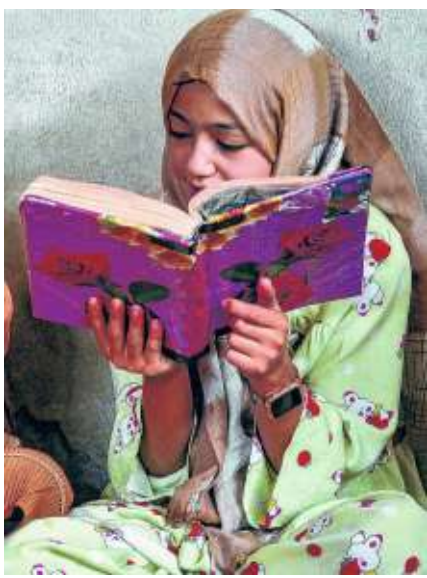




A GIRL'S LIFE UNDER THE TALIBAN

ROSITA BOLAND IN AFGHANISTAN WEEKEND



MAKING OF A SILVER STAR

IAN O'RIORDAN ON KATE O'CONNOR SPORT

THE IRISH TIMES

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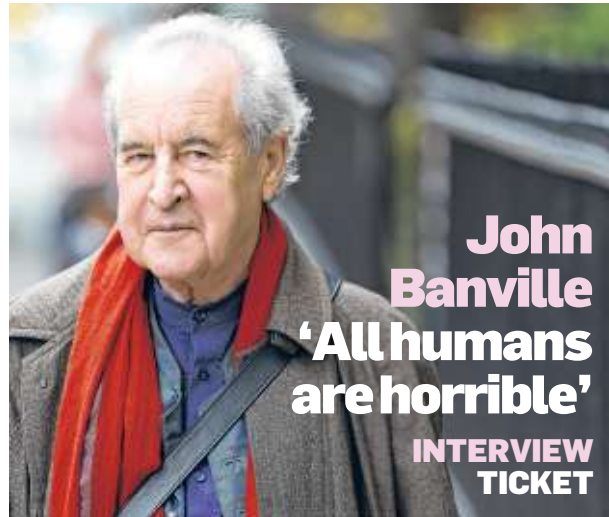
Saturday/Sunday, September 27/28, 2025

Football feast Steelers take over the capital

Pittsburgh Steelers fans – led by Bridget Walsh – do their trademark ‘terrible towel’ celebration in Dublin’s Temple Bar yesterday. The American football team play a ‘home’ NFL game against the Minnesota Vikings in Croke Park tomorrow.

American football's quest for world domination rolls into Croke Park: **Business**, page 17
Rogers a great who divides opinion: **Sports Weekend**

Photograph: Tom Honan



John Banville
‘All humans are horrible’
INTERVIEW
TICKET

‘Traitors’ is every office you have worked in



JENNIFER O'CONNELL
OPINION



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Steen is ‘divisive person’, says McDowell

Senator rejects conservative campaigner's claims over why he declined to back her

Former allies accuse each other of making defamatory statements

ELLEN COYNE
Political Correspondent

One-time referendum campaign allies Maria Steen and Michael McDowell have clashed over the circumstances that led to her failing to secure enough support from Oireachtas members in her presidential bid this week.

She claimed the Independent Senator declined to back her bid for the Áras because of a disagreement they had over her appearance on a televised de-

bate in the March 2024 family and care referendums in which they both campaigned successfully for No votes.

Rejecting the claim, Mr McDowell told The Irish Times: “I believe she is a divisive person.”

On Wednesday, Ms Steen fell just two votes short of the required 20 Oireachtas members needed to secure a place on the October 24th presidential ballot, leaving just three contenders in the race: Fianna Fáil's Jim Gavin, Heather Humphreys for Fine Gael and Cath-

rine Connolly, the Independent and left-wing candidate.

In an interview with The Irish Times, Ms Steen claimed Mr McDowell was one of a number of people who tried to get her to stand aside from an RTE Prime Time debate during last year's referendums campaign.

