

THE SUNDAY TIMES

ESTABLISHED 1822

Urgent action needed to arrest decline of An Garda Síochána

James Christopher “Lugs” Branigan was a legendary member of An Garda Síochána in the 1950s and 1960s. Active in amateur boxing, he was described as a “part of Dublin mythology”. But his gruff, rough and tumble approach to policing also brought allegations of police brutality.

The Lugs Brannigan policing style continued well beyond the man himself. But the notion that the guards could – or should – be a law unto themselves was serially discredited by a series of ugly scandals.

In the 1970s, the activities of “the Heavy Gang” of detectives came under heavy scrutiny after allegations that the group seriously mistreated suspects in its custody. In the 1980s, we had the Kerry babies case in which gardai descended an ever-deeper rabbit hole to justify the confession that they had intimidated out of Joanne Hayes and her family. The force reduced itself to a laughing stock when it insisted that Hayes had become pregnant simultaneously by two men. Then we had the Morris tribunal which investigated allegations of serious garda wrongdoing centred in Co Donegal.

This serial wrongdoing saw a strong momentum for reform build up. In the first decade of the century, Michael McDowell pioneered legislation that saw the creation of the Garda Ombudsman, the Garda Inspectorate and the Garda Reserve. Their respective roles were to process complaints against members of the force, to review its internal efficiency and to allow civic-minded citizens to contribute to policing just as the FCA allows them to contribute to the military.

In 2014, under Frances Fitzgerald, the Policing Authority was set up to oversee the performance of An Garda Síochána in the provision of policing services.

Has this plethora of reforms worked? Recent months have exposed the widespread belief that Dublin city centre is inadequately policed. That was already of

considerable concern around O’Connell Street. The matter was brought to a head by some recent incidents: in July Stephen Termini, from Buffalo, New York, suffered serious injuries after being attacked in Dublin; in September a mob laying siege to Leinster House forced it to go into lock-down; and last month there was rioting and looting on O’Connell Street that attracted worldwide attention.

On top of serious breaches of the law on our main streets, there seems to be simmering discontent within our police force. Last year, the Garda Representative Association (GRA) warned that a “worrying” pattern had begun to emerge in Irish policing, with more garda members retiring from the force long before they reached their compulsory retirement age.

In September, 99 per cent of members of the Garda Representative Association (GRA) voted no confidence in Commissioner Drew Harris, with 85 per cent of GRA members participating in the poll.

Later in the autumn, not a single senior officer applied for the post of deputy commissioner in charge of all criminal, security, intelligence and terrorist operations. In the past, deputy commissioners have generally been promoted to commissioner.

The recently deceased Henry Kissinger observed: “Order and freedom, sometimes described as opposite poles on the spectrum of experience, should instead be understood as interdependent.” What value has order if we lack freedom? What value has freedom if we lack order?

There is a grave danger that the pendulum of controlling our police has swung too far in the direction of regulating and disempowering. This may explain the low level of morale in the force and the insipid policing response to regular disorder in our city centres.

Is the Policing Authority anything other than the Department of Justice’s own version of the HSE – an organisational airbag to absorb the impact of ministerial failure?

Little sign that the Democrats can do any better than Biden

It is a vexing feature of American politics that a country so vast, so diverse and so rich in talent seems incapable of producing a wide selection of appealing candidates for president.

It was frequently observed in 2016 that Hillary Clinton was probably the only Democrat who could lose to Donald Trump and that Donald Trump was the only Republican who could lose to Hillary Clinton. In 2020 the Democrats had the sense to pick probably the only candidate who could beat Trump.

Four years on, the same unedifying options are on offer but, as things stand, it seems Joe Biden is now the less appealing of two unappealing choices, and some Democrats are seeking an alternative.

It’s early days, of course, and nothing can be said with confidence about an election in 11 months. But one thing we can say is that as far as the polls are concerned, Trump is in better shape at this stage of his third run for the presidency than he was at any stage of his previous two.

The daily polling average compiled by the political site Real Clear Politics (RCP) has Trump with a two-point lead over Biden. That doesn’t sound like much but consider the recent historical context. As Sean Trende, an elections analyst with RCP, noted, in 2016 Trump led Clinton in the polling average for just five days – immediately after the Republican convention that summer, when a candidate usually gets a bounce in the polls.

Some Democrats are getting vocal about Biden’s fading chances. David Axel-

rod, who was Barack Obama’s campaign chief in 2008, told The New York Times recently: “I think he has a 50-50 shot here but no better ... and maybe a little worse.”

But there’s a problem. Is there a more plausible candidate – and would they have a better shot at winning than Biden? Despite his age and infirmity, Biden still looks like his party’s best chance.

The most obvious contenders are Kamala Harris, the vice-president, and Gavin Newsom, the governor of California. Harris has been playing the loyal lieutenant, not even allowing talk of a possible candidacy to emerge anonymously from her team. Newsom, by contrast, while professing public support for Biden, is being as subtle about his ambitions as a man wearing a sandwich board.

