



SHANE McGRATH

Lineker's lesson was the power of celebrity

BETWEEN the descent from his martyr's pyre and his return to the harmless affability of presenting duties, Gary Lineker stands as a triumph for the power of free speech.

Because of his brave actions in tweeting an overwrought and historically suspect comparison between the British government of today and the dark forces that supplicated in 1930s Germany, Lineker has apparently safeguarded one of the foundational principles of civilised society.

The unshakeable commitment to free speech shown by many of his supporters on social media will, presumably, hold firm the next time someone whose views do not so neatly align with the zeitgeist is embroiled in controversy. That would be to suppose that the motivating factor for all of those whose 'incredible support' as praised by Lineker, forced the BBC climbdown was actually the defence of free speech.

But it wasn't.

Conflict

This was a conflict between an employer and hired talent, with the attempts of the employer to hold the talent to account failing dismally.

More importantly given its wider significance, it was a story about the immense power of social media and how holding opinions that satisfy the consensus empowers famous people to the extent that they are effectively beyond management.

Forget the independent review and talk of revised social media policies: a heavyweight Twitter presence like Lineker is, barring a cataclysmically misjudged post, beyond reproach.

He posts for the people – or certainly that unrepresentative portion of them whose views are shaped by the online world, and curated for that audience.

This was a drama whose most significant turns took place on social media, from Lineker's original, ill-judged post, to the solidarity shown by pundits and fellow presenters. The stream of announcements that reduced last weekend's BBC soccer coverage to a sorry shadow were made



Twitter furore: Gary Lineker's comments were ill-judged

online; pundits did not subject themselves to interview on radio, TV, or in print. It was enough to tap out a line or two of on-message support, and then watch the retweets and the likes mount.

Many who backed Lineker may hold deep convictions about free speech, but some accounts of the story claim others felt they had no option but to withdraw their labour, fearing the consequences if they did not.

And the torrent of abuse directed at one BBC commentator who did work last weekend, as he felt as a member of staff he had no choice, will have convinced those who followed the consensus that they made the right choice.

Warped

In fact, there was only one choice to make if online opprobrium was to be avoided, exposing the fallacy that this was a cause in defence of free speech in the first place.

Bemoaning the extent to which public discourse is warped by social media is a quaint regret, but just because it's irreversible its damaging effects should not go unheeded. This matters in a society where difficult, contentious discussions abound, and where the conditions for free and unfettered debate were never so important.

Yet express a view that conflicts with the prevailing ideology on Twitter and hate will soon come sluicing your way. The eventual effect of this is to stop alternative opinions.

The triumph of Gary Lineker – and it was a resounding victory for him – will not encourage diverse views to flourish.

His win does show that hysterical tweets relying on lazy invocations of Nazi Germany will be defended, providing the tweeter is famous and the person or body on the receiving end of the comparison is deemed to come from the 'wrong' side.

As a significant event for the concept of free speech, though, this episode was a sham.



Poll ready: Mary Lou McDonald

Be careful what you wish for, Mary Lou

MARY LOU MCDONALD says it is time for a new government. Careful what you wish for might be the retort, especially given reports that some ministers now advocate an early election, potentially as soon as this winter.

Their argument is reported to be that going to the country after a giveaway budget gives this tottering administration its best chance of maximising support.

It is, at best, a highly risky calculation, betting that more energy subventions and some modest tax adjustments would be enough to sway people over the crises in housing and health.

But if we assume that Sinn Féin would be the big winners, the prize for leading a new government would be those same messes in housing and health.

And for all the stridency of the party, its leader and her team, their conviction that they are the party to fix Ireland would be quickly, and sorely, tested.



NI invitation: Joe Biden and Rishi Sunak

Biden's blarney vital to our stability and standing

THIS is Joe Biden's time. Watch the US president in action in the coming days when he welcomes the Taoiseach into the Oval Office. There can't have been a previous occupant of the White House who so relished the Ireland of the Irish-American imagination.

We should embrace that blarney. At his press conference with Rishi Sunak, the UK prime minister, Biden illustrated he is a man whose passion for the old sod is authentic. The way he accepted Sunak's invitation

to Northern Ireland, by mentioning his plans to visit this State too, was a powerful reminder of the value of American friends – and how that manifests itself economically and politically.

This is especially relevant given the log-jam in the North's institutions, but also in a time when UK politics generally are unstable.

There is a tradition here of sniggering at sentimental Yanks. But just as long-lasting is our reliance on them.