She claims the “incident” was the “only thing” she could think of when considering Mr McDowell's motivation for not nominating her this week.

The Independent Senator, in response, strongly rejected her claims.

Ms Steen and Mr McDowell accused each other of making defamatory statements in separate exchanges with The Irish Times about their conflicting accounts of a phone call made before a televised debate before last year's referendums.

Mr McDowell, who came under intense pressure this week



■ **Maria Steen said Michael McDowell effectively ignored her for four weeks**

following his refusal to sign Ms Steen's nomination papers, said there was “absolutely no connection” between last year's referendums and his decision not to back Ms Steen.

He said he was “very, very uneasy” about sharing a platform with her last year. “I believe she is a divisive person,” he said.

Ms Steen said Mr McDowell effectively ignored her for four weeks when she was trying to get him to sign her nomination papers. “He sent one text. He didn't answer any phone calls – not one phone call,” she said.

Ms Steen claims Mr McDow-

ell objected to her appearing in a televised RTE debate in last year's referendums campaign against then tánaiste Micheál Martin for the Yes side when she telephoned him for advice ahead of the debate.

She has claimed he also made dismissive comments about her appearing in the televised debate during their call. Mr McDowell denied this.

He said he was “astonished” and “very, very angry” she was now making these claims, describing her remarks as “defamatory”.

He insisted he had no interest in doing the RTE debate. Ms Steen said she thought “the optics of having two men debate about women in the home were all wrong”.

On her presidential bid this week, Mr McDowell said he was never going to nominate her for president and “she knew that”.

Asked why he didn't meet her this week, he said: “I wasn't going to meet her because I wasn't going to say to her face what I thought of her.”

➔ **I was painted as a ‘phantom villainess’:**
Interview: page 5
McDowell turns the page on Steen: page 7



Families to get €10,000 to drop asylum claims

PAT LEAHY
Political Editor

Asylum seekers are to be offered an allowance of €2,500 – or €10,000 for a family – if they drop their claim for international protection, leave the State and return home.

Minister for Justice Jim O'Callaghan has signed an order increasing the existing voluntary return grant, which will be available to people in the asy-

lum system before September 28th and who are awaiting a decision on their status.

The move, part of a general toughening of the State's asylum regime, is intended to incentivise people who may not have a valid claim for international protection, or asylum, to leave the State voluntarily. It would reduce the costs associated with considering asylum claims and accommodating individuals while the process –

which can be lengthy and expensive – unfolds.

Figures from the Department of Justice suggest processing an average international protection application costs about €122,000. This includes accommodation and food, social protection payments, healthcare and education.

The cost of deportations is also considerable. Earlier this year, the department said a charter flight deporting 35 peo-

ple to Nigeria had cost €325,000.

A voluntary return allowance of €1,200 per person or €2,000 per family is offered at present. Under this scheme, 1,159 people had left the State this year by September 19th, 2025, an increase of 129 per cent compared with the same period in 2024.

If people are in the appeals process – having been refused asylum in the first instance –

and decide to voluntarily leave before the appeal is concluded, they will be eligible to receive a lower allowance of up to €1,500 per person, or €6,000 per family unit.

There are safeguards in place for vulnerable people, and return requests can be refused if it would be unsafe for the person to return home, say officials. Additionally, the option is not offered to those convicted of serious criminality.

Weather

Rain in the east, heavy at times. A bright start further west with isolated showers later. Highs of 13-17 degrees.

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Attack: A businessman who engaged in a smear campaign against Jim Gavin was previously convicted of attacking a fisheries board officer. **Page 6**

World News



US: Donald Trump has signalled that his administration will launch prosecutions against more political opponents. **Page 9**

Business Today

Tariffs: Donald Trump's latest tariffs targeting pharmaceuticals do not apply to countries like Ireland that already have negotiated trade deals. **Page 16**

Retail: Accounts for Brown Thomas Arnotts Ltd show it made a pretax profit of just under €19m. **Page 16**

Sports Weekend

Soccer: Shamrock Rovers beat Bohemians 2-1 to inch closer to a fifth league title in six years, with Derry City drawing against Drogheda United.

