Mayor John Moran fell out with JP McManus (inset left) and former council CEO Pat Daly (right).

Turbulent Mayor: Part 1 – The full story of how the Limerick experiment turned toxic

John Moran became Ireland's first directly elected mayor in 2024. Willing to upset even JP McManus, he compares his uncompromising approach to Roy Keane's – but a three-month investigation including more than 40 interviews reveals deep divisions.

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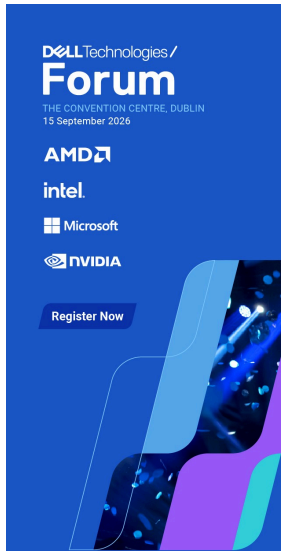


In the moment that JP McManus choked up in the chamber of Limerick City and County Council, the propaganda war raging over Ireland's first directly elected mayor entered new territory.

It was June 24, 2025 and the Limerick businessman and racehorse owner was seated on the far left of the top table, facing the elected members and reading a seven-page statement to a packed chamber. The media had been locked outside. This was private – and personal.

Everyone knew McManus had been hurt by the decision to reject his gift of a €30 million building in the heart of the city. But nobody was expecting him to become so emotional that he struggled to read his own words.

There was a notable absentee from the top table. Mayor John Moran, who had opposed the deal to take over the International Rugby Experience building, was out of the country on other business.

Moran was elected in June 2024 with a glittering CV. A former Wall Street banker, he was the high-profile secretary general of the Department of Finance during the bailout years. He had been given the option of logging into the meeting remotely, but there was no sign of him online when McManus's voice started cracking as he tried to read his words. "One of the proudest days of my life was May 11, 2001, when Limerick City Council recognised me as a Freeman of Limerick ..." he said, before being unable to continue.

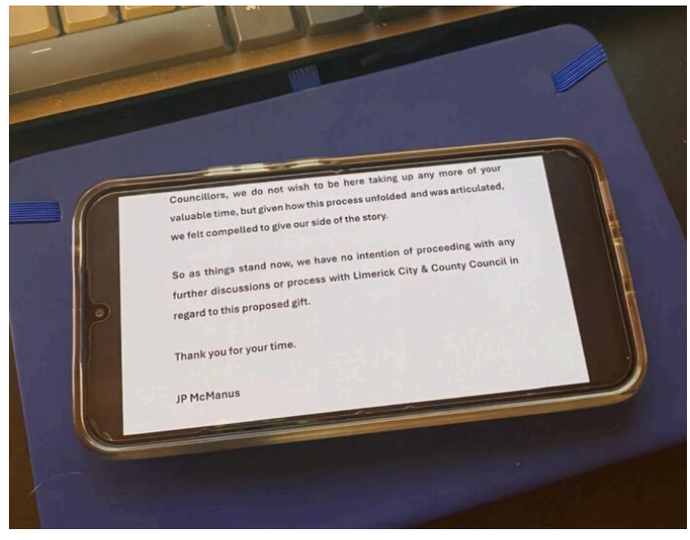
"You could have heard a pin drop. He kept pausing, because the words weren't coming out," says someone who was in the room. From the floor, a councillor called for an adjournment so that McManus could gather himself.

But after being comforted by Paul Foley, one of the three people accompanying him, McManus managed to carry on. His emotion, though, caused shock in the chamber. "When he finished," says the person present, "there was a massive round of applause. It felt like a response to the tension. You don't expect someone like JP to react like that."

JP McManus arriving at Limerick's County Hall last year. He became upset when addressing the council chamber. Photo: Brendan Gleeson

Moran is not a stranger to conflict and controversy – more on that in part two of this investigation. Once elected, it wasn't long before trouble found him. Before the chain was even around his neck, Moran had upset people. And some of them were fast out of the blocks in pinning the blame for McManus's upset on him.

