

Inside Politics

Pat Leahy



Harris has one big advantage and one big disadvantage

A week and a half into the Simon Harris era and too soon, really, to make even an early judgment. But there are some clear signposts to how he will do the job, where his priorities lie, and the political calculations he will make in the coming months.

They are worth recounting, because of the power of the Government to drive the political agenda, and the power of the Taoiseach to set the tone for the Government. Fianna Fáil, which still has a few old

hands at this stuff around, is watching him like a hawk.

1 Early Dáil performances show Harris understands there is a difference between being Taoiseach and being a minister. He does not entirely eschew conflict with the Opposition, but he seems to be trying to rise above it – trying to be Taoiseach, a national leader, not a partisan figure. Harris will not shy away from conflict with Sinn Féin when the occasion demands it

(he cut loose a little while in Brussels at his first EU summit) and he will, as his predecessor did repeatedly and unsuccessfully, try to present elections as a choice between Fine Gael and Sinn Féin. But he will not, it seems, seek to mudwrestle with the Opposition in the Dáil every week.

2 Political calculations will be ever-present as Harris and his Government colleagues decide what they will do and what they won't before the end of this administration. Is there a political upside to this? If not, the level of interest slumps. On any reckoning, the referendum on joining the EU patents' court should have proceeded as an act of good government. Is there a country in the world where intellectual property law is more central to economic wellbeing? But a simple calculation was made – is there a political upside to this? And then down it went.

I think we will see a similar process at play in other major political decisions, as the great general election countdown that is ticking in every politician's head continues and the political horizons narrow. The days after the Cabinet approved the patent court postponement, Jennifer Bray reported that any further liberalisation of the law on abortion before the election is unlikely. It won't be the last such story in the coming months, I expect.

3 There's a fightback, of sorts, on housing.

Harris has continued the mantra that housing is the Government's number one priority, and promised an eye-catching 250,000 new homes in the next five years. In reality, that will probably happen anyway. But it is interesting that both Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil talk noticeably more about "home ownership" compared to Sinn Féin's focus on social and affordable housing. That dividing line will probably grow in clarity. As will the question of the continuation of the Government support schemes such as Help-to-Buy, which Sinn Féin has pledged to scrap.

Fine Gael knows that the people Harris recently described as being stuck in their parents' box room aren't going to vote for the party. But it is hopeful that those who have managed to move out and buy their own home, and who don't want to see the slump in house prices advocated by Sinn Féin, might. Not to mention the homeowners who are seeing their chief asset continue to appreciate in value.

4 Harris's ascent to the Taoiseach's office comes at a point in time when politics seems poised for something; it's just not clear entirely what. This much has been apparent in the various party conferences that have taken place in recent weeks and continues today in the RDS with the Green Party.

All the parties seem to be sort of waiting for something, some timorously, some expectantly. In some respects, it's like

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2006 – economic growth, unpopular government, no great enthusiasm for the alternative.

Look at it this way: there have been two significant trends in the opinion polls since the last general election. The first was the rise of Sinn Féin, the second was the fall of Sinn Féin. We'll come to discuss that in the coming weeks, but for now, it's sufficient to note that the fall in support for Sinn Féin – from the mid-30 per cent to the mid-20 per cent – has not been accompanied by a commensurate increase in support for its chief rivals in the Government.

Instead, the support lost by Sinn Féin is

scattered around, with most going to Independents of various stripes.

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Uncertain mix

The electorate, for now anyway, seems to be in a sort of plague-on-all-your-houses mood. Perhaps they will stay with the Independents and the smaller parties; more likely they will give the big parties another look before the election – they hog much of the political debate and the media coverage of it. The conditions seem to be in place for a big swing, but there are few indications where it might go.

To this uncertain mix, Harris brings one big advantage and one big disadvantage.

First, novelty. The public, even those who pay only passing attention to politics, notice a new Taoiseach and will give him a hearing.

Second, familiarity. His party has been in office for 13 years. And you know what they say about familiarity. The Fine Gael leadership change has introduced a new uncertainty into the great game. Harris has the time between now and the local and European elections to change something in the way Fine Gael-available voters see the party.

If he gives the impression of a man in a hurry... he should be.

On a reporting trip to Rwanda, I was not allowed on the plane



Sally Hayden Opinion

My reporting and experience was used as evidence in the legal challenge against the UK Home Office's Rwanda deportation plan

It took me a moment to realise that the airline staff at the gate in front of me were shaking their heads. It was March 25th, and I was in Addis Ababa airport in Ethiopia, about to board a flight to Kigali, the capital of Rwanda. Or not. I would not be allowed any further, the staff were telling me.

The issue, they were saying, was that Rwandan authorities had emailed the airline about two hours before with my name, specifically saying that I was not allowed on. Instead, I should sit to the side and wait. They would hold on to my passport.

