

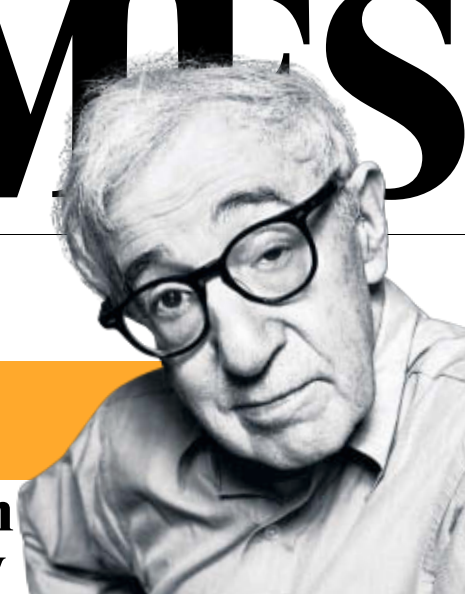
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McGregor puts society at risk, warns taoiseach

Martin criticises divisive ‘loose talk’ of former MMA star

Claire Scott
Political Correspondent
Ian Begley Senior Reporter

Micheál Martin, the taoiseach, has warned that Conor McGregor’s rhetoric on immigration risks discouraging people from coming to work in Ireland.

In a scathing attack on the one-time mixed martial arts fighter, Martin said that McGregor’s “loose talk” and “nasty othering of a particular race” was fuelling division and undermining social cohesion.

The Fianna Fail leader voiced his strong concerns before the former UFC star’s planned pursuit of the presidential nomination through local authorities. McGregor is due to make his first pitch before Dublin city council tomorrow evening.

In an interview with The Sunday Times, Martin said he feared Ireland’s growing multicultural workforce would dwindle due to rising anti-immigration sentiment which was being actively supported by McGregor through his social media accounts, where he has tens of millions of followers

Martin said Ireland had “turned a corner in the wrong direction because of the kind of language Conor McGregor articulates”. He expressed unease about the rise of “narrow nationalism re-emerging and inward-looking nationalism that is othering people”.

While acknowledging that some concerns about migration were legitimate, the taoiseach said they must be expressed “in a way that’s not racist and that doesn’t incite violence against people because



I WILL LEAD FIANNA FAIL INTO THE NEXT GENERAL ELECTION
Micheál Martin interview and presidential race coverage
Pages 6-7

of their colour or their creed or their race”.

The director of public prosecution considered charges against McGregor over social media comments he made during the 2023 Dublin riots but ultimately decided not to seek a prosecution.

Martin said he respected the right to protest but fundamentally disagreed with the substance of McGregor’s views on immigration. “I don’t agree with the content of what he’s saying and the substance of what he’s saying, or with a lot of people who don’t like the label far right, but that’s where they are,” the taoiseach said.

While he took no issue with the MMA fighter pursuing a run for the presidency through the councils, describing it as his right to do so, the Fianna Fail leader believed McGregor was “incoherent on the constitution” when it came to how it could and could not be amended.

McGregor, who was found liable for rape in a civil case taken by Nikita Hand last November, will come before Dublin city hall

tomorrow at 6.15pm alongside 13 other candidates for a special meeting where councillors will consider nominations for the presidency.

A protest, arranged by Rosa, a socialist feminist organisation, will coincide with the hearing. Ruth Coppinger, who will speak at the rally, which begins at 5.30pm, criticised the council for giving McGregor a platform.

“This is someone who has been found by a jury to be a rapist. He has also put the woman who won the case through a series of legal challenges,” the Socialist TD said.

“He also helped to stir up division and misinformation that led to the Dublin riots, which cost the city council millions of euros and created huge fear among minorities.”

She added: “McGregor getting platforms like this deserves to be greeted with a protest. He has stirred up misogyny and victim-blaming in our society. We also want to show our solidarity to Nikita Hand.”

During his presentation, McGregor is likely to reiterate his pledge to “give power back to the people of Ireland” and to represent citizens “independently”, as he previously outlined in his email appealing to councils.

He asked for support in securing a nomination “so that the Irish people may be given a real choice” that was not “confined to candidates from the traditional political establishment”.

“A nomination is not an endorsement of my campaign, but Continued on page 2→

EYES ON THE PRIZE



Heather Humphreys chose the Monaghan Peace Campus in her home county to launch her campaign for the presidency yesterday. The Fine Gael candidate faced tough questions on controversies during her time as a government minister. Full story, page 7

Varadkar feared UK tapped Irish phones in Brexit talks

Jennifer Bray Political Editor
Claire Scott

The government feared its phone calls and text messages might have been monitored by British intelligence services during the Brexit negotiations, Leo Varadkar, the taoiseach at the time, has revealed.

