

Catherine Connolly in her office in Galway.
Picture by Ray Ryan



HARD QUESTIONS FOR CONNOLLY



From Gemma O'Doherty to Syria to Irish neutrality, political editor Mary Regan puts some key issues to the presidential hopeful

The front doors of Catherine Connolly's constituency office, a stone's throw from the Spanish Arch in Galway, are thrown wide open. But as we talk, it doesn't take much for the presidential hopeful to pull certain shutters down.

When it comes to what has formed her as a politician — and some of the bigger decisions of her career to date and what they tell us — she can be elusive.

Her discomfort with the spotlight is clear: something that is at odds with a campaign of this nature and all of its big TV moments.

While the left-wing candidate has strong views about global politics and the EU in particular, much remains imperceptible, such as her reasons for entering politics, the people she was involved with along the way and what exactly has brought her to this point.

She recently said she is "not a natural politician" and that she does not like the world of politics.

Does this mean she considers herself a political outsider?

"I wouldn't make that deduction from what I said," she says, but I'm left unsure what deduction I should make.

Seven years ago, Connolly, now 68, nominated Gemma O'Doherty for the presidential election in 2018.

It is one of the many questions that will test her in the weeks ahead, but it is not the only one.

lives in the city's original settlement. The Claddagh, where the river Corrib meets the Atlantic and where her own grandfather was part of the fishing tradition.

Her father, a carpenter, made the traditional gleeiteog sailing boats, a craft that is being revived thanks to a drive by her going back to her days as a councillor.

She has two beautiful miniature versions of the boat, crafted by her father, proudly displayed in her office.

Connolly grew up in a house of 14 siblings in Shantall, an area that was developed as Galway's first corporation housing scheme in the 1950s.

When asked about her upbringing, she says she would "prefer to talk about the role" of the presidency.

I put it to her that people might be interested to know if her background shaped anything about her politics.

"When you are part of a family of that size, and it was seven boys and seven girls, we learned about equality, about fighting your corner — but also, as we grew older, respecting the differences between us."

She vaguely knew President Michael D Higgins, who was in college with her eldest brother, "not politically, as in he went jogging with my brother," she adds. It was in the 1990s that she got to know him better, and he asked her to get involved in politics.

with the party and being elected to the Dáil as an Independent.

EUROPE

Part of the reason she parted ways with the Labour Party was over its support for the Lisbon Treaty in a referendum in 2008.

It was the first EU treaty she campaigned against, she says, "to my shame" because it was only then that she "woke up" to the EU.

"The blatant neoliberal agenda, plus the building up of the arms industry was frightening to me."

During statements on Europe Day in the Dáil in May, Connolly said she was "ashamed to be European" under the leadership of Ursula von der Leyen.

Now that she is running for presidential office, would she still use the same term?

"If I said that before, I am sure I said it with good reason," she says. "I still have good reason to be very worried about Ursula von der Leyen. This is a woman who has stood shoulder to shoulder with Netanyahu and expressed that, in her words, he made the desert bloom. There are many, many things to be concerned about with Frau Von der Leyen."

She did meet her, in her role as leas-cheann comhairle in the Dáil, and spoke to her in German, having picked up the language when she studied psychology there.

"I have no difficulty carrying out my role in meeting heads of state," she says. During a debate on the removal of the triple lock, she told the Dáil there are countries she does not trust, and those are the US and France.

Given that France is our nearest EU neighbour, would she be viewed negatively in Europe if she were to become president? Is she a Eurosceptic?

"I would not consider myself to be a Eurosceptic," she says. "I am a committed European. I have always been so. However, I've always been concerned about the rampant neoliberal agenda and the militarisation of the EU."

Connolly said she believes the EU is

Presidential Election

Sunday Independent

Ireland Thinks.

Q If the ballot paper in the presidential election had the following names, who would you vote for?



Connolly says "there was no praise for the regime in the company we were in". Among the people they met were "mostly Palestinians, by far" and an Irish nun who has since died. They were also shown around a refugee camp "that gave me an insight into what a refugee camp was".

It was, she says, "an eye-opener", adding: "I came back with the horror of war, the horror of the destruction of war."

They met with the head of the chamber of commerce of Aleppo. Can she remember his name? She says she did not have it to hand. I put it to her that the meeting was with a man named Farah Chehawi. He was sanctioned at the time by the EU for "providing economic support" to the Assad regime.

Asked if she knew this before she met him, Connolly says: "I can't comment on that right now because I don't have the list before me." But she insists "there was no praise for the regime".

She adds that she is on record for condemning Assad, although she did vote against sanctions on Syria.

Connolly is also unclear on who exactly organised the trip. "It was a group in Dublin that organised it," she says.

