

# JOHN LEE

*Irreverent. Irrepressible. In the corridors of power*

**B**ERTIE AHERN had endured a hard day's work under a searing African sun but, as he always did, the Taoiseach found time for a press conference.

We had flown south from our base in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania's capital, to the shores of Lake Victoria, close to the place where in 1871 journalist Henry Morton Stanley had found a lost British missionary and uttered the immortal words: 'Dr Livingstone, I presume.'

It was January 2008, and fleeing grave political peril at home, Bertie was conducting a marathon visit to South Africa, Mozambique and Tanzania. Our travels around the titanic African interior via planes, four wheel drives and boats had brought us near Ujiji. After Bertie had presented aid to a village – in the shape of cattle – we saw a macabre tribal dance that involved a very large, albino python, which tried to wrap itself around the Taoiseach's neck. At home, Fine Gael and Labour and the press were trying to squeeze the life out of Bertie's 11-year premiership. The symbolism was not lost on us.

Back at the Dar es Salaam hotel, 15 hours after our original departure, Bertie's press conference took place in the lobby. At the end, after Mahon Tribunal questions and other issues of the day, someone asked about a deadly political crisis in neighbouring Kenya.

**T**HE then-Taoiseach said of then-Kenyan President Mwai Kibaki that he 'believes that his tribe have always been the rulers, his tribe have always been in power, they have always had power'. He added that they expected to 'always be in power'.

I said that the tribe sounded 'very like Fianna Fáil'. The assembled hacks laughed, and Bertie laughed loudly and gave me a gentle version of the shoulder charge he was famed for on north Dublin football pitches.

Yet, over a decade after his resignation from Fianna Fáil, Bertie Ahern returns to a diminished, and sometimes delusional party vastly different from the one he led to three successive general election victories.

There is now speculation about his running on a party ticket for the 2025 presidential election. In Leinster House this week I was stunned to hear a few parliamentary party members speak about Bertie possibly running in the next general election. Like I said – in some cases – there is delusion.

Bertie, like all politicians, craves the arena, but he will surely analyse dispassionately all that has happened to his party and Ireland since that hot day in Tanzania, when the prospect of Fianna Fáil not being at the centre of Irish politics provoked such mirth.

Or will he? For much as his admirers would remind us that he is a political genius, they will also concede that nous deserted him at a crucial time for his own, and his

**He may want it.  
He may even get  
to run. But Bertie  
will never be  
President**

country's, welfare. Only three months after the African visit, on the 10th anniversary of Bertie Ahern's securing of a historic peace in Northern Ireland, he was ousted.

When I look back it is another press conference, in March 2008 on the steps of Capitol Hill, that resonates. There were questions to Bertie that day about the collapse of a US investment bank, Bear Stearns. Many of us see the downfall of Lehman's, another New York bank, six months later as the beginning of the financial crash that was to mark all our lives. Yet it was Bear Stearns, torn asunder by its speculation in sub-prime mortgage debt (in what is now known as the St Patrick's Day massacre) that should have warned world leaders that something terrible was approaching. We went to Wall Street a few days later, and there, all around us there were signs, smart people were warning.

I, like everybody, was to make personal financial decisions in those six months that, had I known what was coming, would have been very different. Certainly, the government led by Brian Cowen, who succeeded Bertie in April, did little to predict or pre-empt the catastrophe that was to come. It was appearances at the Mahon Tribunal that were to cause Bertie Ahern to resign. But his legacy of prosperity cannot be looked at in isolation, how it laid the terrible groundwork for the economic col-

lapse that devastated our public finances – and led to the bailout.

**A**S WE saw with the disclosures about nursing home charges in this newspaper, the average man and woman don't always accept the cold, hard, logical explanation for events politicians and lawyers would like us to.

Emotion and pain, real pain, often dictate our views of events. Fianna Fáil – Bertie Ahern, Brian Cowen and Micheál Martin – will always be inextricably linked in the public mind with the 2008 financial crash and its aftermath.