One after the other, councillors lined up to condemn the treatment of McManus. They also wanted it known where their loyalties lay. Within minutes, local journalists were being sent McManus's statement in WhatsApp messages.



The end of JP McManus's emotive statement after his gift to Limerick was rejected.

And then there were mutterings in some parts of the chamber: "Where's the mayor?" "Why isn't the mayor here for this?"

Not a normal country

Moran's election came five years after Limerick voters had passed a plebiscite on the new role with a 52 per cent majority. The electorates in Cork and Waterford rejected the change by narrow margins – less than 1,000 votes.

The idea of a directly elected mayor in Dublin has long been discussed. That would be an earthquake in the political system in the city. Limerick is being seen more as an experiment – and a lot is riding on its success or failure.

Ireland is not a normal country when it comes to local government. It's an absolute outlier. The European Charter of Local Self-Government sets minimum standards for local democracy. Ireland signed up to that in 1998 but 25 years later, a scathing report found it to be compliant in only eight out of 20 principles.

Russia was kicked out of the Council of Europe in 2022. But before then, Ireland's level of local autonomy was regarded as being on a par with Putin's. In the EU's Decentralisation Index, Ireland is ranked 27th out of 27.

The Mayor of Limerick Act was the first time in the history of the State that any powers were decentralised away from central government – not that there were many. In Dublin, some senior civil servants feared it might mark the crossing of a Rubicon.

Outside Limerick, few cared that the new directly elected mayor was fighting with some local councillors. But falling out with JP McManus was different – that was box-office. Interest in how the new role was working out began to grow.

Since that episode, tensions have deepened considerably and there has been talk of the need for national intervention. There is provision in the legislation for a review after three years – some say Limerick can't wait that long. But a 399-word statement issued to *The Currency* on behalf of Local Government Minister James Browne last Friday could be summed up in seven words: They'll have to sort it out themselves.

The review is "being prepared to begin by the end of this year", but Browne's view is that "issues should be best worked out within the team at the local level".

Browne's statement effectively fired the ball back into Limerick's court, with top spin.

"Everyone I meet across the public sector and private sector, academia and industry, is asking me, 'What's going on?'" says Joe Leddin, the Labour Party leader on Limerick council.

The day after McManus addressed the chamber, a Cork-based friend of one of those in the room described Limerick as "the only county in Ireland that could make its own billionaire cry".

Fraught relationship

It was hardly surprising that people outside the county were mystified when few people in Limerick could understand what was going on. How had it come to this?

The Currency's three-part investigation is based on interviews with more than 40 people, including the key protagonists, as well as dozens of other conversations and previously undisclosed documents. Most interviews were on the record – some spoke on an off-the-record or background-only basis.

Moran blamed council officials for scheduling the McManus meeting on a day when they knew he was otherwise engaged. By then, his relationship with director general Pat Daly, the man he had replaced as the ultimate head of the council, was at best fraught.

Daly denies trying to outmanoeuvre Moran on the timing of the meeting. "John's diary at the time was bananas. We were not stymying him," he says. Daly is personable but keeps a low profile. However, in a two-hour interview with *The Currency* he speaks freely about the tensions in his relationship with the mayor.

Moran's comments for this series are by far his most extensive and revealing since he took up the job.

Among the disclosures is an alleged physical altercation between the two men last October. There is also the revelation that Moran was close to seeking a High Court judicial review into the circumstances of Daly's appointment as Limerick council's CEO in 2022, after he had applied unsuccessfully for the job himself.

Brilliance and mistrust: John Moran. Photo: Don Moloney

Even those who are at odds with the mayor speak about his intellectual brilliance, his extraordinary work ethic and his driving ambition.

However, even those who count themselves among his allies say he alienates some of those he needs to bring with him, struggles with trusting other people's opinions, and prefers talking to listening.

Seven hours of face-to-face interviews with Moran convinced me he is all of that and more.

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Many things were causing tensions between Moran and Daly. At the heart of most of them were differing interpretations of their powers under the legislation for Limerick's directly elected mayor (DEM) – and their diametrically opposed management styles.