But who was that group? They were "a group of Palestinian activists who were very concerned". So individuals? "Yes," she says, but we are left none the wiser as to who.

She described Daly and Wallace as "like-minded", so will they form part of her presidential campaign?

"I am sure all of them will be helping me, they respect what I do," she says. Pressed again, she adds: "I am sure they will be involved in the campaign — along with thousands of people who have signed up — who are looking for a president that will respect the values of people, Irish people."

She dismisses the media's "obsession" with those TDs. "I saw Clare Daly work extremely hard in the Dáil. I saw her put legislation through the Dáil, and I saw her gain the respect of nearly all TDs in the Dáil."

Daly and Wallace claim on Sunday

"And if you would like to know what I felt as I clapped, I felt a sense of horror with what was going on in the war. As a mother, as a woman and as a TD, I felt the horror of war. I can see why they were clapping, but perhaps a dignified silence would have been better."

NEUTRALITY

One of her big political platforms throughout her career has been neutrality, and she is strongly opposed to laws to remove the triple lock, which would allow Ireland to take part in peacekeeping missions without the sanction of the UN, which she says is "an undermining of the international order".

Not only is it likely that this would be the first piece of legislation she would sign into law as president, but the role would also make her supreme commander of the Defence Forces, whose mandate she would not agree with.

"I would have no difficulty with that. Every piece of legislation that comes before you to sign, you do that with the Council of State — I would have no difficulty with that," she says.

"I have had many roles in my life, and each one I have done to the best of my ability. So I worked as a clinical psychologist, a barrister, as a TD and leas-cheann comhairle."

"I have no difficulty in embracing the role of president and doing what I have to do within the restriction of that role, as set out in the Constitution and law, and I have proven that in the different roles that I have played."

Connolly hopes that her presidency, if she is elected, would focus on community and the Irish language.

She says that everywhere she has travelled, people are exercised about Palestine.

"People are literally coming up to me when I'm canvassing, crying over Palestine," she says. "But I think it is much more than Palestine, it's people feeling that if we let this happen under our watch, what is next? It has brought into focus, where we are going as a country, what

is not something she regrets.

"I didn't endorse her. I gave my agreement to nominate her," Connolly says. "She didn't get the nomination. I made that decision at the time, Gemma O'Doherty had done good work at the time. I have lots of regrets in my life, but not on that."

I put it to her that at that point O'Doherty had already put forward conspiratorial theories, including that *Sunday Independent* journalist Veronica Guerin was killed by the State, as well as conspiracies around the HPV vaccine.

Was Connolly aware of those theories when she gave her the nomination?

"It is so long ago," she says, and does not add anything further.

A former mayor of Galway, she

the understanding that there would be very little involved," she says. "It wasn't quite the accurate picture, but anyway..."

She served as a Labour councillor for many years before eventually falling out



She hopes that her presidency would focus on community and Irish language

Connolly said she believes the EU "is certainly not a peace project and has not been for a long time".

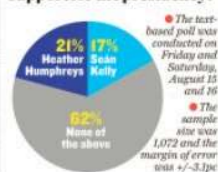
SYRIA

Something that is likely to draw more scrutiny as the campaign develops is her visit, as part of a group, to Syria in 2018. The trip took place during the Assad regime, which was starving, torturing and executing Syrians and Palestinians.

She is reluctant to talk about the trip and wonders why the media is focusing on that "and not what is happening in Syria now and Israel's bombing of it".

The group, which included Independent TDs Mick Wallace, Clare Daly and Maureen O'Sullivan, did not meet any members of the Assad regime, and

Q Which of the following Fine Gael candidates would you support for the presidency?



Luby and Wallace's views on Russia have drawn attention at home and across Europe, so given they are like-minded, does she share similar views?

"Russia illegally invaded Ukraine. I am on record saying that," Connolly says. "The world is volatile at the moment, and we need to use our voice and our presidential voice as a voice for peace."

Video footage of Volodymyr Zelenskyy's address to the Dáil in April 2022 shows that she didn't applaud the Ukrainian president. She insists she did.

"I stood and I clapped, so let me get that out of the way first," she says. "But we have a situation where the analysis by the media is around the duration and intensity of my clapping. It's a poor reflection of debate in this country."

direction are we going, what values do we want to represent?"

She says the president "can reflect what people are feeling on the ground, the president can listen and reflect as honestly as possible on what people are saying."

Connolly says she decided to run for the Áras because of what she felt was "empty rhetoric" and the "nature of the debate among commentators". It was being treated as a personality contest and "a bit of a joke", which she found "demeaning to the role of the presidency and how important it is".

But we are left with a feeling that leaving questions unanswered is not something she will be able to sustain throughout the course of the campaign.