

# 'I HAD DEVELOPED A HORRIFYING CORPORATE STRUT'

Having previously written a confessional book about his career as a businessman and RTÉ journalist, Fintan Drury has now turned his attention to Israel's treatment of Palestine

By Laura Slattery

## WEEKEND INTERVIEW FINTAN DRURY

Fintan Drury was marching in support of Palestine with one of his daughters last year, feeling the same distrust he felt during his 1980s stint as a presenter of RTÉ's Morning Ireland.

"I just sort of thought, well, I don't believe what we're being fed. I just don't believe it."

As Israel's onslaught on Gaza intensified, his participation in marches became more regular, and so did the sense that he could do something else to counter the official line coming from Israel. He rejects as "patent nonsense" any perception that the conflict began with the Hamas attacks of October 7th, 2023.

"I thought there was more I could do if I got up off my ass and used my curious mind and my journalistic training."

This was the catalyst for writing *Catastrophe: Nakba II*, his sober yet devastating account of Israel's treatment of Palestinians over decades.

He says the subject is too important not to actively promote the book and that means being "quizzed" by journalists, though he seems keen throughout our conversation to avoid coming across as egotistic – something that will not surprise readers of his 2021 memoir *See-Saw*, which dwells on the perils of ego.

"Sorry, it sounds sort of pompous," he apologises soon after explaining how he was counselled to exhume his reporting skills in 2016.

That year Drury wrote a series of articles for *The Irish Times* from his time as a volunteer at a Syrian refugee camp in Athens. It came after a long spell in the higher echelons of Irish corporate life during which he was, on occasion, the story. Indeed, so much of his career was spent in business that when he identifies journalism as the thing he was "best at", the self-criticism is implied.

*Catastrophe* opens with a note acknowledging that most books on Palestine and Israel are by authors with more extensive experience of the Middle East. Many are by "absolutely brilliant minds", he says, but can be academic and dense.

His aim, when he began working on it "in a serious way" in April 2024, was to provide an accessible narrative "so even the people who are out marching and protesting and wearing their keffiyehs – the people who are instinctively pro-Palestine – can better understand why they're protesting".

His research, which saw him travel to the West Bank, Jordan and Lebanon last July, helped confirm his own "gut" feeling, though he didn't know then how extreme the situation would become.

"I didn't honestly believe at that time that it could be as bad as it is now. And it was bad then. Really, really bad."

**Israel's aggression escalated while he was in the region, obliging him to call off one trip to southern Lebanon after a phone call with a contact in the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (Unifil). He was advised that an elevated security threat meant it would no longer be able to dedicate a mind-er.**

"It's a bit like swimming when you're told not to, and the coastguard getting called out. You're putting other people at risk. I'm a grandfather. I wasn't trying to be a hero; that wasn't my mission, so I didn't go."

He has been heartened by the "very positive" public reaction. At the Listowel Literary Festival, interest in *Catastrophe* was such that his talk was moved to a bigger room, though when someone asked him about solutions, he said he wasn't the right person to offer them.

"It is multifaceted, and it will ebb and flow and change," he says. "But the fundamental of the story is pretty clear to me and to a great many others who are there and studying it and observing it for decades. This is a genocide. All bets are off now. This is not right."



**My grandparents were displaced people. They were refugees from Belfast. Is that relevant? Absolutely, it's relevant. Because it's in your history. You understand that Catholics and nationalists who weren't able to get out continued to suffer**

Authors often have more than one reason for writing a particular book and in his case there were several. Apart from the conflict itself, and the time being right for him to embark upon the project, he sees parallels with Ireland's colonisation that intersect with his own family story.

Drury's maternal grandfather Joseph Connolly was a leader of the Irish Volunteers in Belfast who was imprisoned by the British in 1916 and resumed his republican activities in the city after his release. When it became too dangerous to stay, he fled with his wife and young family to Dublin.

Connolly, who went on to serve twice as a minister under Éamon de Valera, died when Drury was two, but he knew his grandmother well, he says.

"My grandparents were displaced people. They were refugees from Belfast. Is that relevant? Absolutely, it's relevant. Because it's in your history. You understand that Catholics and nationalists who weren't able to get out continued to suffer."

*Catastrophe* – the Nakba of the subtitle refers, in the first instance, to the mass displacement of Palestinians in the 1948 Arab-Israeli war – is dedicated to the memory of his Belfast-born mother Róisín Drury, née Connolly. Their discussions about how the plight of Jewish people was shamefully ignored in the 1930s and 1940s would sometimes end with her relief that modern communications meant nothing like the Holocaust could ever happen again.

There will be no credible basis for anyone to claim they did not understand what Israel was doing in Gaza or that they "somehow missed it", he writes. The book documents an "institutionalised bias" in the West towards Israel as the "upholder of Western values" in the Middle East, with Drury despairing at both "staggering" international inertia and "chilling" sponsorship of Israel's campaign.

