

Martin is damaged say the bloodletting

THEY say never judge a book by its cover. But I think it might be appropriate to infer something from the clunkily titled 'Report reviewing matters related to the Presidential election and making recommendations regarding potential improvement to the process for identifying and selecting candidates'.

TDs, senators and MEPS were given only an hour to absorb the fateful 27 pages of what is more colloquially known as the 'Jim Gavin report' – the first half-hour was spent on the title page – before entering a monster meeting that went on from 7pm to 12.30am.

Afterwards, those who ran to Foley's of Merrion Row for the Fianna Fáil Christmas party, where staff had proceeded to revel blithely without them, found the bar complying with licensing laws and closed. A few had got out early to defend their leader on broadcast media and others just left, bored.

One TD who made it before closing got a pint and when seeking an obligatory second on the party tab was told it was too late. He told me he had to 'fight as hard as I did to defend Micheál Martin these last few months to get a second drink'.

Another, released from the hot, unventilated room, had to get Oireachtas staff to unlock a room so they could get their coat to venture out into the rain, while Martin could avail of his chauffeur-driven limousine to take him to his nearby pied-à-terre near Leeson Street.

The meeting was called only that morning after this newspaper and others had revealed advance details of the report the previous weekend. But I had been told weeks earlier on the Leinster House plinth that the report was complete. Reasons for the delay in delivery were never given in detail. I was sitting having a dinner of chicken and vegetable skewers in the Leinster House self-service restaurant with a TD, when the report landed.

A minister had previously agreed to send it to me, so we both had it. My dinner companion saw in the report's 'steps taken during the identification and selection process' section, in a timeline, under a heading 'Friday, September 5', that the Taoiseach's chief of staff had received 'a call from journalist and Ireland Editor at the Irish Independent Fionnán Sheahan' to tell her there was an 'issue with a tenant'. We had revealed this last Sunday.

It continues that when the party put it to Jim Gavin, he stated 'that he is not aware of any such issue'.

In the section under the heading 'September 8', the report confirmed that the party received a press query, which was followed by a text message (in fact, as we revealed in advance, it was a WhatsApp message) from Dublin South-West TD John Lahart that was sent to Gavin's director of elections, minister Jack Chambers.

The WhatsApp began with the words, 'this might be nothing...' but went on to warn Chambers to take the press query seriously and, vitally, informed the minister that the tenant was a 'journalist'.

All of this – a phone call from a widely regarded editor at a media group to the Taoiseach's senior aide about Gavin's problems with a tenant; a written follow-up press query on similar and a corroborative text communication alleging the tenant was a journalist (and all the obvious connotations this had) – should have set loud alarm bells ringing.

Of course, at the time, other alarm bells were ringing.

It should not be forgotten that whether Mr Martin had the votes to have his candidate selected was an active matter of political discussion at the start of September. The

convention was being pitched as a referendum on Martin's high-handedness.

It was Gavin, the outsider, against Billy Kelleher, the insider. The size of the eventual vote for Kelleher – if seven votes had switched he'd have triumphed – was ultimately seen as a message to Micheál.

It is a message that has subsequently been amplified by the catastrophe of Gavin's candidacy.

But don't heed any revisionism – from the moment he was selected to be the Fianna Fáil flag-bearer in the presidential election, Martin's fate was entwined with his chosen carpetbagger. As such, the minimal mentions of Martin in the report rise to the level of Sherlock's Holmes's curious incident of the dog in the night-time, the dog that didn't bark.

I understand, from people familiar with the compilation of the report, that Lahart was only asked about whether he could prove the veracity of the constituent who approached him with the information about Gavin and his journalist tenant. The inquiry team did not ask him whether Chambers had come to him to ask for further information (he didn't) and they did not ask Lahart if he had contacted the Taoiseach.