Rugby: Leinster went down 35-0 to Stormers in Cape Town in their opening URC match of the season.

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Presidential election 2025



■ Maria Steen: 'I did keep making phone calls. I didn't give up.'
PHOTOGRAPH: NICK BRADSHAW
■ Below: With her husband Niall and 'the bag'. Bottom: With Michael McDowell on the same platform during last year's referendum campaigns

I was painted as a 'pantomime villainess': Maria Steen reflects on her failed Áras bid



Ellen Coyne
Political Correspondent

The barrister, conservative campaigner and stay-at-home mother talks about falling short in her attempt to get her name on the presidential ballot

In the soft luxury of the high-ceilinged lounge in an ornate south Dublin hotel sits Maria Steen, reflecting on a rollercoaster week in Irish politics.

The first week of the 2025 Irish presidential election was dominated by the one candidate who can't run in it. Tensions ran high with brickbats flying online. Asks if she feels she has become a "Disney villain" in people's minds, she replies: "Absolutely – pantomime villainess."

In a high-octane political drama, Steen managed to secure 18 of the 20 signatures required to be an official candidate on the October 24th ballot, with just hours to go until the close of nominations on Wednesday. "I did keep making phone calls. I didn't give up. I kept making phone calls up to as late as possible, but people just didn't pick up the phone," says the campaigner and barrister whose social and political positions stem from Catholic social teaching.

In the aftermath of her failing to get on the ticket, there has been very public rancour from a cohort of anti-establishment voters who now feel they effectively have no candidate in the race. Her opponents are equally vocal, with some openly suggesting that someone who holds Steen's views has no place in politics.

Steen herself feels she exists as a caricature in the minds of some because she is a practising Catholic who holds traditional views on social issues.

"There's an effort by some to make me out to be anti-woman, anti-gay, anti-whatever," Steen tells The Irish Times in her first lengthy interview since failing to secure enough support for her nomination. "All of these things are completely untrue, and they're a fairly ham-fisted attempt to paint me in a particular light, but I think most ordinary people can see through that and can see what's going on

here," Steen came closer than any other non-party candidate to running in the presidential election and some analysis suggests the reason she failed is because she left it too late.

"I don't accept that," she says.

While she concedes that starting earlier down the county council route – through which a successful candidate requires the support of four councils to get on the ticket – might have helped her, she points out that fellow unsuccessful hopeful Gareth Sheridan, also an Independent, had been working on his bid for much longer.

She says she delayed running until she knew for sure that Independent Senator Michael McDowell was not running for president.

Her honest belief is that she never could have secured more than 18 signatures from the Oireachtas because some TDs and Senators flat out refused to talk to her. "I was over a month trying to contact TDs and Senators, some of whom knew me personally, or were certainly aware of me," she says.

"And there are some Senators and TDs who just simply never returned my phone calls, refused to meet me or answer any emails or any texts. So that made things difficult."

Steen is best known as a conservative campaigner, though she rejects the label. "I certainly have never regarded myself as that," she says, considering herself a "centrist".

"But it's just that everybody else has moved so far left, it makes me look right," she says.

Formerly a spokeswoman for the Iona Institute, the socially conservative think-tank, she campaigned against the same-sex marriage and abortion referendums in 2015 and 2018 respectively, falling on the losing side in both.

Steen doesn't believe she was locked out of the Oireachtas because of her views on social issues, but thinks it was used as an "excuse".

When she was trying to get through the council route to the presidential ballot, she experienced "quite a lot of hostility" from councillors. The way she was addressed was "quite disrespectful", she says.

"Because I was pro-life, one female councillor told me that she would be worried for her daughters, that I was dangerous, that the country would be a dangerous place if I were president, despite the fact that my baseline position as a pro-life person is that we should start from a perspective that we shouldn't kill other human beings.

