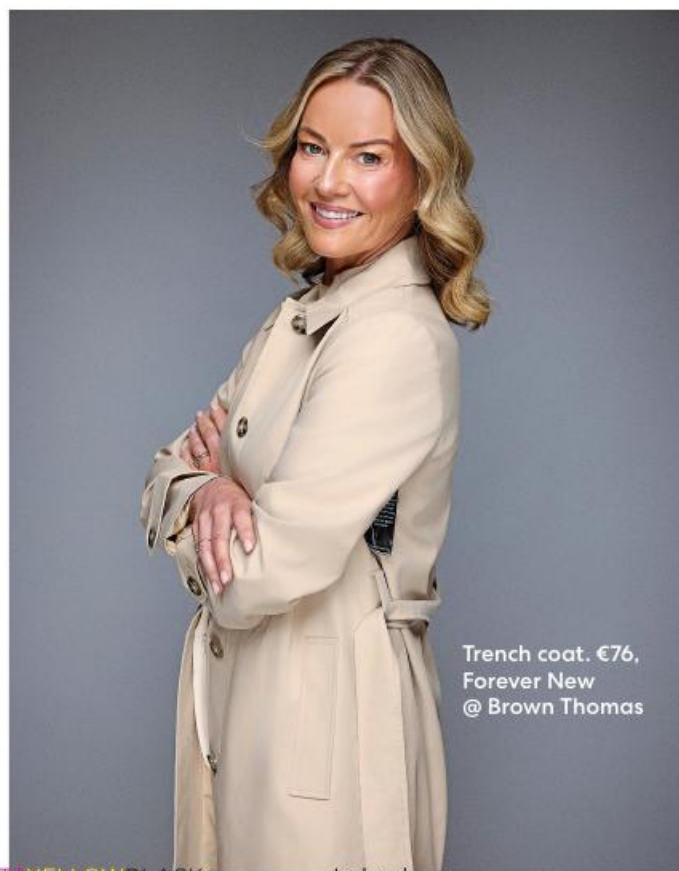
'LONDON WAS GREAT BUT YOU'RE BETTER OFF AT HOME'

he's a real ally and a great person to work with,' she says.

Leaving the *Late Late* speculation behind has allowed her to reclaim her private life, something she guards fiercely. Away from the studio lights, her life is reassuringly normal. She lives in Wicklow and drives her kids to school each day before commuting into the city.

'I'll be coming in here for probably half six in the morning because of my nine o'clock start,' she says of her new routine. 'My intention is to use the Luas to come in and then I'll collect the children when I'm finished. I love this job for that reason, the hours are great because I can be there for them in the evenings.'

Does she get stopped on the street? 'No, it doesn't happen that often to me,' she laughs. 'I feel like when I'm out with my



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