Disgust at lack of answers in report on Jim Gavin debacle is tempered by the fact that Taoiseach's enemies know Justice Minister Jim O'Callaghan, needs more time and experience before he takes the crown

JOHN

Irreverent. Irrepressible. In the



Indeed, at the time of going to press we are still endeavouring to find out from Fianna Fáil whether the investigation committee asked Deirdre Gillane, Jack Chambers, Seán Dorgan, or Micheál Martin himself if they had informed Martin of this central question. They may have asked, they may have answered but we don't know, as the report remains totally silent on Martin's access to information.

In my initial reading of the

report, and then when I studied it in detail before appearing on Tuesday night's Prime Time, the most glaring omission was that the report was silent on what Martin knew. I told the host Sarah McInerney this when I arrived and she spoke about this on air.

Crucially, he was asked this several times at the parliamentary party meeting. As I understand it from people in the room, he never quite answered that question.

Instead his colleagues had to wait for him to confirm to RTE's David McCullagh that he had been informed of the information given to party colleagues about Gavin on September 5 and September 8.

Not getting an answer to that question is not the only remarkable aspect of last Tuesday's meeting. I have covered many parliamentary party debates about a leader's future. (This, of course, is what last Tuesday's meeting was

but the **centre** ground needs to stop **for now**



BAD LOOK: Micheál Martin glares at reporters as he answers questions about his role in the Jim Gavin debacle

LEE corridors of power

really about.) I have never before covered one where just a single minister spoke. Yet that is what happened last week, when minister Timmy Dooley, at the end, appealed for unity and for Martin to have a 'cuppa' with Kelleher to sort out what has become an increasingly ill-tempered rift.

Martin, we reminded readers recently, met at Kelleher's house in January 2011 to discuss Brian Cowen before he, Martin, met

Cowen to ask him to consider standing aside as Fianna Fáil leader. This is one of many uncomfortable facts Martin does not like being reminded of, but the press, to his rising rage, continue to ask him ill-mannered (in his view) questions.

(Last Tuesday, his day began on the way into Cabinet, where he was asked by a young female journalist, formerly of this newspaper group, Louise Burne, about his continued attacks on the press. Martin was

evasive and she politely pushed him for an answer, when he told her to have 'manners'. The clip was widely circulated on social media and was a very bad look, especially when Burne accused Martin of being 'Trumpian'.)

In the meeting later, Martin was introduced to what his final months hold for him. He was relentlessly criticised; his ministers said nothing to defend him and the party's middle ground largely sat on their hands. Though many outside the room – where the infamous Haughey heave debates were held – interpreted the silence of the ministers and the non-combative-ness of the middle ground as a victory for Martin, it was a pyrrhic one, if even that. Meetings of this nature concerning the leadership of Charlie Haughey, Bertie Ahern, Brian Cowen and former Fine Gael leader Enda Kenny were dominated by ministers speaking their support and praise of their leader. There was none of that last Tuesday. Many noted that the prince in waiting, Justice Minister Jim O'Callaghan, sat with Social Affairs Minister Dara Calleary: many believe they will eventually work together on a leadership ticket. Jack Chambers, who was director of elections for Jim Gavin, and according to the report made the initial contacts with him about the presidency in July, similarly said nothing.

Martin's hands had shaken, I'd previously reported, at one of the parliamentary meetings in the immediate aftermath of the presidential election. This week they were firmly clasped on his lap. Perhaps he was coached, but more likely he reads this column and learned a lesson. Yet he would have gone into this meeting with trepidation. All it took was for it to take a slight change in tone and some of the middle ground could have thrown their weight behind his opponents.

Three party grandees – Pat the Cope Gallagher, Seán Ó Fearghail and Willie O'Dea – had issued a statement the night before which many viewed as the primary trigger of this meeting. Ultimately, only Gallagher contributed significantly, with a bad-tempered exchange over the Taoiseach's failure to visit Donegal during last year's general election, which was seen as a snub in the county.

Martin replied that his presence was needed in other places as he always thought there would be two seats in that constituency. This exchange illustrated starkly the difference between November 2024 and now. Would TDs be as worried if Martin didn't show up in their constituency now?