Of course, there is an important distinction when it comes to Bertie: he is the only one of them responsible for bringing peace to the island of Ireland and, let's not forget, Britain. The Northern Ireland Peace Process is the most successful, enduring peace agreement in recent Western history. Three years before our peace process, in 1995, with the Oslo peace accords, Israel and the Palestinians, almost sealed a peace deal. Look at the tragedy there now. The Soviet Empire collapsed in 1991, and Russia, it was hoped, would become a full, peaceful participant in world affairs. That hasn't worked out.

The late PJ Mara, reflecting shrewdly as always, on Bertie's post-politics life, said that once Ahern left the Dáil in 2011 he should have said: 'I brought peace

to Ireland, that's all I have to say.'

And PJ added, he should have then said 'not a f\*\*\*ing word about the economy'.

Other world leaders who participated in the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, Bill Clinton and Tony Blair, have continued to receive international acclaim. Yes, Bertie has quietly pursued significant peace and conflict resolution work, but truly it has been a tragic waste of Irish talent that his skills have not been used officially. International diplomacy and Irish prestige have suffered from Bertie Ahern not possessing a high-profile, official, conflict resolution position this last decade.

He should be granted a special envoy status by the Irish State now, on the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement. And a main reason for him coming in from the cold is that anniversary, currently being used as a symbolic tool for further post-Brexit political compromise.

But his wilderness years don't bequeath him a garlanded return to glory, or as his supporters believe, a run for the Áras. On Thursday night, he himself did not rule out the possibility as he appeared for a chat before 300 Fianna Fáil faithful in Jim O'Callaghan's constituency. For the man called 'most cunning of them all', that means both nothing and something at the same time. Crucially though, Bertie was director of elections for Brian Lenihan's presidential bid and has said

himself that this was the most traumatic election he was involved in. The presidential dogfight has become far dirtier since. He may want to run. He may get to run, although this is very uncertain. But he will not win a national contest.

The Mahon Tribunal did not even imply he was corrupt but it did reveal highly questionable personal financial management. And because of the bailout, his beloved Fianna Fáil will never recover the position that was almost taken for granted that day in Dar es Salaam.

I'll leave the last word to PJ. Of his many stories, the one about the preposterous Pádraig Flynn and Charlie Haughey always made me laugh the most. During the 'glory years', any time a heave against the chief would erupt (and that was very often), Flynn would declare to Haughey: 'Chief, I am in the vanguard of your Praetorian Guard, I will protect you no matter what.'

As PJ related, he and Haughey knew the game was up when the final push came from Albert Reynolds in late 1991, and Flynn barged as usual into the Taoiseach's office. Before Haughey, arms spread wide, with great pathos he asked: 'Ah Jesus Chief, have you not suffered enough?'

Mara managed Bertie Ahern's three general election victories. If he was around today and asked about a Bertie presidential run, I truly believe he would proffer a similar response as Flynn. If a little less self-serving.

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**I**T WAS March 2011 and I stood at a window in Leinster House with a veteran Fianna Fáil TD looking a Fine Gael parliamentary party so large that it spread across the plinth, like a herd of wildebeest on the African savannah.

Scattered among the throng were Labour TDs and senators. I vividly remember the words of the Fianna Fáil TD – shattered, part of a small band who had been re-elected after the dark farce of the previous three-and-a-half years.

‘F\*\*\*’s sake,’ he remarked mournfully, as he scanned the crowd trying to identify the new faces, ‘We won’t get that bloody lot out for a decade’.

Fine Gael had won 76 seats, just seven short of an overall majority. But with Labour, which won 37, a Government of 113 seats was formed – an administration of unprecedented mandate.

The TD was wrong, of course. It only took nine years, and Fianna Fáil didn’t ‘get them out’ but joined them. For at that point, in early 2011, we were only at the mid-point of the financial cataclysm, with the very existence of the European currency coming under threat.

Politics had changed forever, in Ireland and the rest of the world, and none of us could have expected that Fine Gael/Labour coalition to lose its advantage so quickly.