Eventually, I was marched to an airline office, where I asked what would happen now. They said they had no explanation as to why I was barred – I would have to take it up with Rwandan authorities. I probably should have expected that they also wouldn't give me a free flight anywhere else – I had to purchase one, they said, and I couldn't stay in the airport much longer. They held my passport until I did.

I have reported in Rwanda three times over the past decade. One of my very first assignments as a reporter – when I was just 24 – was covering the 20th anniversary of the genocide, also for The Irish Times. During that trip, I interviewed Mary Robinson, who spoke about the "very tight control" of the media there. I was vaguely aware that a journalist who had run afoul of the government disappeared while I was in the country, and later turned up in government custody. More Rwandan journalists later contacted me saying they had fled completely; Rwanda is known to pursue its critics abroad as well as at home.

In late 2019, I went back to the country to meet refugees who had been evacuated to Rwanda from Libya, under an EU-backed, UN Refugee Agency-supported scheme that would eventually see them moved on to western countries. In early 2020, then based in Uganda, I returned to meet them again. For both trips, I was working under a year-long accreditation that officials told me was granted only because they believed I would write "good stories" about them.

My reports on the situation for refugees there were published in The Irish Times, UK and US media outlets. One chapter of my book, *My Fourth Time, We Drowned: Seeking Refuge on the World's Deadliest Migration Route* – which was named *An Post Irish Book of the Year* in 2022 and also won the Orwell Prize, Britain's top prize for political writing – is also based on those 2019 and 2020 meetings. Already then, I saw how frightened my sources were to speak openly – we met in isolated places where we could keep a watch out for anyone listening in.

Refugees continued to contact me after I left, both to give general updates and to forward complaints about their treatment that were not being resolved. One particular case involved a claim about the alleged attempted sexual assault of a minor. I only published a report after the teenager had been publicly denounced online by the Rwandan police force, before a proper



investigation was concluded. In the aftermath, a spokesperson for Rwandan president Paul Kagame accused me of writing "refugee porn", and the government-aligned New Times newspaper said I "peddle lies".

My reporting and experience in Rwanda was later submitted as evidence in the legal challenge against the UK Home Office's Rwanda deportation plan (it was highly relevant given that the UK Home Office was using the EU-backed evacuation scheme in discussions as to why their scheme should go ahead).

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On this latest planned trip, timed to coincide with the 30th anniversary of the genocide, I was hoping to follow up with people I had met in 2014, as well as to do some general news reporting for The Irish Times. My media accreditation application, which had been approved for other journalists with a day or two, was still pending when I embarked on my flight to Rwanda, but this is not unusual: more journalists entered before and after me with applications pending. I expected not to be able to work until it was sorted, not to be blocked from entering the country.

Aside from media accreditation,

Rwanda has a visa-on-arrival system for Irish citizens. The fact that I was stopped before boarding the flight made me wonder if officials had scanned through the flight logs and searched everyone on them, or whether my name was already on a list. I waited weeks to go public with this, trying to resolve the issue so I could still travel there, but I have still not received a clear explanation as to why I was barred.

I was, maybe ironically, coming from a European Young Leaders summit that had been held by think tank Friends of Europe in Paris, where one of the topics discussed was how Europe is becoming more right-wing, ahead of the European elections in June. Migration – and the toxic debate around it – is a big part of that.

Abusive migration policies are being seen all over the western world, and they are growing incrementally in their cruelty. I know people in the UK who are at risk of being sent to Rwanda at this moment. Many have spent years trying to reach safety, crossing seas and deserts, living through detention, and watching friends or family members die. This deal – created to act as a deterrent – is mental torture for those who have gone through so much. An overlooked aspect of all this is that many of those involved originally fled dictatorships and persecution – the idea that they will be put in a similar environment again is incredibly frightening.

I'm a journalist, not an activist. I don't propose policy. When I am asked about the Rwanda deal though, I do say that proper monitoring and evaluation will not be possible in a country with such tight control over criticism and dissent.

I am often asked by British media what else the British are meant to do to stop people arriving on their shores, as if the UK is the only place people are migrating to. Last month, I stood on the border between Sudan and South Sudan, where more than 1,000 people, on average,

■ Rwandan president Paul Kagame: the country is renowned for unleashing co-ordinated pro-government online campaigns against journalists.

PHOTOGRAPH: TOLGA AKMEN/EPA-EFE

have crossed southwards each day for more than a year. South Sudan still maintains an "open door" policy. The Sudan war is just one of many current crises "forgotten" by many in the western world.

Rather than realising it is impossible not to feel the ripples of global suffering, western countries are increasingly spending huge sums of money in ways that prop up dictatorships, militias and systems that oppress people further.

There is a constant dissonance. It has also been strange this week seeing the "visit Rwanda" message flash up on the TV during football matches, on the sleeves of Arsenal players and on the side of pitches, and even in my own kitchen, on a friend's jersey. ("It's like it's taunting me," I told him.)