It was, unusually for a young, inexperienced first-term TD, a contribution from a Ryan O'Meara of Tipperary North that was seen

as pivotal. O'Meara stressed that no 'pressure' had been put on him by Chambers when he was canvassed, and he said he would not now bow to pressure from either side of the debate over Martin's future (which, again, to stress, is what this is all about).

O'Meara said that his loyalty was to the people in his local organisation who had selected him to run for the Dáil in the first place. The Tipperary Fianna Fáil organisation forced the party to have a selection convention when HQ didn't want one at all, as incumbent Jackie Cahill had withdrawn so late. It is understood that the Tipperary North organisation feels 'humiliated' and 'embarrassed' by the presidential catastrophe.

But, equally, it has come to the point where the increasingly vicious row between the pro- and anti-Martin camps has angered them more. There is a view across the national Fianna Fáil organisation that the very public yet personally driven arguments have

'Don't expect to see Martin and Billy Kelleher playing football on the lawn'

damaged the party's reputation in the broader electorate.

This was the fundamental reason that the explosion did not happen, according to ministers, TDs and senators I spoke to since last Tuesday. There had to be a Christmas Armistice (although don't expect to see Micheál Martin and Billy Kelleher playing football on a snowy Leinster House lawn on Christmas Day).

Martin had played a central role in re-establishing the party's moderate revival. His willingness to stay at the helm when others retired was vital and his backing of the liberal side in social referendums changed the electorate's view of Fianna Fáil.

Yet despite an increase in seats, Fianna Fáil still stands at only 21.9 per cent (which is, in fact, a slight fall from 2020 which, at 22.2 per cent, was considered a disaster). So, after nearly 15 years of Martin leadership, the party has recovered 4.5 percentage points from its 2011 nadir of 17.4 per cent.

The party has had a terrible year in Government since the election, and the presidential fall-out has damaged both parties in the Coalition. But Fianna Fáil's in-fighting has been more publicly and dramatically played out.

The Tipperary view is echoed across the party: the fighting had to stop. This truce was assisted by a growing consensus across the party, from the highest minister down, that Martin is significantly damaged, the party is damaged and a heave would possibly drag it into a 2011-style abyss.

Their chosen successor, it is felt, needs another year in Cabinet.

A minister said last night: 'We all know that Martin is damaged. We don't need parliamentary party rebels to show us that. But we know a heave would destroy us.'

'We all know people who were around for the Haughey heaves and it took a political generation for us to recover from it. There is only one person for the leadership and we want Jim O'Callaghan to take over a unified, healthy party, not one riven by a heave.'

Additionally, there is a belief that a longer lead-in to the orderly handover of power would assist not only the party but Mr O'Callaghan. 'Jim himself needs another year as a Cabinet minister. Not only to get on top of his brief but to learn more about all aspects of Government policy, housing, foreign affairs and everything.'

'That is why we expect a new leader in a year. After the European Presidency, in January 2027, Micheál Martin will go and O'Callaghan will take over. It will be hard for Martin to keep discipline but that's his problem. He can have that presidency if he wants it.'

The word every politician, from high rank to low, used was 'blood-bath'. Language leaves a fingerprint and clearly there have been significant informal talks across the parliamentary party, between Cabinet contenders and back-benchers, even if only in a non-direct fashion.

A precipitous heave would leave a damaged party for O'Callaghan, they believe, and hence the absence of action this week.

It may be that they'd all be happy to see Martin stay on for another year but events dictate the course of politics, not weak, unwritten agreements. Opposition parties have it in their power to move the writs for two by-elections, one in Catherine Connolly's constituency, and another in Bertie Ahern's old bailiwick of Dublin Central.

A Martin-led government can seek to block that. But that risks replaying a 'Dáil Speaking'-type row, which would be a foolish move for a Taoiseach not even fully in control of his own party. Those who talk of a truce, and allowing a Martin of lost authority to stay on, ignore that a temptation of Garden of Eden proportions lies unguarded: the office of Taoiseach without a general election.

Once that ephemeral concept authority is gone from a leader, it's nearly impossible to get back.