Writing in his new memoir, *Speaking My Mind*, Varadkar said his government knew Britain “had the capacity to listen to our calls

and read our text messages and emails” when they met to discuss the UK’s exit from the EU.

The claim from Varadkar, 46, coincides with Britain and Ireland trying to reset Anglo-Irish relations after years of turmoil following the 2016 Brexit referendum. The book provides insights into the contentious negotiations between Varadkar and Theresa May, prime minister from 2016 to 2019, and Boris Johnson, her successor until 2022.

The level of distrust is highlighted in a chapter called “Standing Up for Ireland”, where Varadkar outlines his suspicions as talks progressed.

He says the British delegation installed a “huge, green tent-like object” in its negotiation room where May could “make calls without being heard”. He referred to the tent in conversation with May, saying: “That’s an interesting piece of equipment.” He added: “we don’t bother with any of that.”

According to Varadkar, May responded with a wry smile: “Oh, we know you don’t.”

He conceded that, while the Continued on page 2→



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Micheál Martin: I’ll lead Fianna Fail into next general election

The taoiseach talks about backing Jim Gavin for president and what he wants out of budget negotiations

Claire Scott
Political Correspondent

After a week of speculation over his grip on Fianna Fail and even his future as leader of the party, Micheál Martin appears anything but rattled.

In the taoiseach’s office at Government Buildings he is relaxed, almost breezy. The photographer has to ask for gravitas as he stands next to a foreboding portrait of Eamon de Valera. He obliges then slips back into chit-chat.

The windowsill is lined with gifts from world leaders alongside handmade cards from schoolchildren. He points out a present from the prime minister of Japan, Shigeru Ishiba; a red, blue and white toy called Myaku-Myaku. The display is a good reflection of Martin’s mood – cheerful, carefully arranged.

With a 50-minute gap in his schedule before he meets the deputy prime minister of Montenegro, he turns to the row that engulfed his party: his handling of Fianna Fail’s presidential pick, Jim Gavin, the former Dublin GAA manager.

The main point of internal criticism seems to be that he kept his TDs and senators in the dark on the process for selecting a candidate. It gave rise to Billy Kelleher, the Ireland South MEP, putting his own name forward for consideration, effectively blindsiding the leadership as he rallied grassroots to support him.

In a contest last Tuesday Kelleher was defeated 41-29 by Gavin after they each presented their case for the candidacy before the parliamentary party. However, the fact the Cork MEP managed to achieve such a sizeable vote has fuelled speculation that Martin’s hold on Fianna Fail is waning. So, in hindsight, would the taoiseach have done things differently?

“Not particularly, no,” he tells The Sunday Times. “Let’s be real about it: the speculation around August is extraordinary. If I spoke to anyone about it, it would have been the front page of the newspaper the next day – that’s the reality. And one has to be strategic and do one’s best in these matters. I’ve been through this before in different governments. The last time was 1997 when we actually had a candidate, and it was somewhat similar.”

JUDGMENT CALL

He draws a parallel with his predecessor Bertie Ahern, who was accused of privately backing Mary McAleese in her bid for the Fianna Fail presidential candidacy in September 1997 at the expense of Albert Reynolds, the former taoiseach.

Ironically, in the same way Reynolds was critical of Ahern, by suggesting he undermined his bid for the presidency to propel McAleese into the Aras 28 years ago, Ahern criticised Martin for setting up the selection process in such a way that he could “do sweet nothing” about putting himself forward.

“Leaders have to make judgment calls,” Martin argues. “Bertie Ahern did exactly the same thing with Mary McAleese. In fairness, she was up against Albert Reynolds, former taoiseach, and Michael O’Kennedy, former minister. In fact, she lost on the first count and was elected on transfers.

“The moral of the story there being: it’s hard to present someone who’s not a member of the parliamentary party to the parliamentary party against a well-respected member of the parliamentary party and win.

“So actually, the question should be turned around, it’s a considerable decision by the parliamentary party to select someone like Jim Gavin, who’s up against someone they like very much in Billy Kelleher, and who’s very popular and was a very good parliamentarian. So I’m not as exercised by what happened. I think it was a good exercise in democracy.”