He witnessed what he calls the "warped" US policy first hand when he reported for RTÉ on Ronald Reagan's 1984 re-election and believes Democrats as well as Republicans

have abandoned Palestinians. While Israel's prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu found it easy to "play" the US in a presidential election year, he says the young mothers he met in Lebanon were livid that such a "warmonger", as one described him, was permitted to address Congress.

Ireland should be doing more, too, he concludes.

"I think Ireland has done many things really well, I really do, but has Ireland done enough? Time will tell, but right now I don't think so."

**Drury (67) was born in Dublin and raised in Clonskeagh, then a "sleepy part of south Dublin". He attended Blackrock College and later UCD – its relocation to Belfield was an early taste of the city's encroachment on the fields of his youth.**

From 1981 to 1988 he was a newsman, joining RTÉ despite being told in a screen test that his head was "shaped like a shovel". He reported from Belfast and overseas before becoming the co-presenter of *Radio 1's* then fledgling *Morning Ireland* in 1985.

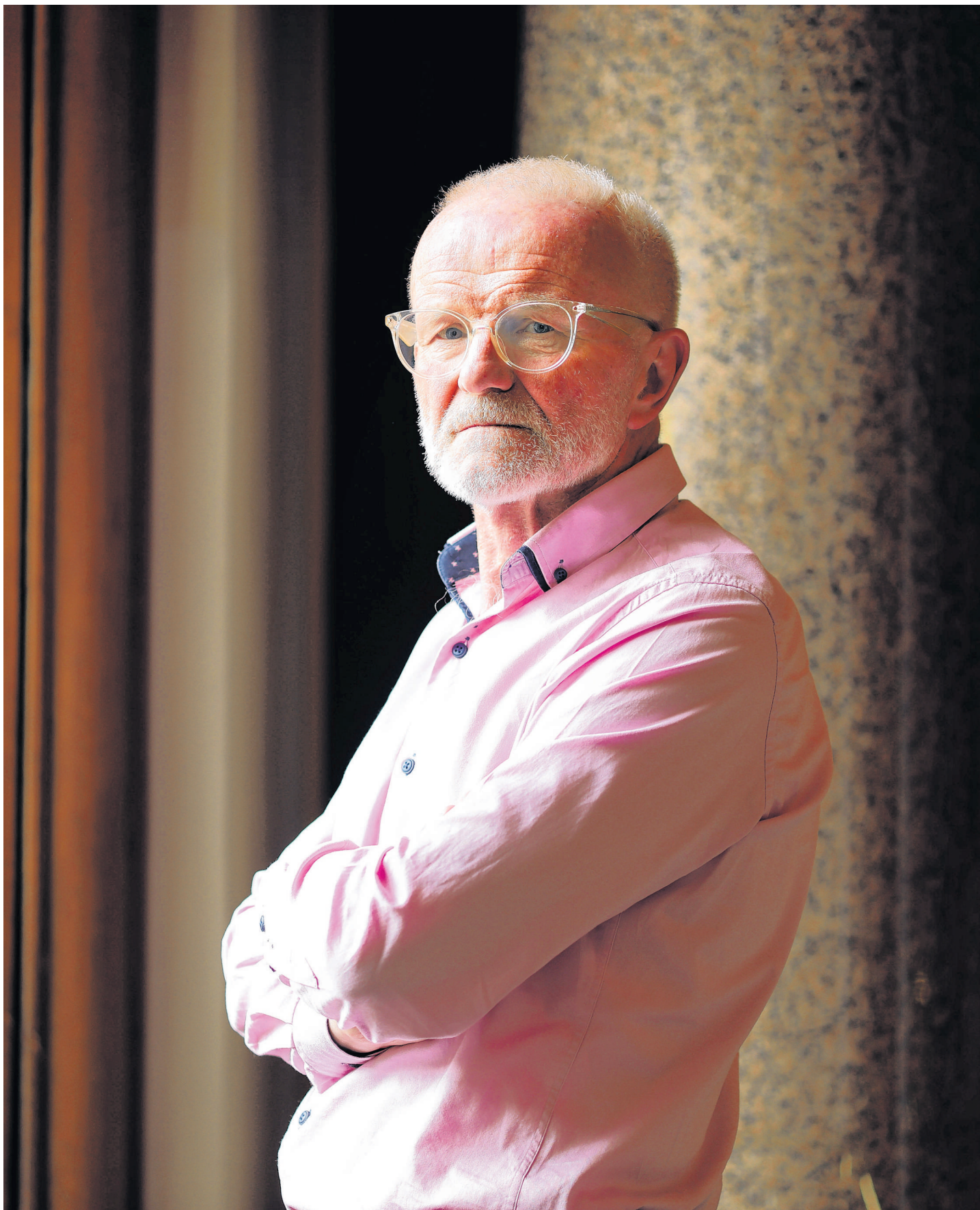
But after just two-and-half years he grew restless and left broadcasting at age 29. It wasn't his plan to go into business, yet that's what he did, founding the public relations firm Drury Communications before selling it to its management a decade later to concentrate on his eponymous sports consultancy, which in 2004 rebranded as Platinum One.