"I don't think that's extreme. I think it's utterly reasonable," she says.

Refused to talk

McDowell, who campaigned alongside Steen during the 2024 family and care referendums (when they were on the winning "No" side), effectively refused to talk to her in the four weeks she spent trying to get on the ticket.

"He sent one text. He didn't answer any phone calls – not one phone call," she says.

McDowell has been experiencing intense abuse from Steen's allies and supporters online this week, who can't understand how the man who shared a platform with her during the 2024 referendums would refuse to support her.

He told The Irish Times he reluctantly shared a platform with Steen last year and that he never would have supported her for president.

The acrimony between Steen and McDowell reached boiling point yesterday



as each – in separate exchanges with The Irish Times – angrily rejected the other's account of a phone call between them in the run-up to last year's referendums when Steen was asked, ahead of McDowell, to represent the "No" side in an RTE televised debate.

Steen says she had "hoped" McDowell would support her and is "disappointed" he didn't. "In fairness, it wasn't just McDowell. There were other Independent Senators and TDs as well, some of whom would have aligned with me on almost every issue," she says. After Kerry Independent TD Michael Healy-Rae agreed to sign her nomination papers, an intense lobbying effort focused on fellow Government Independents like Seán Canney, Noel Grealish and Kevin Boxer Moran.

Steen says it "took me a long time to reach them". When she finally reached them, the Ministers told her they would not back her, "though they didn't really explain why".

Steen also claims there was an "attempt to tarnish" her name and her campaign in the Seanad by asking her to account for abusive tweets sent by people demanding politicians to support Steen.

Independent Senator Gerard Craughwell later blamed the "outrageous online campaign" for his decision not to sign Steen's papers. In a meeting with Steen this week, Craughwell asked Steen to distance herself publicly from the social media abuse he was receiving.

Steen felt it unfair to expect her to take responsibility for social media posts that had nothing to do with her. "I can't even get nasty tweets that are written about myself taken down," she says, adding: "How on earth would I have control over what somebody else writes?"

'RTÉ narrative'

She is critical of RTE's coverage of her, claiming the broadcaster has an agenda against her, as she says was evidenced in the interview with presenter David McCullagh on RTE's Six One news programme on Tuesday. She felt there was a "clearly an attempt" to link her to rumours circulated by businessman Kieran Kelly about Fianna Fáil candidate Jim Gavin.

Kelly said in an online post he had spoken to Steen on the phone about her presidential bid and that he was supportive of her. Steen says a councillor had asked her if it was okay to give her number to Kelly. "In the midst of a campaign, I

said: 'Sure.' I didn't know anything about him," she says.

She describes McCullagh's question – that she wanted to bring Ireland "back to the 1930s" as president – as "an attempt by RTE to frame a narrative".

She felt RTE showed bias against her during the 2024 referendum debate, saying the broadcaster set up the debate – now a cause of tensions between Steen and McDowell – "to try to paint me as part of old Ireland".

"That was what they were hoping. It didn't work out for them," Steen says. She says she was "rushed" into the studio with a minute to air, while her opponent in the head-to-head debate, then tánaiste Micheál Martin, was settled in his seat getting his make-up done.

A spokesman for RTE said that it "stands over the line of questioning" of Steen on the Six One programme: "RTE provided Maria Steen with an opportunity to clearly distance herself from the tweets referred to and the question about the 1930s followed Maria Steen's reference to the role of the president being to bring the nation back to the values that the country was founded on."

The spokesman said the broadcaster also "does not accept any suggestion of unfair treatment of Maria Steen" in last year's Prime Time debate.

After the 2018 referendum, Steen decided to take a break after a "very exhausting two years" of intense campaigning. She went back to being a stay-at-home mother. The pandemic hit, and in 2021 she had her fifth child – a girl whose fourth birthday she celebrated on Wednesday after her presidential hopes ended.