A lack of freedom of speech doesn't mean no speech for anyone. Rwanda is also renowned for unleashing co-ordinated pro-government online campaigns against journalists. As early as 2014, one Twitter account known to attack critics was linked back to the president's office.

Since going public with what happened to me, I have been besieged by tweets, including those that call me a white supremacist or "Karen", and say that I am only trying to garner "clout" or attention. Some of the tweets were copy-and-pasted on to different accounts. "In Rwanda, they cage dogs when necessary," one read.

If this deal goes ahead, it's hard to see how anyone sent to Rwanda won't have their narrative taken over by Rwandan and UK government communications people and PR firms, at risk of retribution if they speak out.

Breda O'Brien



RTÉ flaws on show in abortion programme

Way back at the end of the last century, I was wondering whether to continue with the insecure, six-month researcher contracts I was getting from RTÉ. A kindly senior researcher told me that I had no future in RTÉ as I would never be considered a safe pair of hands because of my anti-abortion views. I remembered that conversation while watching the RTÉ Investigates programme on Ireland's abortion services broadcast last Monday.

There was not a single contribution from anyone, pro-choice or pro-life, who had doubts about the wisdom of expanding Irish abortion access. What would the programme have been like with this pair of "unsafe hands" at the helm?

I would have included the programme's personal testimonies, such as a young woman with an unsuccessful medical abortion who then could not access Irish abortion as she was well past 12 weeks. However, I would also have interviewed women who changed their minds about aborting during the three-day waiting period.

I would have included the grieving mothers who felt it was in the best interests of their child to end the pregnancy in Britain when they received a devastating diagnosis that would not necessarily result in death within 28 days after birth. But I would also have featured mothers I have interviewed previously who continued their pregnancies in Ireland and received the best of bereavement care.

I would not have sent two undercover researchers for two days to secretly film a religious retreat run by Rachel's Vineyard. As the programme made clear, there was no suggestion of any participant being coerced or of any criminal activity. The problem seemed to be that they were run by women at variance with the current prevailing orthodoxy that there is nothing to regret about abortion.

Tiny alarm bell

Invading the privacy of the women running the retreat as they dealt with trauma and loss, with no public service justification, and allowing other contributors to describe their activities as akin to "voodoo" and a "cult" – no, I would not have done that. Did not even a tiny alarm bell tinkle from RTÉ's robust editorial structures?

Dr Jonathan Lord, who was interviewed in the programme, is the medical director of MSI, one of the biggest UK abortion providers. He joined MSI in February 2020, after it had been through a series of controversies. Marie Stopes temporarily ceased some operations in 2016 because of damning Care Quality Commission (CQC) reports. Previously there was the case of Aisha Chithira who travelled from Ireland in 2012 for a late-stage abortion and later died, after Marie Stopes staff put her into a taxi following the procedure, despite obvious

signs of unwellness stemming from a tear to her uterus. A coroner later identified an "element of complacency" within the west London clinic, but said he could not return a verdict of neglect because he was not satisfied there had been a gross failure.

In 2016, CQC found that there was a "cattle market" approach in Maidstone MSI. Staff were encouraged to approach people who had not shown up for abortions to offer them another appointment. This was linked to performance bonuses. MSI's CQC reports have improved greatly since Lord joined.

Nonetheless, I would have made his role at MSI clear and balanced him with an experienced Irish obstetrician with different views.

The programme focused on what it called rogue counselling agencies, but ignored what appeared to be an egregious promotion of abortion by the HSE My Options helpline recorded in their own programme. A woman calls My Options, says that she is about 14 weeks pregnant, never mentions abortion in the clip used in the programme, but is told that she is too late for an Irish abortion but that a voluntary group can help her go to the UK. Viewers see no evidence of counselling, no questions about exploring other options – which would be a clear breach of My Options' mandate to nondirectively explore all options, including parenting. I would have investigated that further.

I would have asked Dr Marie O'Shea why, when preparing her Report on the Operation of the 2018 Abortion Legislation, neither she nor her researchers spoke to a single woman who regretted her abortion choice, or who did not proceed to abortion. I would have asked about the woman in Limerick who almost died from an ectopic pregnancy after being prescribed abortion medicine and what safeguards should be put in place to prevent coercive abortions.

Figures outlining claims for fees from GPs for second abortion visits from January to November 2023 indicate that there were probably 10,000 Irish abortions in that period. Why have the figures risen so dramatically since legalisation?

In response to a series of questions, RTÉ said that the documentary "was not about looking at the rights or wrongs of abortion but rather examines the Government-commissioned review of Ireland's abortion legislation published early last year" and that the broadcaster "does not comment on individual editorial decisions". The programme was produced in accordance with RTÉ's journalism guidelines and extensive editorial processes.

Just when you begin to feel sympathy for RTÉ's workforce suffering from egregious financial mismanagement that was not of their doing, they manage to remind us that there are other systemic organisational flaws that there is little appetite to redress.