He became chairman of RTÉ in mid-2005 but resigned after six months when a perceived conflict of interest arose – over golf. The then government was flirting with adding the 2006 Ryder Cup, which was being held in Co Kildare, to its list of free-to-air television events, but Drury was an adviser to its organisers. Relinquishing the role was "the right thing", he says.

Does this all seem like a long time ago?

"It was a long time ago," he says, laughing.

It was that exact Celtic Tiger era, I say.



“Yeah.”

These were hubristic times, as Drury outlines in *See-Saw*, which is laced with mea culpas about a “sense of impregnability” borne of live news presenting and his PR and sports management success. It underpinned decisions that led, he writes, “to a decade of stress that was degenerative of body and soul”.

After Anglo Irish Bank supremo Seán FitzPatrick persuaded him to join the Anglo board, he served as non-executive director for six years until May 2008, leaving six months before the bank failed.

FitzPatrick’s post-collapse recollection that Drury brought him and then taoiseach Brian Cowen together for a

■ **Fintan Drury: ‘I had actually developed a corporate strut. When that becomes part of your way, you don’t lose the capacity or the facility to make good judgments, but that capacity is diminished or diminished.’**

Photograph: Dara MacDónaill

July 2008 meeting and round of golf did no one any favours, with Drury and Cowen, his friend, still being asked about it at an Oireachtas inquiry seven years later. (No banking was discussed that day, they said.)

FitzPatrick’s distraction-creating move convinced Drury of FitzPatrick’s “utter selfishness”, he notes in the memoir. Cowen, meanwhile, remains a friend and was one of the early readers of *Catastrophe*.

I ask him about his realisation that when FitzPatrick said he wanted board members who would “never be afraid” of expressing their opinion, he was flattering his ego.

“Yeah, and men, in particular, we’re more susceptible to that,” he

says.

He mentions his use of the phrase “corporate strut”, which he suspects he acquired in those Anglo days.

“It horrifies me, and it would have horrified me before – it wasn’t a conscious thing – but when I looked back on it, I had actually developed a corporate strut. When that becomes part of your way, you don’t lose the capacity or the facility to make good judgments, but that capacity is dimmed or diminished.”

He also regrets that “the blinkers were on” during his tenure as Paddy Power chairman, when he says his old curiosity was subsumed by passive subscription to corporate Ireland, blinding him to the societal conse-

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quences of gambling. Efforts to regulate the industry are “nowhere near tough enough”, he says.

“I was a good chairman in the sense that I helped the company grow. But I was horrified when I looked back, and I wished I’d never been chairman.”

The memoir, as well as his articles for *The Irish Times* and business publication *The Currency*, gave him a “certain level of confidence” that he could write, though he has been reluctant to call himself a journalist again.

“There was a discussion with [Catastrophe publishers] Merrion Press about how to describe me on blurbs, and initially I was kind of resistant to that, because I think I have an old-fashioned sense of what a journalist does,” he says. (The blurb says he “returned to journalism” in 2016 but introduces him as “an author and opinion writer”.)

The principles of his news years are deeply rooted, nonetheless. When he says he watches “really good interviewers” flail amid the “stonewalling, stonewalling, stonewalling” of Israel’s spokespeople, I ask if he thinks it is correct to invite them on air when this outcome can be anticipated.

“I would have suffered the constraints of Section 31 of the Broadcasting Act, and I don’t believe in censorship. I am strongly of the view that censorship of any description is not of value. So I think it is better to attempt to interview them, and every so often you might make a little breakthrough,” he says.

“I think their own Sphinx-like intransigence, and same old weary lines, reinforces to most of the audience – which is more intelligent than we ever give them credit for – that that’s what it is.”

Sport being the other through line of his life – he played soccer for UCD – Drury is now chairman of not-for-profit Sport Against Racism Ireland.

“The work of any NGO, trying to get funds, is hard,” he says, adding that he would like to see the Government “crack the whip” so the private sector does more.

“A lot of private-sector companies benefiting from migration aren’t investing any money at all in supporting initiatives that make migrants feel part of our community, feel cared for, feel respected, and that’s a real shame. I would much rather you include that than any bolloxology about Fintan Drury.”

*Catastrophe: Nakba II* by Fintan Drury is published by Merrion Press and is reviewed in the **Ticket**