When the family and care referendums were announced for March 2024, Steen felt they would pass but thought it important that somebody should debate the proposals as she felt "very few people" would be willing to come out and oppose them.

"Having been at home with my children, I had a thing or two to say about mothers and the work we do in the home," she says.

She campaigned for a "No" vote as a stay-at-home mother and lawyer, and not part of any official group such as the Iona Institute, which she says she hasn't worked for as a spokeswoman since 2018.

She looks back at the campaign as a "healing" experience as she worked alongside people with different perspectives and felt it was different from the "hostility" of previous referendums which she thinks "were quite damaging to our society".

Being on the winning side last year motivated her to launch her presidential bid. She believes McDowell got most of the praise for the victorious "No" side, saying "very few women got any credit for it".

“The handbag was deliberate . . . I wanted to expose the hypocrisy of the left who don't love the poor; they just hate the rich”

The fallout from her failure to get on the presidential ballot has been fierce. Online, Steen's supporters have threatened to electorally punish McDowell, Grealish, Canney, Moran and any other politician who didn't sign her nomination papers.

"At the end of the day, people feel the way they feel, and if they're angry, they're entitled to express their anger, so long as it's obviously within the boundaries of being respectful and all of that," she says.

She also believes there is "a kind of righteous anger that people are entitled to express".

"I think politicians need to listen to that," she says.

One feature of her final public appearance in the presidential nominations race that generated much comment on traditional and social media was a Hermès handbag on her arm, estimated to cost anywhere between €10,000 and €40,000. Some on the conservative right, reacting to the style she displayed at the moment, went so far as to describe Steen as their "Jackie O".

She laughs when the subject of the handbag is raised. "The handbag was deliberate," she says of its appearance at the most public moment of her failed presidential bid this week. "I wanted to expose the hypocrisy of the left who don't love the poor; they just hate the rich," she says.

Steen argues that it's hypocritical for feminists to argue that they want more women in public life and then "criticise a woman who happens to have the wrong values for carrying the expensive handbag".

She also considers it misogynistic. "Nobody would ever question a man about the price of his car or of his suit – or if he's wearing an expensive watch – but a woman carries an expensive handbag, and that's all the news," she says. Besides, she argues, if you're applying for a job, it's a sign of respect "to look as well as I can".

Her supporters are already wasting no time; they are already pushing her to run again for the presidency in 2032. Steen doesn't know if she wants to. In the interim, competing for a Dáil seat would be "too difficult" to contemplate.

"The life of a TD is very difficult, particularly for a woman with a young family," she says. "People talk about women who take time out to be at home as lacking ambition. It's not that I lack ambition, but my ambitions lie elsewhere."

Presidential election

‘I was hoping for Paul Mescal,’ tourist laments after meeting only Jim Gavin

On the canvass

**Cormac McQuinn**

in Dalkey

‘Middle-of-the-road kind of guy’ keeps things steady on home turf

Jim Gavin chatted to Canadian couple Maja Crawley and Colin Landrie during a short Dart journey between Blackrock and Dalkey in south Dublin yesterday.

The pair seemed somewhat bemused to have come upon the Fianna Fáil presidential election candidate’s large entourage during their journey.

An Irish Rail staff member kept a close eye to make sure there was no canvassing on board as this is a no-no for the transport company.

Team Gavin told him they were only on board to “get from A to B” and the candidate was on safe ground talking to the Canadian pair who do not have a vote in the election.

Dún Laoghaire TD Cormac Devlin told the tourists that Taoiseach Micheál Martin was in Canada to meet their prime minister Mark Carney.

So did the couple from Winnipeg, Manitoba, expect to encounter a presidential election candidate on their trip to Ireland?

“I was hoping for Paul Mescal or Dermot Kennedy,” Ms Crawley said.

Mr Gavin does not have the same kind of star power as the actor or the singer-songwriter, but who does in fairness?