**P**ERHAPS events made Labour’s fate inevitable, because as the apparent representatives of the working classes, they were never going to survive implementing austerity, which hit the weakest the hardest.

Fine Gael’s fate was less certain.

I would contend that character flaws, such as arrogance, political complacency and a lack of empathy – for the mass of people and politicians within their own ranks – has cost them up to a score of avoidable seat losses over the past 12 years.

This week, Roscommon-Galway TD Denis Naughten announced – two years before an election – that he is leaving politics.

Yes, Mr Naughten left Fine Gael in 2011, in an early protest over austerity cuts to his local hospital. But he had deep emotional and family ties to Fine Gael – and his vote is traditional Fine Gael.

As a 24-year-old man, perhaps with ambitions to pursue an academic career, he was thrust into politics by the death of his father. He won the subsequent by-election to the Seanad in 1997 and was elected to the Dáil the same year. Of course he went against Enda Kenny in the party’s 2010 attempted palace coup against the leader.

So when, in 2011, he was passed over for Cabinet, unlike other heave leaders Leo Varadkar, Simon Coveney and Richard Bruton, it didn’t bode well.

Looking back, there was a problem with Enda Kenny that many outside the party did not see. As I was to witness over the following decade, there was nobody like Mr Kenny for holding a grudge.

**Of 26 brand-new Fine Gael TDs in 2011, only five remain. Can Leo explain why?**

There was no Julius Caesar-like general amnesty. Certain people were given a pass after the heave while others, such as Denis Naughten, Michael Creed and John Deasy, were banished.

Mr Kenny frittered away TDs the way a drunk treats euros in a Monte Carlo casino.

Before the 2016 election, he had already lost 10 TDs. Fine Gael came back with just 50 seats, and these losses fired the starting pistols on the leadership campaigns of Leo Varadkar and Simon Coveney.

Mr Varadkar won. Why? Because he guaranteed that he would return Fine Gael’s electoral success.

He hasn’t yet. Indeed, by the 2020 election, the departure of TDs from Fine Gael had continued. The 50 seats had turned into 47 and Mr Varadkar’s new, vibrant party returned with just 35 seats.

From 76 seats to 35 in nine years – it wasn’t a Fianna Fáil-level collapse, but it was pretty incredible all the same.

Few believe Mr Varadkar would have survived had it not been for Covid-19, but survive he did.

Many, including yours truly, believed that, given this reprieve, he would approach his second term as Taoiseach with the fervour and enthusiasm of an unlikely escapee from death row.

So we ask, as many influential people in Fine Gael have again been asking in recent weeks, where is the Leo Varadkar we were

promised in 2017? Yes, he communicates brilliantly, and there has been no shortage of interviews and soundbites. But there is no follow-through at all.

Housing is the area that will decide whether Fine Gael’s next election will be another – and this time maybe existential – electoral collapse or the final manifestation of Mr Varadkar’s 2017 promises of substantial seat gains.

**Y**ET, two months in, it appears that the long, unglamorous, boring days in austere offices forming innovative housing policy and negotiating with sectoral interests are not for Mr Varadkar. Well-lit glitzy TV studios, radio studios and other interview locations remain the arena in which he is most at home.

Hence, there were hints at tax breaks for developers, which were ignored by new Finance Minister, Michael McGrath.

Last Sunday, Mr Varadkar said the Government had made ‘real progress’ in housing. He also said that 2023 would be the year that Ireland would ‘turn the corner’ on the housing crisis.

Yet since December 17, since he assumed top billing again, there hasn’t been one initiative in the area that dominates the nation’s consciousness and conscience.

Health? Oh yes, it appears that is really urgent too but, as we were

reminded by the ongoing nursing home charges scandal, Mr Varadkar, like many other politicians, saw his time in the Department of Health as an exercise in avoiding trouble rather than implementing change. That instinct as Taoiseach continues.

I believe character plays a far greater role in political management than many credit. Enda Kenny, like Leo Varadkar, had great character and skill in many areas. Yet the longer their time in Government went on, the more their character flaws were exposed.