But neither Harris’s discretion nor Newsom’s self-promotion is paying off in any visible way. The latest polling shows Trump would beat Newsom by the same margin he leads Biden. He would beat Harris by even more – one poll last month showed him beating her by 12 points.

Worse, if Biden were to stand down now, it’s hard to see how a contested primary election for the Democratic nomination would help the party. It would probably be divisive and ugly.

At another event this week, Biden hinted at another, parallel universe of presidential choice. “If Trump wasn’t running, I’m not sure I’d be running,” he said at a fundraiser in Massachusetts. But, he quickly reminded us, Trump is running – and the contest remains on.

Beasts in corridors of power

The Mansion House live crib was re-located, and the animals removed, on the instructions of the lord mayor last year. She had cited animal welfare concerns for interrupting the 30-year-old tradition, but this year’s mayor has no such worries.

“I know that the farmers always take great care of the animals and that this year will be no different,” Daithí de Róiste said.

Animal rights campaigners have professed their shock at the live crib’s return, with one complaining that “we’re putting these animals on display” during “some of the coldest weather in years”. Wait until

they find out where sheep and goats normally live. By contrast there is surprisingly little concern for other beasts trying to find shelter on these wintry nights.

Over the past year Aras an Uachtaráin has had to call in pest control experts to evict wasps, flies, ants, pigeons and rodents, at a yearly cost of about €11,000.

The president’s private drawing room seems to hold a particular appeal for rats and mice as it was reported last week they are back in An Grianan. Like the animals at the Mansion House, they have made their seasonal, but rather less welcome, return.

Brenda Power

Chains to the kitchen sink can’t be voted away



Women need social not constitutional change to escape domestic drudgery

Women in the home, rejoice. All your worries are over. Come March 8, the constitutional provision that has been blighting your life, limiting your career choices and chaining you to the kitchen sink, will be swept away.

Women in the home, you’ll no longer be expected to do your 20 hours of housework a week, after you’ve finished your day job, compared with your male partner’s average of seven hours. Next time the Economic and Social Research Institute studies unpaid work in Ireland, following on from that 2021 survey, men in the home will be doing their fair share.

Up to now, you see, men could rely on article 41.2 of the constitution to insist you cooked, cleaned, shopped and managed the bulk of the childcare – but a referendum to amend that offensive article will change all of that for ever.

Women in the home, you may be the ones taking the most poorly paid jobs in the country, according to figures published last week, while men dominate the top positions. But since that’s because you’re doing all the housework, and you’ll be freed from that drudgery come next March – there’ll be no stopping you.

Yes, women in the home, there are better days ahead. That is, unless you are one of those women in the home who’s being beaten black and blue by the man in the home. Tough luck if you’re among those who contributed to more than 54,000 reports of domestic violence this year so far, an 8 per cent increase on last year’s figures.

Unfortunately for women in the home, it’s still going to be “the man in your bed”, as Marie Cassidy, the former state pathologist, put it recently, “and not the man under your bed that you should be worried about”. Your abusers will still get suspended sentences for crimes that would have seen them locked up if they’d attacked another man, and you’ll still be more likely to be murdered by your partner than by a stranger.

But hey, you can’t have everything. Alas, women in the home suffering domestic abuse, this referendum won’t make a blind bit of difference to your lot.

In reality, this proposed referendum – scheduled for International Women’s Day, as if it couldn’t be more patronising – won’t make a blind bit of difference to anyone. Removing the offending article of the constitution won’t liberate women because it never enslaved them. As Susan Denham, then a Supreme Court judge, said in a 2001 ruling, “article 41.2 does not assign women to a domestic role” but rather it

● It is one of the immutable laws of television that whatever programme you sit down to watch with your young adult children will invariably include a sex scene. The only productions that now seem safe for communal viewing are gardening shows and cookery programmes, because they only mention soggy bottoms rather than shoving them in your face in HD.

I used to find it embarrassing to be ambushed by a graphic sex scene in mixed company, then it became awkwardly funny, but lately it’s just plain aggravating and even feels borderline abusive.

We were watching the much-hyped new Channel Four drama *The Couple Next Door* last week, a twisty thriller involving some mild suburban wife-swapping. And yes, there was a warning that it contained “scenes of an adult nature”, but when you’re invested in a series, what are your options? Abandon an engrossing story, or sit through several excruciating minutes of porn?

The series was described as “sexy” and “erotic”, but it was about as erotic as that scene in Monty Python’s *The Meaning of Life* where John Cleese summons his wife to help him demonstrate reproduction to a bored class of spotty boys: cringingly, tediously, ridiculously explicit. Here, you’re just embarrassed for the poor actors – this is “method” I could live without.