The former Dublin GAA manager, a newcomer to politics, does enjoy some fame due to his multiple All-Ireland winning efforts and there was the odd ‘Up the Dubs’ as he canvassed in the southside suburbs. He met footballers Paul Mannion and Con O’Callaghan in Dún Laoghaire. The pair later featured in a campaign video backing him.

But what is Mr Gavin telling voters regarding his plans for the presidency?

Voters Anne O’Leary and Rimiko Ogata got the pitch in a Blackrock café. They got a



technical explanation of the powers of the presidency, such as scrutinising Bills and appointing taoisigh and ministers after elections. He also said the office had “the power to highlight things” like disadvantage and “those who mightn’t have a voice” and to “shine a light on people who provide services”.

This would be a “big part” of his presidency, he told them.

Ms O’Leary asked for an example and Mr Gavin mentioned the kind of places he visited while canvassing in Navan, Co Meath, the previous day including a childcare

centre. “It’s about highlighting the really good things in the country,” he said.

Speaking afterwards, Ms O’Leary and Ms Ogata said they had not been Fianna Fáil supporters in the past, but would consider voting for Mr Gavin.

Ms O’Leary said that with Mr Martin as leader she was more open to the party. Ms Ogata agreed.

Mr Gavin, of course, is the person the Taoiseach backed to be Fianna Fáil’s candidate. He held off Ireland South MEP Billy Kelleher in the internal parliamentary party vote to

select a candidate, but by a thinner margin than many expected.

One of Mr Kelleher’s supporters in that contest, Dublin MEP Barry Andrews, was on the canvass with Mr Gavin.

Is he ruling the fact that it is Mr Gavin rather than Mr Kelleher pounding the pavements on the campaign trail? “It’s ancient history,” Mr Andrews said. “We had a great contest and are delighted that Jim is our candidate.”

“We’re very lucky. His record of service is really unbelievable. I came across

him in humanitarian work when I was in [aid agency] Goal and he was in the Air Corps.

“In the next four weeks he’ll grow as a candidate and get to know the people.”

More importantly, does he believe Mr Gavin can stay ahead of the Fine Gael candidate, Heather Humphreys, when it comes to first preference votes?

“I think so, yeah,” Mr Andrews said.

Fine Gael transfers

A widely held view among commentators is that whichever Coalition party candidate is ahead – Mr Gavin or Ms Humphreys – will benefit from transfers from the other, propelling them to the presidency over left-wing Independent Catherine Connolly, who is backed by Opposition parties.

Mr Andrews said “the concentration on first preference will be the main thing here” and “that’s why he’s working as hard as he is”.

“He’s an amazingly energetic candidate,” he said. “People are really responding to him well on the road.”

In Blackrock, Eugene Kenny, from “a Fianna Fáil house”, said he would vote for Mr Gavin as “he seems to be the best of the three at the

■ **Fianna Fáil presidential candidate Jim Gavin meeting voters with Dún Laoghaire TD Cormac Devlin. Left: Gavin sets out his stall in Blackrock.**

PHOTOGRAPHS: DAN DENNISON

moment”. He described him as a “middle-of-the-road kind of guy” who is “able to speak pretty well”.

Another voter in the village, Jane McGauran, told Mr Gavin how Ms Connolly was particularly vocal on the horror of the war in Gaza.

Dr McGauran is a volunteer with the Children Not Numbers charity and is a member of Irish Healthcare Workers for Palestine. She is in contact with families in Gaza who have “very sick children” including some with injuries from explosives.

She asked if Mr Gavin would speak out about the war and advocate for injured children to come to Ireland. He told her what was happening in Gaza was “genocide” and said he would “speak out against that”.

“The fighting needs to stop, the hostages need to be handed back by Hamas, and we need to get aid into Gaza and to get those women and children and people out,” he said. “So I will champion that.”