Mr Varadkar remains a compelling figure. He is among the most interesting and talented – but also most flawed – Irish politicians ever.

During the exploding controversy over the Mail on Sunday story revealing the secret strategy of successive governments to stymie refunds to those forced to put their parents into private nursing homes, something momentous happened in Fine Gael that received less attention than it should have.

Brendan Griffin, a 40-year-old man, married with two young children, who has no experience in any profession bar politics, decided, like Mr Naughten, to announce two years before an election that he was leaving the Dáil.

Mr Griffin had jeopardised his own political career by becoming the first TD to call on Enda Kenny to stand down, in the summer of 2016. He was close to Mr Varadkar

and this move could only be seen as benefiting his cause.

Joe McHugh, a 51-year-old with a young family, also announced that he will not stand in 2025.

The manner of these retirements is highly unusual in Irish politics.

Fine Gael TDs will protest about speculation but it is reasonable to cast doubt over whether at least 11 will stand again.

If policy innovation in housing and health is not your thing, then a leader must put every sinew of effort into convincing politicians such as Brendan Griffin, Joe McHugh, Denis Naughten and any of the up to 11 Fine Gael TDs considering retirement that there is a future under his leadership. This clearly isn’t within Leo Varadkar’s skill set.

In the throng that day in March 2011, there were 26 new Fine Gael TDs. Mr Griffin was one of them. Now, excluding Mr Griffin, there are five of those left, and the leader of the party must explain why.

As that Fianna Fáil TD and I looked through the Leinster House lobby window, we saw only Fine Gael and Labour TDs and senators. Elsewhere in the complex there were 14 Sinn Féin TDs.

The impressive increase in their seats from four to 14 was overshadowed by the election of Gerry Adams to the Dáil for the first time. Many overlooked the fact that the growth in Sinn Féin’s numbers was the more important advance.

The first advance. But not the last.



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**I**F I had to choose one event that most marked my consciousness while covering politics, I would refer immediately to a spontaneous reaction to just one measure in the traumatic 'crash' budget for 2009. Everyone who saw it up close in October 2008 agrees with me, we learned so much about politics and Irish society.

It was the spontaneous protest over the then-Fianna Fáil/Green coalition government's removal of the entitlement of the over-70s to a universal medical card.

When elderly people, sometimes accompanied by their families but mostly as individuals, joined others and took to the autumn air, or filled churches and, of course, rang Liveline, to ask why this was being done to them most of us felt a collective shame.

Was this what we the Irish people had become? Allowing a reckless, neo-liberal, regulation-spurning government to wreck an economy and then blame it on the elderly?

When my colleague Daniel McConnell and I interviewed most of that Cabinet, years later, for our book on that government, Hell At The Gates, virtually all of them referred to the measure and its quick reversal in hushed tones.

The Health minister of the time, Mary Harney, who I felt was our most cerebrally and emotionally intelligent interviewee, appeared wide-eyed in terror remembering it.

For the purposes of this column, this week I looked back at the articles I wrote for this newspaper at the time.

The move had been leaked to me, I saw. And buried halfway down a front-page article I wrote: 'It has also been decided to end the universal granting of a medical card to the over-70s.'

Since it was an emergency budget called by then-finance minister Brian Lenihan in the days after the government had bailed out the banks – at an eventual cost of €120bn – since we were watching banks collapsing in the United States, since we were also warned of children's allowance being cut and taxes being raised, the exclusive didn't illuminate red lights.

It was included that means-testing would be imposed for the over-70s for a medical card.

I was in St Andrew's Church on Westland Row as elderly people, some on Zimmer frames some in wheelchairs, came in (the hotel conference room that had been booked was too small).

The minister asked to address them. Brian Cowen's Fianna Fáil constituency colleague John Moloney stood on the altar, unable to make himself heard. It was shocking and shameful, what the government did.

There was a backbench revolt and the move was reversed. Looking back at it now, it wasn't until the Water Charges protests six years later that any such outpouring of public sentiment happened again, and even that felt different.