Martin bristles at what he sees as unbalanced commentary in recent weeks. Why, he asked, was he painted as “dithering” over a candidate while Mary



ILLUSTRATION: TONY BELL

Lou McDonald, the Sinn Féin leader, faced little scrutiny for taking her time?

Should Gavin fail to make it to the Aras, Martin strongly rejects the notion that his position would be in question. He intends to lead Fianna Fail into the next general election – a subject he has plainly grown weary of revisiting.

“We’re in a very turbulent and dangerous world at the moment where there’s terrible conflict ... We need to focus on these matters also, not just on who is in and who is out of politics. At times we can be in a bubble in Leinster House, and the public will grow intolerant if we focus on just ourselves.”

Jack Chambers, the party’s deputy leader, was the first to meet Gavin after it emerged that the GAA manager was interested in pursuing the Fianna Fail nomination in July. Officials from party headquarters then met him before Martin.

The taoiseach had a clear idea of the type of person he wanted: someone who was above party politics, someone who could draw voters in from outside the Fianna Fail base – a necessary trait particularly given the fragmentation among the main political parties, each polling about 20 per cent.

“You need somebody that’s significantly higher than that, who will appeal to a broad base of people,” he says.

On his initial meeting with Gavin over the summer, he says: “We had a long conversation, I was immediately struck that here was a person with a considerable degree of breadth and depth.”

In a previous interview with The Sunday Times in April, Gavin was critical of the government’s failure to progress the necessary plebiscite on a directly elected mayor for Dublin over fears that figures such as Conor McGregor would pursue the role. He had chaired the assembly on the matter, which produced a report recommending the change in 2022.

“I agree with him, that’s a legitimate criticism,” Martin says. “We’re in a coalition government – it’s difficult, we can’t progress everything at once. There was a previous attempt to progress it. It’s still on the agenda, it’s something that can be progressed. I think people are watching the mayoralty in Limerick to see how that unfolds. It’s complex in Dublin too, it’s multi-layered, but I can see how he would be legitimately critical of the absence of follow-through.”

UNFAIR FRENZY

Given the bruising nature of presidential campaigns, did Fianna Fail headquarters check for any skeletons in Gavin’s closet before settling on him?

“With every candidate you kind of talk to them and ask, what could the media try to or what could anyone throw at you generally? That engagement did happen.”

Then he turns to a broader point: “You’ve asked me that question, what’s that question telling us? It’s telling us that we’ve allowed the presidential election to become a sort of election whereby it’s fair game to do everything you possibly can to take down an individual.

“I have a problem with that. I mean, there’s a number of presidential elections that I’ve experienced where independent candidates were undermined significantly – unfairly, in some cases in the past – and whatever it is about the presidency, it seems to engender that sort of frenzy, which I think is unfortunate.”

He has already seen some of this targeting commence but declines to say whether he believed it had affected his candidacy.

On his experience of Heather Humphreys, now among Gavin’s rivals for the presidency, Martin says that he found her to be a “nice person” and they “got on well”.

The Sunday Times revealed last week that a former Department of Agriculture official believed that the collapse of a Co

Monaghan animal cruelty case was caused by a staff member in Humphreys’s office passing on a letter to the department. Kieran Devlin, a retired veterinary inspector, said the only conclusion he could come to was that “it was a direct result of some interference”.

Martin says that there should be no issues with publishing the letter at the centre of the case.

He adds: “I don’t have the full background to the case. The secretary-general of agriculture said there was no representation and no impact on whatever decision the officials in the Department of Agriculture took. All animal cruelty cases are shocking. They should be prosecuted and pursued.”

Humphreys has also come under fire for the green paper on disability reform published by her Department of Social Protection in 2023 that was widely criticised by human rights campaigners. The most controversial element was the proposal that people employed by the department would carry out medical examinations to assess a person’s capacity to work.

“I was never in favour of that paper,” Martin says, adding that he believes “attitudes across all our agencies and systems towards disabled people need to change”.

He wants disabled people to continue to receive allowances while working for a period of time, but said there was a cultural pushback within some departments.

There is also criticism about increases in the domiciliary care allowance and also suggestions that disabled people will not work if they are in receipt of the allowance at the same time. “This needs to change,” he says.

BUDGET HOPES

The taoiseach is in the thick of negotiations before budget day on October 7. While the government has been clear there will be no further one-off payments, Martin indicates there will be increases in pensions and other welfare rates. Christmas bonus payments, made before the cost of living budget, are also anticipated.