Crash victim’s family criticise Humphreys

ELLEN COYNE
Political Correspondent

Lucia O’Farrell, the mother of hit-and-run victim Shane O’Farrell, has said she was “terribly disappointed” that Heather Humphreys did not support the Monaghan family’s campaign for a public inquiry into failings in the criminal justice system surrounding her son’s death.

Ms O’Farrell said the Fine Gael presidential candidate is “not capable of being the president for the people of Ireland, when she can’t represent her own people in Monaghan”.

Shane O’Farrell died in a hit-and-run incident in Co Monaghan in 2011. The 23-year-old was knocked off his bike by a man with multiple convictions.

For 14 years, his mother has been campaigning for answers about how and why Zigmantas Gridziuska, who was driving the car that hit Mr O’Farrell, was out on bail at the time.

Gridziuska had 42 previous convictions, including for road-traffic offences, theft and heroin possession.

Earlier this year, the O’Farrell family were offered a State apology for failings in the criminal justice system.

Justice Minister Jim O’Callaghan also announced a review of bail laws, “to help prevent other families having to suffer in the way the O’Farrell family have suffered”.

Ms O’Farrell told The Irish Times the family had been supported by politicians from across the political spectrum, adding, “we were very lucky with those kind and good people who had a good heart”.

These included politicians from Sinn Féin, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, as well as Independents, she said.

But Ms O’Farrell said the family were not supported by Ms Humphreys, who was their local TD in Monaghan for the period between Mr O’Farrell’s death and last year’s general election.

“She never stood shoulder to shoulder with us outside the Dáil, when almost everyone else did. When the doors were bulging in Buswells Hotel, when we had a press conference, she wasn’t there,” Ms

O’Farrell said.

“I was terribly disappointed in that. I thought as a local representative from Cavan Monaghan, as our local representative, and as a mother, that it would be different.”

Ms O’Farrell said she has never met Ms Humphreys, although she received some email correspondence from her.

No meeting

She also said she called Ms Humphreys at one point in the year before the State apology and asked to meet the then minister to show her documents relating to Mr O’Farrell’s case.

Ms Humphreys asked Ms O’Farrell to send the documents to her, Ms O’Farrell said.

She said she expected Ms Humphreys to contact the family after the State apology was



“She never stood shoulder to shoulder with us outside the Dáil, when almost everyone else did – Lucia O’Farrell, whose son Shane was killed

issued. There is no record of Ms Humphreys having raised the family’s case in the Dáil.

She responded to questions from other politicians asked on behalf of the O’Farrell family when she briefly served as minister for justice while Helen McEntee was on maternity leave.

“And she read from a script,” Ms O’Farrell said.

A spokesman for Ms Humphreys said: “The O’Farrell family have endured terrible pain since the loss of Shane. Heather has spoken with Lucia in the past. She welcomes the State apology from Minister Jim O’Callaghan to the family.”

Connolly compares Germany’s arms build-up with 1930s

ELLEN COYNE
Political Correspondent

Presidential candidate Catherine Connolly has said there are “parallels” between the current increase in military spending in Germany and its rearmament during the 1930s.

The Independent candidate, who is supported by a broad left-wing alliance of parties, was speaking as part of a fireside chat with the University College Dublin Politics Society on Wednesday night.

Standing over the comments yesterday, Ms Connolly said Ireland should use its neutrality to challenge imperial powers and “I think America is one of those imperial powers”.

Ms Connolly told the event that the world was “normalising war and normalising genocide”, and that peace has become an unacceptable word. She said promoting peace and neutrality was one of her “main motivating factors” in running for president.

Ms Connolly told students that Ireland, as a neutral country, should champion peace, particularly given its history as a colonised country, its experience of famine and of the Troubles and subsequent peace process.

“I think we should draw on that experience and use all our skills as a neutral country to go down a road of peace,” she

said. “If we lose, we lose, but you lose by war anyway. But let’s try. Let’s say: this is wrong.”

“We’re increasing our spend all over Europe on the military industrial complex. They’re absolutely championing the cause of the military industrial complex in Germany, as a booster for the economy.”