SHANE McGRATH

on Saturday



shane.mcgrath@dailymail.ie

Broken bodies of the past are yesterday's news to Sinn Féin

SING ABOUT THE past all you want. But don't dare speak of it. It can be mined for tasteless songs and it is fine to ransack it for grudges against the Brits.

Try to analyse it, though, and great will be the scorn. This will be manifested on social media, of course, but also in mainstream discussion.

Inadvertent offence caused by a magnificent group of young Irish women, has exposed attitudes to the past among some people that are breezily complacent.

It has also revealed an unwillingness to recognise the importance of the past that is just as disquieting.

Decades of murder, misery and mayhem, much of it carried out in our name, can be repurposed into a catchy chorus and anyone daring to protest against this is told it is history.

There may follow some whataboutery asking why there isn't the same uproar about the atrocities committed by loyalist murder gangs and British forces. Then the gears shift into concern about the housing crisis and a sclerotic health service.

It's a well-worn formula, familiar from previous occasions when the mask slipped and toxic attitudes, once assumed to be withering into oblivion, leaked into view.

It is designed to allow the user both to wallow in an ignorant take on the past and to assume moral superiority when lecturing about the ills of the present.



'FINGERS CROSSED' IS O'BRIEN POLICY

FOUR MONTHS ago, Independent TD Carol Nolan, pictured left, asked the Minister for Housing if it was not time for 'some way of exploring in a grown-up, pragmatic and constructive way the links between unsustainable levels of inward migration or asylum into this State and housing'.

The reaction was instantly hysterical, led by Minister Darragh O'Brien. He intoned that the deputy's suggestions were 'a risk to social cohesion'. Ireland, said the floundering Minister, grabbing a rare chance to take a front-foot position, would 'take in as many Ukrainian citizens fleeing the brutal war foisted upon them through no fault of their own as we must'.

Ms Nolan was harangued from all the usual quarters.

On Friday, Integration Minister Roderic O'Gorman admitted capacity problems mean State accommodation cannot be guaranteed for refugees and people seeking international protection by next week.

Wishful thinking is not a policy. Ireland's incoherent approach makes the needy suffer most.

That the Irish women's soccer team quickly apologised for singing the song and that their enormously impressive manager, Vera Pauw, showed true leadership in explaining the embarrassment and regret felt by her players, has been forgotten.

The story was hijacked by those adamant that they had nothing to apologise for, that it was only a song, and that it's all in the past.

This is the real cause for concern. A roomful of 20-somethings not understanding or appreciating the weight of their words is forgivable, given that they had

just reached a first-ever World Cup only hours previously.

More worrying was an often vicious determination to double down on their behalf.

The past cannot be shucked off like some old, spent skin, and the devious contention that the controversy was about an out-of-touch generation hung up on the past, versus an energetic, engaged one set on shaping a better future, must be resisted.

The two positions are not exclusive; it is possible to be appalled at the cowardly evil perpetrated by the IRA and to have ambitions for a better Ireland.

In fact, it was revulsion at the failed terrorism of the Provos that helped precipitate the peace process, which we dared believe might portend a future full of hope, one that was unimaginable through the haunting years of bombs and broken bodies.

Sinn Féin representatives have long tried, unconvincingly, to straddle the complexities of a shameful past while selling their vision of the future.

Many of those likely to vote for them in the next election don't bother with the contortions and simply dismiss the unpleasantness as yesterday's news. That will not work, no matter how much they hector and mock those who oppose such an infantile view.

The power of Sinn Féin is in its promise and in its image as a fresh movement, free of the baggage of Ireland's big two parties. It is all about the future.

But the past is insistent. It can't be shrugged off, stored away, or hidden. Too many people remember too much, and know too much, and they won't stand by and let what happened be forgotten.

Houses are vital. A functioning healthcare system is critical. So too is an honest reckoning with the past.

SEWAGE ISSUE STINKS, BUT WATER CHARGES TOO TOXIC

FOR over a decade and a half, Ireland has failed to comply with EU environmental standards on the treatment of sewage.

The Environmental Protection Agency says it will take 20 years and 'sustained multi-billion-euro

investment' by Irish Water to get waste-water treatment plants up to the necessary standards.

Stories such as this one are now familiar to us, and the persistence of the status quo, and the monopoly money required to solve the

problems, tend to dull their impact. But one memory burns through the lethargy: water charges.

Had the coalition led by Enda Kenny, right, not badly mismanaged the introduction of the charge, these stories would not come with

such a tinge of desperation. That administration made such a mess of bringing in water charges that they remain politically toxic. There is no chance of a future administration having the gumption to revisit this subject for at least a generation.



