

# JOHN LEE



*Irreverent. Irrepressible. In the corridors of power*

## Jack Chambers is an overnight success... that we told you about three years ago

**I**N MARCH 2021, in the gloomy depths of the Covid pandemic, Fine Gael ministers told me there was a tall, dark-haired doctor from the Dublin West constituency talking a lot of sense at Cabinet. But it wasn't their leader, Leo Varadkar, they were praising. The grudging eulogies were for the then 30-year-old Jack Chambers.

After those briefings, the Irish Mail on Sunday – to some scepticism it must be said – predicted (inset) that Chambers would be a future leader of Fianna Fáil. Chambers is now the youngest Minister for Finance since Michael Collins and he is deputy leader of his party. His claim to succession is well-buttressed. But he is far from an overnight success.

It is only three years ago, but things were so different then. Less than a year into his term as taoiseach, Micheál Martin was struggling. Leo Varadkar too, seemed lost in his role as Tánaiste.

The focus of succession debates in the two Coalition parties was elsewhere. But the MoS calculated that if Fine Gael politicians were praising Chambers it was not wholly for altruistic reasons – it was because they were alarmed.

Fine Gael felt it could handle Micheál Martin and his then-speculated-upon successors, Michael McGrath and Darragh O'Brien. Martin, before his remarkable recent resurgence, was struggling and a lot older than FG's leader, Leo Varadkar. McGrath was steady but hardly, they said, going to outshine Varadkar for glamour and charisma. O'Brien was never really a competitor but his seniority in Dublin gave the impression to Fine Gael that he was.

**C**HAMBERS – young, educated, urbane and self-confident – scared Fine Gael. And if we noticed it, you can be sure Micheál Martin did too.

Suddenly, the entire Irish political scene has changed. I was speaking to former taoiseach Bertie Ahern last week. He believes Sinn Féin will do better than their recent election disaster at the general election but says they will not be in the discussion to form the next government. It's all about Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil, according to Bertie – the 'It'll be Grand' coalition, as some wags have dubbed it.

Fine Gael has a new leader, and the Green Party will soon follow suit. Meanwhile, quietly, Micheál Martin has reinforced his place as the true heir of Bertie Ahern's political acumen. Behind the apparent audacity and progressiveness of Martin's anointment of Chambers as his successor, there lies skill and deviousness.

For many, Michael McGrath was the future of Fianna Fáil and Martin has watched him nibble at his authority both in their shared Cork South Central constituency and at a national level for too long. With a deft sweep of the dagger, McGrath effectively sees his

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**Looking for a dark horse as next FF leader? Read it here first: Jack Chambers**

domestic political career and his pretensions to become leader of Fianna Fáil – the most evocative position for people of his background – disappear. History tells us once you go to Europe as commissioner, you never really come back. Yes, €443,000 a year will help McGrath adjust, but from the Tánaiste's viewpoint, he has got the main threat off the pitch, on the EU's dime. O'Brien was once part of the leadership conversation, and now he isn't. As for Jim O'Callaghan – his time appears to have passed like a summer shower.

Micheál Martin has installed a young man who will credit his entire career to the Tánaiste. There will be no trouble out of him. Should Martin decide to stand for President next year, he will have left his mark on any leadership race. If he decides to stay on as leader, he has

neutralised all opposition for the moment. The only threat to Martin will come if, finally, a woman politician is allowed to emerge in Fianna Fáil to take on the leadership. Clearly, as last week's underwhelming promotions showed, that won't happen under Micheál Martin.

There was an understandably limited perception of Brian Cowen because of his centrality to the economic crash and the focus on his downtime excesses. Yet, one of the reasons he appointed Mary Coughlan as his tánaiste was that he understood the importance of giving a woman a chance in a senior position. Yet she was not the only surprise promotion of May 2008: it is forgotten now but Brian Lenihan was once seen as the nearly man of Irish politics. Born with a silver ballot paper in his mouth, he was nonetheless overlooked by Bertie for Cabinet until 2007 – when he finally relented and made him justice minister. A year later, when Cowen came to power, he made him his minister for finance. That appointment has echoes of Chambers', just as Chambers himself has echoes of Lenihan.

Cowen, though himself an educated and intelligent man, was aware of his image that came from his undisguised enthusiasm for socialising with backbenchers. Cowen was unfairly known as a

Biffo. The scenes in Clara that accompanied his elevation did little to disabuse anyone of this stereotype. In contrast, Lenihan was a Cambridge-educated barrister from Castleknock. And in 2008, Fianna Fáil had just lost a Dublin taoiseach.

**A**SIZEABLE portion of the Irish electorate lives in Dublin. No matter how urbane, educated and articulate Micheál Martin is, he is still from Cork. And until last week Fianna Fáil had a Cork minister for finance. Once more, Chambers is from Castleknock and represents Dublin West.

Numbers dictate all for a political leader and the greatest number of seats are in Dublin. And if Fianna Fáil is to capitalise on the momentum gained at the recent elections, it will have to gain ground in Dublin. The battle is on to be the bigger party in the next grand coalition.

Interestingly, Chambers frequently plays on his Lenihan connections. His father, Frank Chambers, was a close ally of the Lenihans and a long-time power broker on the party's ruling body, the Ard Comhairle.

Micheál Martin has huge respect for Fianna Fáil heritage and this tangential connection to the Leni-

han dynasty will have influenced him. He is also hoping it will help endear Chambers to the party grass roots. Astute leaders know the appearance of change is necessary to maintain the status quo.

None of this mattered, of course, to the unhappy Fianna Fáil parliamentary party members I met in Leinster House on Wednesday evening. There was dissent over the Chambers leap.

But Martin is in the strongest position he has ever been as leader of his party and he will simply put the grumbling down to broken dreams of advancement.

Some carp that Chambers does not show enough attention to detail and spends too much time canvassing around the country. That itself is a strange gripe. Yet those close to the new Finance Minister assure me he is well prepared for the big promotion. And crucially he is the man in possession.

Chambers has already successfully guided Fianna Fáil to a local and European election result that nobody in the party predicted. If he shores up votes in the capital and helps Martin to fresh electoral success after nearly five years of electoral doom and gloom, the question will not be if Jack Chambers will be Fianna Fáil leader, it will be when. And remember that is a feat that Brian Lenihan (senior or junior) never managed to achieve.