There were many more years of revelations, and fiscal shocks involving billions and billions of taxpayer's money but, in many ways, that was the emotional rubicon for the Cowen government.

**T**HIS week, as I watched Taoiseach Leo Varadkar quibble over the exact meaning of the word minister, as his primary reaction to the Irish Mail on Sunday story about the continuing scorning of the elderly, I recalled he was an opposition TD in 2008. Was he not paying attention? Indeed, the two other coalition leaders, Micheál Martin and Eamon Ryan, were in that government. Have they forgotten, finally, the trauma they inflicted on elderly people then?

Many of those protesting in 2008 may now have passed on. Maybe their families had to sue the State to recoup monies they were entitled to for paying questionable charges to place them in private nursing homes, despite them having medical cards.

Maybe it's because our elite politicians fight retirement themselves for so long. But we don't have much of a turnover of the personalities at the very top. Martin and Ryan, incredibly, considering they were part of the worst government in the history of State, are still at the top. Leo Varadkar has been in Cabinet since 2011.

There is, of course, collective Cabinet responsibility in Ireland, but we'll give Varadkar a pass on the crucial decisions made in 2011 that would, again, target the elderly for saving the State money. The memo is marked 'secret' at its head, only then-taoiseach Enda Kenny, health minister James Reilly, the attorney general Máire Whelan and a select few were told about it.

It is called 'Memorandum on the management of long stay [in nursing care] and other related litigation'.

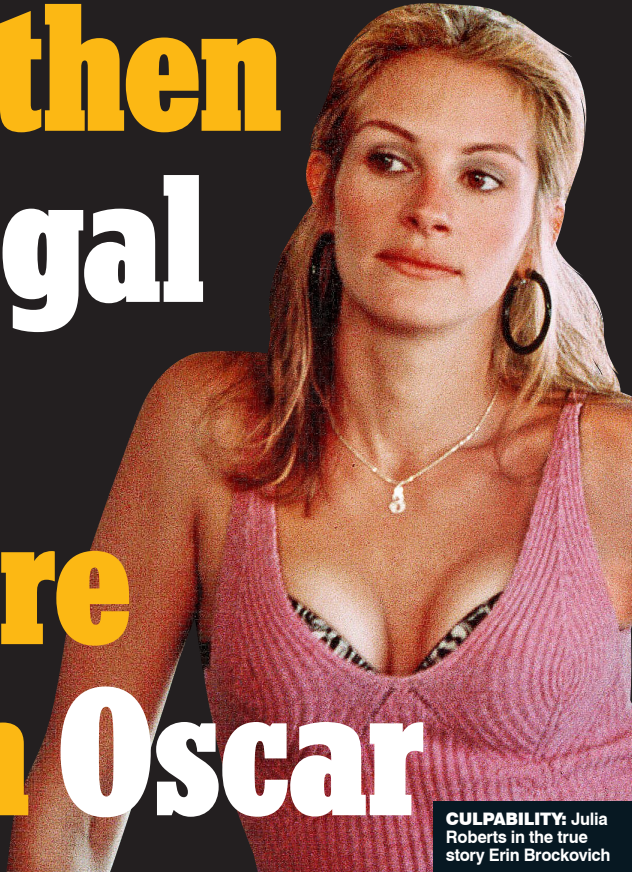
Those seeing it were reminded: 'All of the

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## Deny, delay, then settle was legal strategy of villains before Julia won an Oscar



**CULPABILITY:** Julia Roberts in the true story Erin Brockovich

information herein is highly confidential and sensitive and is legal'.

In other words, 'we don't want anyone knowing what we're up to here.'

The memo says that confidentiality is necessary because the government doesn't want people to become aware that they are due reimbursement from the State for nursing home charges they paid because they couldn't get a place in the public system.

If they find out, well they might ask for money they are entitled to back. They would, of course, have to hire a legal team, and go over all the inextricably painful experience of placing a relative in a nursing home because they could no longer be cared for at home.