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shane.mcgrath@dailymail.ie

Metro will cost a packet but, sure look, that's just how we do things here



No case to answer: the DPP has cleared Leo Varadkar

LEO HAS GOT A SECOND CHANCE. NOW HE MUST USE IT

THOSE members of the online community who detect a conspiracy in every story that doesn't fall their way have been busy since Wednesday night. The decision of the Director of Public Prosecutions that Leo Varadkar has no case to answer about the leaking of a proposed new contract for GPs sent Twitter users into a frenzy – or, at least, those of them with pirate flags and tricolours in their bios. Back in the real world, the DPP's judgment constitutes a fresh start for Mr Varadkar – and for the sake of his party, he must take it. He has less than five months until he becomes Taoiseach again, but there are useful actions he could start today. One would be to stop chasing populist causes that won't win any new votes for Fine Gael. Another would be to revisit his perfectly reasonable vow to represent those people who get up early in the morning.

SURE LOOK, you know yourself. That's a phrase – part apology, part explanation, part philosophical acceptance of our helplessness in the face of greater forces – that should be printed on all documents pertaining to Government spending. Those five words could also adorn every glossy publication detailing a major infrastructure plan. If the strain of deluded nationalism that is agitating for a border poll gets its way and takes back the fourth green field, it would be a good title for a new national anthem as well. Actually, let's go all out and have those words illuminated in ten-foot letters at the entrance to every port and airport in the country, letting visitors know just what sort of place they've landed in. It's the sort of country that plans to build a new children's hospital and sees it turn into a swamp for public money. This was a project compromised for years by political squabbles over where it should be built. And once a location was settled on, the cost was estimated at €1.433billion. That was four years ago. Last April, an updated cost of €1.73billion was given, and Covid, the war in Ukraine, and Brexit were all given as reasons. (The same three reasons are now offered for inflation and any other inconvenient problem that arises, you'll have noticed.) And the ground was pre-

pared for further increases. It seems inevitable that the job, whose completion date is uncertain, will cost well in excess of €2billion. Sure look, you know yourself. Consider, too, the €2.7billion National Broadband Plan, the capital project

compared to rural electrification. By the end of January, 6,000 homes had been connected, compared to a target of 115,000. Plans for a new maternity hospital stoked improbable fears about a religious ethos, when a much more authentic cause for concern is the cost. Announced in 2013, the hospital came with a price tag of €150million. That estimate had doubled within four years. It is now set at €800million but we can be sure it will eventually exceed €1billion. Long before inflation became a

fresh scourge on the global economy, it was rampant in big infrastructure projects involving the State. Into this ignoble tradition chugs Metrolink. As befits the miserable history of such ambitious construction jobs, the Metrolink plan for Dublin has a serpentine back story. And, also in keeping with established practice, it started with a relatively modest cost. In 2002, its price was estimated at €2.4billion. There were the usual delays, shelvings and revisions, leaving us with the blueprint unveiled in recent days.

THE provisional cost was put at €9.5billion – until the Tánaiste spoke to Pat Kenny on Newstalk. Then, Leo Varadkar said that in an 'extreme' scenario, the price could actually rise to €23billion. A planning application could be submitted by September, and there was hopeful chatter about a starting date in 2025. If the envisaged deadlines are met – and that's a hopeful thought – then we should all be absolutely certain that the budget figures won't be. Take it as gospel that if a metro is completed, connecting Dublin city centre to the vast suburbs to its north and to the airport, the final bill will be much closer to €23billion than €9.5billion. That is just how Ireland works. A few civil servants will occasionally get hauled before an unhappy Oireachtas committee, ministers will talk sadly about uncertainty, the opposition will fulminate, and the tab will be settled with our money. This is why our infrastructure is so lamentably lacking in many areas. Sure look, you know yourself.

NO KIDDING: SF ADD CHILDCARE TO ELECTION WAR GAMES

THE theatres of battle in the next general election are being chosen by Sinn Féin. The party's hugely effective focus on housing pays rich dividends, although it has been much less certain about the other traditional crisis topic, healthcare. The pandemic, and the relatively assured way it was

handled here, didn't facilitate any easy wins for Sinn Féin. But it is increasingly clear that these two areas will be joined by a third in the next election: childcare. Sinn Féin's claim that it can reduce costs for parents by up to two thirds is eye-catching, at least. The party's ambition, according to 'Delivering Affordable Childcare',

is to turn childcare into a 'properly funded public service'. It plans to start by providing €270million to ease the burden on parents, while introducing 'decent pay scales for all staff'. Details are sketchy, but mark this one down as another electoral manoeuvre.