“Seems to me, there are some parallels with the ‘30s. I don’t wish to depress you. There is hope. And we have voices. And we can use them.”

Doubling defence spending Germany is planning to double its defence spending over the next five years, with plans to invest almost €650 billion in largely European contracts and suppliers.

Under the measures agreed by the German government earlier this year, the country would hit Nato’s new defence spending target of 3.5 per cent of GDP by 2029.

Asked about Germany’s security fears amid Russia’s incursions into European states, Ms Connolly replied: “I think we have a very volatile situation in the world. I think we have imperial powers. I think America is one of those imperial powers. As a neutral country, we have a duty to use our neutrality to call out the abuse of power no matter where that is, whether by Russia or by American or by whatever country.”

Man behind Gavin ‘smears’ was sued over ‘false’ claims

CONOR GALLAGHER
Crime and Security Correspondent

The businessman behind online “malicious smears” about presidential candidate Jim Gavin was successfully sued for almost €500,000 last year for spreading defamatory claims on social media.

A US court ruled Kieran Kelly, a former Waterford fisherman who lives in Indonesia, used his large social media following to make false and damaging claims against a business rival.

In recent weeks, Mr Kelly has posted derogatory claims concerning Mr Gavin, who is Fianna Fáil’s candidate for president, that went viral across several social media platforms.

The posts, which were offered without any evidence and concern Mr Gavin’s private life, were viewed hundreds of thousands of times. They have since been removed from most platforms following complaints from the Gavin campaign.

In 2019, Mr Kelly, who describes himself as a registered Republican and “Trump loyalist”, founded an environmental business in Indonesia that removes waste from the water.

It claimed to use newly invented technology to remove large amounts of plastic waste from the seas for recycling.

In 2022, Mr Kelly’s company was sued by a Danish company called Resea Project, which was engaged in similar work.

The Danish company alleged Mr Kelly was using social media to spread false claims about them that severely damaged their business and reputation.

This included false claims that Resea mixed oil into the plastic waste they collected and



“The judge said Kelly engaged in ‘abusive and sanctionable conduct’ against a rival and responded to their claim with ‘ever-increasing belligerence’

that it dumped recovered plastic back into the water.

Mr Kelly also falsely claimed the company was involved in fraud and “corporate greenwashing”.

Resea said these claims were part of an “ongoing social media blitz of false and negative information” about the company on Mr Kelly’s social media accounts. It said he used hashtags and tagged influential people to ensure maximum reach.

The US District Court in west Texas found these claims were “literally false”. It also strongly criticised the manner in which Mr Kelly approached the case.

In a judgment issued last year, Judge Jason Pulliam said the Waterford man engaged in “abusive and sanctionable con-

duct”. When Resea made efforts to advance the case, Mr Kelly did not respond, the judge said. “Instead, he has responded with additional wrongdoing and ever-increasing belligerence.”

Mr Kelly refused to appear for a deposition until ordered to do so and when he did appear “he then lied repeatedly” and interfered with Resea’s attempts to depose other witnesses.

Damages

Last September, the judge issued a judgment in default against Mr Kelly after the defendant stopped engaging with the case. He imposed a permanent injunction on Mr Kelly preventing him for posting further false claims about the Danish company and ordered he pay a total of \$577,741 (€494,798) in damages and interest.

Court documents show Mr Kelly later attempted to appeal but this was rejected.

Mr Kelly refused to comment on the case yesterday, instead making a series of accusations against The Irish Times and claiming he would release thousands of pages of documents next week that will bring down the Government.

A spokesman for Resea said it “does not wish to comment on Kieran Kelly, his companies or his working methods”.

Mr Kelly has refused to provide any evidence for his claims about Mr Gavin, claiming it will be released shortly before polling day.

The claims have drawn an angry response from the Gavin campaign, which called them “invented and utterly false”.

Mr Gavin has said the online abuse he has received is “a failure of our digital culture”.

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