

JOHN LEE

Irreverent. Irrepressible. In the corridors of power

MARY Lou McDonald was late for the press conference but she had her patsy. 'Sorry we're late folks, it was Fintan,' she said in her familiar maternal tone.

All eyes turned to the tall, handsome and harmless Senator Fintan Warfield to her left. His eyes swivelled from the back of his leader's head to me, standing to her far right, and swept across the unexpectedly large gathering of journalists. She added wearily: 'It's always Fintan.' Fintan's eyes widened but he said nothing.

For some reason I thought of a Belfast contact I had during the Troubles who, when asked what the story was with such and such, would say they were 'gone down a hole' or were 'going down a hole'.

Mary Lou McDonald was on the Leinster House plinth last Friday week to announce that Sinn Féin was tabling a motion of no confidence in the Minister for Justice, Helen McEntee. Despite Ms McDonald publicly expressing no confidence in the Garda Commissioner Drew Harris – whose father, Alwyn, the Provisional IRA murdered with a car bomb in 1989 – there was to be no motion on him.

Ms McDonald rarely gives the type of impromptu press conference that we hacks call a 'doorstep' in Leinster House. They are tough to control, which didn't stop Sinn Féin apparatchiks trying to do it. Upon arrival, the advance party press officer – also late – said questions would be taken in tranches of three. When I protested, I was told 'that's what we do at all our press conferences'.

AS I tried to deliver the rejoinder that Mary Lou never does them, the queen arrived, and after berating her footman Fintan, began a long, rambling speech about how upset Sinn Féin was about disorder and crime in Ireland. I took the first opportunity to ask a question, and asked whether she had discussed with her front bench that this motion of no confidence could 'backfire' because of her 'party's long association with criminality,' for instance 'your association with Jonathan Dowdall?' There were two more questions before she had to answer, giving her time to collect her thoughts. She replied: 'Okay, so first John, we have considered the political implications of taking this motion but this motion isn't about Sinn Féin... We fully accept that they [the Government] will stand their ground, fight their corner... that they will raise all matters and by all means to distract.' Dowdall was a councillor in Ms McDonald's constituency organisation who resigned because of bullying in 2015. He is/was also a member of the Provisional IRA, the Special Criminal Court heard; a convicted torturer; a facilitator of murder; and an former associate of one of the most high-profile criminals in this State, Gerry Hutch,

A SF TD admitted that the motion against the justice minister was 'bonkers'

whom he turned on to become a State witness. I'm not entirely sure that her association with such a character can be legitimately dismissed as a distraction.

My colleague Brian Mahon of the Irish Daily Mail then asked her about the disgraceful episode where a front-bench colleague had displayed in the Dáil chamber a photo of a vulnerable man near the school in her constituency where school children were stabbed. He also asked her if she had apologised to Drew Harris, whose father was killed by the IRA.

She dawdled, she delayed (like Fintan Warfield getting ready for a press conference perhaps). When she avoided answering the question about the commissioner, I politely pointed out that she hadn't answered and said we'll take that as 'no'. She in turn accused Brian of being 'aggressive' and 'rude', when he was just urging her to actually answer the question.

Remember, this is all being recorded. It's all on tape. But interestingly, not on the tape the Sinn Féin press office initially distributed to journalists who weren't there. That tape was edited to take out my question about 'criminality' and 'Jonathan Dowdall'. The

public may not care about Stalinist editing of tapes, being focused, rightly, on crises in housing and health. These are the areas where people feel they have been failed. As such, in September, after the badly policed far right disturbances outside the Dáil, when I asked a member of the Sinn Féin front bench whether they were tabling a motion of no confidence in the Minister for Justice, that person's reply was just that: 'The public don't care about law and order that much. It's housing and health that worries them and that's what we will pursue the Government on.' We also agreed that Sinn Féin had no credibility on law and order because of the 'IRA, crime and Jonathan Dowdall'. Such insight in September seemed to have been abandoned.

MORE than a week after our contretemps on the plinth it's plain to see that the motion of no confidence did backfire, spectacularly. And looking at the Sinn Féin front bench last week you could see it in their eyes that they knew it. In fact, I don't

believe Mary Lou McDonald thought it was a good idea. It showed in her body language and that of most of the parliamentary party. One front-bench TD admitted to me that many of them thought the motion, from a party so closely associated with violence, crime and terrorism, was 'bonkers'. So who ordered this U-turn between September and December?

This has happened before. Even with Sinn Féin's firm support for Palestine, and her own 2020 participation in an online event with Hamas, Mary Lou stated on a Thursday night that her party was not calling for the expulsion of the Israeli ambassador to Ireland. On the Friday morning, after a meeting in Belfast, she called for the expulsion – an about-turn so sharp that I have whiplash from just typing it.

The symbolism of location was striking. Also striking was when Housing spokesman Eoin Ó Broin claimed that among those feeding into this policy U-turn was the Sinn Féin 'international department' and the Northern membership. 'What is an international department?' I asked myself at the time. Is that like the Quinta Brigada?

As Sinn Féin never tires of reminding us, it got the highest

vote percentage in 2020 – 24.5%. Their rise did not stop there. For over three years the party has been in the low to mid-30s in the polls. Yet two polls have seen it fall backwards, and Ireland Thinks now has Sinn Féin at 28%, which will not be enough to put it in government, even with a large party coalition.

The aura of inevitability it has worn like armour since February 2020 is now beginning to diminish. There are mutterings of dissent in the ranks. And keeping a disparate group of politicians on message is tough enough, without having to keep an eye over your shoulder on what a more left-leaning 'international department' might think.

We have written here previously of the 'Ming Vase strategy' deployed by an exuberant opposition. How Sinn Féin was planning to not allow the Government to land any punches before its eventual coronation. How it was hoping to remain error-free until it got over the election finish line. That Ming Vase has a few more chips in it since we last referred to it, due to what the late Séamus Brennan called 'playing senior hurling'.

As for poor Fintan? He was hot favourite to join Senator Lynn Boylan, a former MEP, on the Dublin ticket for next June's elections. Instead Councillor Daithí Doolan – a more republican candidate who recently shouted 'tíocfaidh ár lá' at a pro-Palestinian rally – got the nod. Another sign that the old Sinn Féin hasn't gone away, you know.

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