Not only were there not sufficient places in public facilities, but the document also says that in some cases applications weren't processed and, sometimes, the relative health board didn't have the capacity to process the application.

A number of things strike you, reading this government memo, one of many thousands I have read as a political journalist. The first is unprecedented callousness; the next is its disingenuousness (the projected cost to the State of €7bn is ludicrously excessive). But, most of all, a 'political out' shouts from the bland pages.

I don't go for the defence some

Fine Gael people have put out this week: that the State was broke at the time. We had been bailed out by the IMF, so the banks could be bailed out and more importantly so we could care for citizens.

**N**O, THE 'out' was that Enda Kenny could have easily said, you know what, this isn't our fault, the previous government, which was there for 14 years, did this, they came up with the legal strategy too and we're not continuing it. Fine Gael could have made the ploy public, said they were discontinuing it. Legal advice is just that, advice, a leader's duty is to lead.

And politicians are elected to protect the interest of the people, particularly the most vulnerable.

This, over a number of pages of dry, bureaucratic language is a chronicle of what 'civil service capture' involves.

We hear this phrase but here we see it in action: politicians, so ecstatic to have assumed high office, fail to morally question bureaucrats, who long ago made their peace with questionable ethics, and lawyers who themselves are trained into a system that incentivises desensitisation to moral imperatives.

Leo Varadkar, importantly, admit-

ted in the Dáil this week that he was aware of the strategy when he was Minister for Health; and he believes it was right.

He backs the policy of fighting elderly people and their families, draining them of money and morale before settling for '40%-60%' of the claim on the court steps.

Documents the Irish Mail on Sunday published show that current Cabinet Ministers Simon Harris and Helen McEntee, backed and continued this legal ploy, too.

Nobody called a halt, nobody said: 'This is wrong, I'm not signing my name to it.'

Like World War I generals who, having surveyed thousands of young men mowed down one day, send more young men over the top again the next, politicians appear to delude themselves that they will get a different outcome from the same strategy.

Like robots they argue for a strategy, without questioning whether the strategy they argue for holds the insight they have been promised it does.

Promised by the people who have come up with the strategy in the first place.

A man can have the biggest share of the pot in poker and bet big to ensure nobody ever bets against him regardless of what cards he or they hold.

But as even the most casual of

poker players know, that is not a sound strategy. It is a bullying tactic. And it can be undone by someone calling the bluff.

Time and time again lawyers for the State said we cannot reveal our cards - because we have an idea that our cards won't win.

This week the Taoiseach of this country tried to tell ordinary citizens that which they know by instinct is not true. That those who called the State's bluff and asked to see their cards in discovery did not have an entitlement to the nursing home care they, or their parents, were denied.

If the State had winnable defences - despite the problematic documents in discovery relating to the 1993 subvention which are revealed in today's MoS - then they would have pressed home their advantage.

**D**ENY, delay and settle to avoid publicity is the de facto legal strategy of every corporate villain in every movie about corporate malfeasance since well before Julia Roberts won an Oscar for her portrayal of Erin Brockovich.

But that isn't even the worst part of the government's response. Everyone has two parents: even an orphan, and their (perhaps)

spectral presence looms over their entire lives.

Regardless of the parental relationship - present or absent - this is the relationship that is most dominant in all our psyches.

How we deal with our parents' old age and retirement is an eternal worry. This is why this story has had such a deep effect on the public.

As such, a non-empathetic response leaning into the legal advice provided by faceless lawyers is just bad politics - as the spontaneous 2008 protest demonstrates.

Pretty much all the centrist parties who have ever been in government participated in this scandal, and kept quiet about it.

Sinn Féin has never been in government.

The exposure of a secret, callous strategy to deprive people reimbursement of nursing home charges may not cost any of our Cabinet their jobs and their careers, this year.

But next year or the year after there will be a general election and Sinn Féin, already projected to win a massive seat haul, are now better placed to oust the Coalition and enter government.

And the Coalition will blame newspapers and media, who tried to show them the error of their ways. Like miners, blaming the canary, for dying.