There was a time when Channel Four was your go-to channel for naughty content but these days anyone with a smartphone has a world of porn at their fingertips. If I want to watch pornography with my kids at 7.30pm on a Tuesday – replay and recordings mean there’s no watershed anymore – then I can, honestly. And billing porn as erotic shows a poor understanding of the word. One of the most genuinely erotic scenes in any drama is the closing shot in the old BBC adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* where Mr Darcy and Elizabeth – both buttoned up to the throat – head off on their honeymoon. Your imagination, rather than the “intimacy co-ordinator”, does all the heavy lifting.

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Tweaking the constitution will just obscure inequality, not redress it

Hadley Freeman

In my annus horribilis, Swift has been mirabilis



The singer has provided relief in a grim 12 months, personally and globally

I realised every record label was actively working to replace me. I thought instead I’d replace myself first with a new me. It’s harder to hit a moving target,” Taylor Swift said last week about her frequent shifts in musical genre, from country and western to pop to folk to anything she wants. Swift was talking to Time magazine, which has named her its person of the year, and while Swift is right that it’s harder to hit a moving target, that didn’t stop plenty from trying.

The reactions to Time choosing her have ranged from, at best, frantic justifications (the record-breaking sales! The mega tour!) to sneering weariness, as if Swift – only 33 and already one of the most successful singers of all time – is unworthy of Time, a magazine some of us didn’t realise even still existed.

“It’s sad that a hyper-promiscuous, childless woman, ageing and alone with a cat, has become the heroine of a feminist age,” said one viral tweet. To which millions of women replied: “No frantic school runs or grumpy husband AND she gets laid regularly? Sign us up!”

I am not going to argue the case for Swift being person of the year, largely because who cares, but she was the person of my year. On Monday, Spotify informed me that not only was Swift the artist I listened to most this year, but that I am a “top 1% fan”. Did I mention I am 45?

I could write endlessly about why Swift’s music is so satisfying. The variety of the music; the concision of her language: “You call me up again just to break me like a promise/ So casually cruel in the name of being honest” from *All Too Well* is a line that can hold its own against any sonnet in the canon. But there are now more than ten US university courses devoted to her, including one at Harvard, so I’ll leave the muso chat to the qualified Swiftians.

Instead, I’ll talk about what Swift fans always

talk about when they talk about her music: I’ll talk about myself. I’ll be honest with you, Sunday Times readers, it’s been a helluva year, an annus horribilis. Job change followed by divorce, and that was just the first two months. Then there are the world events, which I’ll sum up with a not very Swiftian “oy vay”.

Let’s just say a lot of time has been spent walking around my local park and listening to Swift – 7,445 minutes, to be precise, according to Spotify. Hopeful songs (*Out of the Woods, King of My Heart*), sad songs (*Exile, Is it Over Now?*), angry ones (*Would’ve Could’ve Should’ve*), funny ones (*We Are Never Getting Back Together, Gorgeous*), epic stories (*The Lucky One, All Too Well, The Last Great American Dynasty*) – I’ve inhaled them all.

Like great novelists, Swift knows specificity makes a story relatable, so while we might not have impressed a date by having as many James Taylor records as him (*Begin Again*), we know that feeling of connection she’s describing.

Critics carp that her songs are just about herself, but they don’t understand that in opening herself up, she lets fans in. This is why her song *Style* is so relatable to anyone who’s ever been in an on and off-again relationship, even if we haven’t actually been in one with Harry Styles. For this reason, she is often compared to Joni Mitchell, but I don’t think

that’s right: Mitchell’s songs are about Mitchell, whereas Swift’s lyrics extend outwards. So for me, she’s more like the only other singer with whom I’ve felt such a connection: Madonna. Their music is very different, as are the women. At 65, Madonna is almost twice Swift’s age, and where she has always been all about sex, Swift is about romance. Yet they inspire a similar kind of female devotion, because we see in the way they’re treated something of what we’ve experienced. They also inspire identical carps from (male) critics: that they are unoriginal, overexposed, too old and too slutty.

Madonna refused to be shamed for her sexuality, Swift refused to be cancelled when fighting with other celebrities (Kanye West) and music executives (Scooter Braun.) Both outlasted their bullies, and women see that. And they did it all – as Ginger Rogers once said – backwards and in high heels.

They also celebrate change. People used to mock Madonna’s evolutions – from conical bras to cowboy hats – but only boring people refuse to evolve. Both Swift and Madonna had tours this year – Eras and Celebration – celebrating the different stages of their careers, as if neither can believe they’ve endured.

I went to the last night of Madonna’s Celebration tour in London last week, and when she showed images from her 1990 Blond Ambition tour, which I went to when I was 12, I cried. We’ve been through a lot, you and me, Madonna, but we’re still here.

This time of year always feels like the end of one thing, and the prospect of something new beginning can be overwhelming. But if Madonna can include both *Like a Virgin* and *Don’t Cry for Me Argentina* in the same show, maybe we can all cope with big shifts better than we realise. Next summer, I’ll see Swift in concert. And while there aren’t many certainties in life, I can say this for sure: I will cry.

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Swift and Madonna inspire a similar kind of female devotion