When asked whether the lower VAT rate for hospitality would come in on January 1, as lobbied for by the sector, he says: “It would be challenging to do anything on the personal taxation, we have to work that out.”

He reiterates his call to prioritise additional school places in this year’s budget over another childcare fee cut, and says a two tier child benefit was under consideration but it would be an alternative to further increases to the child support payment and the one parent family payment.

On higher education costs, the government is examining alternatives to reduce the burden on families in the absence of the one-off €1,000 reduction to the student contribution fee.

The taoiseach wants this budget to send a message: “I think the budget will send a very strong statement on research and development, which is going to be key for competitiveness in the economy, new ideas, new products.”

There will also be a focus on infrastructure, with ministers expected to produce sectoral investment plans on budget day that set out projects to be delivered between 2026 and 2030.

“We have to be targeted on welfare payments,” Martin says.

“I think child poverty is a definitive priority of mine, and I want to turn all our aspirations into reality. We will look at certain instruments and mechanisms we can use to target resources to reduce the level of child poverty; and disability is also a priority.”

Jim Gavin is a presidential gamble for the taoiseach, Gary Murphy, page 18

Gardai suspect foreign-based extremists involved in threats against tanaiste

John Mooney
Investigations Editor

Gardai believe threats made in recent weeks against Simon Harris and his family originated with anti-government extremists operating outside the country. Detectives have sought Interpol’s help to identify those behind the intimidation of the tanaiste.

Meta, the owner of Facebook, supplied garda intelligence officers with data linked to the account that sent one message, which was crudely written but technically adept.

Investigators said the wording and phrases suggested the sender might not be Irish. The culprit appeared to go to extraordinary lengths to

locate their victim, demonstrating a detailed understanding of how to find people who want to remain hidden online.

The message was followed by a series of hoax bomb threats to a number of garda stations last weekend. Security sources said the calls were co-ordinated through Telegram, an encrypted messaging app favoured by extremists. Officers are confident they will identify those responsible, and believe they are likely to be Ireland-based.

Other intimidation attempts were also traced. A woman from west Dublin was arrested two weeks ago after allegedly posting a threat to abduct the Fine Gael leader’s children. Gardai are also awaiting directions from the

“Ireland is seen as some kind of racially pure society that can be ‘saved’ by extremists

director of public prosecutions on whether to charge a group of masked activists who staged a fleeting demonstration outside Harris’s home in Wicklow.

Senior officers say the rise of extremist and anti-government ideologies across Ireland is viewed as overtaking the threat posed by violent dissident republicans and international terrorists. Analysts said the trend was being fuelled by developments in the US, where political violence has re-emerged.

Last week a gunman shot dead Charlie Kirk, a 31-year-old podcaster and activist who had endorsed ultra-conservative and far-right causes through a network of college chapters in the US. His death followed earlier

killings of Democratic legislators and attacks on political institutions.

Orla Lynch, a specialist in extremism at University College Cork, said the threats against Harris reflected deep-rooted hatred of elites.

“It is not specific to Simon Harris,” she said. “It is part of a much wider belief system – anti-government, anti-academia, anti-politician. They have a general idea that the system has been broken by the people within it. People like Simon Harris are a very convenient target to point the finger at for their grievances. It’s not about tearing down the system, it’s about the broken system.”

Lynch said anti-government extremism in Ireland was strongly influenced by what was happening in America.



The threats against Simon Harris “reflect a deep-rooted hatred of elites”

“It’s a huge influence, and it might extend to political violence. The US has made radical positions more acceptable and that broad societal influence is emerging here,” she said.

“Ireland has a special place in Irish diaspora hearts. It is seen as some kind of ... racially and culturally pure society that can still be ‘saved’ by extremists. Many claim they want to preserve Ireland’s cultural identity.”

Harris is not the only political figure to have been targeted. Discussions in Telegram groups included claims of Russian surveillance and the EU’s supposed failure to curb migration to Ireland, and criticism of Micheál Martin, the taoiseach, for allegedly failing to confront what they called a “race war”.

Garda intelligence identified others involved in attempts to intimidate politicians. Many senior officers believe Ireland and other EU countries will have to take legislative action to force social media companies to stop the spread of hatred, conspiracy theories and extremist views. Some companies are enforcing bans but others, such as Elon Musk’s X, argue absolute free speech should be permitted regardless of consequences. Gardai said the continuing investigation highlighted the sophistication of online targeting by extremists and the rapidly evolving nature of the threat.

If Kneecap said “death to TDs”, would we still shrug? Brenda Power, page 18