These tensions were, in many ways, built into the system from the start. How that unfolded will be looked at in more detail in part two, but for now, it can be summarised as follows.

For those who supported the plebiscite, the winning sales pitch was simple: a single political leader for the city and county, elected directly by the public.

In the small print of the proposal, some power was taken away from councillors and given to the elected mayor. But no powers were removed from central government. Once the Limerick people had voted it through, somebody had to figure out how it was going to work in practice.

The Implementation Advisory Group was chaired by Tim O'Connor, a retired public servant originally from Limerick who had been part of the Good Friday Agreement negotiations. O'Connor thought the new role offered the opportunity for far-reaching change.

"As a country, we are hopelessly over-centralised as a form of governance," he says. He was enthusiastic about the idea of mayors as a game-changer for Irish cities. He remembers being inspired by a Ted Talk given by a contact of his from New York, Ben Barber, entitled 'If Mayors Ruled the World'.

The committee got down to work and then Covid hit – but that only gave people more time to focus on the task. "We were eating, sleeping and drinking it for nearly a year," O'Connor says. He logged on to the meetings from his Dublin home, wearing a suit and tie. This was serious business.

Tim O'Connor at an online meeting of the Implementation Advisory Group in 2020.

A poll with 927 respondents supported the committee's work. It showed people wanted "a change from the current system of governance". Many felt left out. There was a "general scepticism and low level of regard for the council and local politicians". That low regard was a big part of the reason for Moran's election – and it informs his unshakeable belief that he was given a mandate to change things.

O'Connor knew how things worked in the corridors of power. He knew nobody in Dublin was going to buy into a revolution. "Tim went with a maximalist position. He did it in the full knowledge that it would be watered down – mostly in the relationship between Limerick and central government," says Diarmuid Scully, who was the committee's academic adviser.

Closing the gap

O'Connor also had vested interests to deal with in the implementation committee itself, including those on the council who would be directly affected by new mayoral powers.

The mayor would be the council's top executive, so that meant the CEO role held by Daly had to go. A new job title was proposed. The director general would be answerable to the mayor, but would retain day-to-day operational responsibilities. That would ease the minds of those whose worst nightmare was a mayor with untrammelled powers, or one ill-equipped to do the job in the first place.

"Once you create genuinely democratic local communities, it won't stop there."

Sir Humphrey Appleby

A supremely skilled diplomat, O'Connor got buy-in from the rest of the committee. Even the councillors seemed happy enough. They retained their all-important reserved functions. So if they didn't like the mayor's budget, a simple majority could vote it down.

"He made the best possible job of it – and got as much as could be got out of the system," says Scully, a former mayor of the city when it was largely a ceremonial role.

O'Connor hoped his group's proposals "would help with closing the gap between central and local government". But as he had anticipated, once they entered the machinery of government, things began to change.

The legislation that eventually emerged just months before the 2024 election was marked by a certain amount of political compromise and a great deal of bureaucratic caution.

The latter was straight out of *Yes Minister* – and in particular a 1988 episode called "Power to the People". The scene featured Bernard Woolley, Principal Private Secretary to Minister Jim Hacker, and Sir

Humphrey Appleby, Permanent Secretary of the Department of Administrative Affairs.

"I think it's about time we reformed local government," Bernard begins, drawing a withering look from Sir Humphrey.

Yes Minister featured Nigel Hawthorne and Derek Fowlds as Sir Humphrey Appleby and Bernard Woolley.

Sir Humphrey: "Once you create genuinely democratic local communities, it won't stop there."

Bernard: "Won't it?"

Sir Humphrey: "Well of course it won't! You see, once they get established they'll insist on more power and the politicians will be too frightened to withhold them, so you'll get *regional government*!"

At this point, Sir Humphrey is close to combustion. He sits Bernard down and educates him: "If the right people don't have power, do you know what happens? The wrong people get it! Politicians, councillors, ordinary voters!"

Democracy, he says, depends on a system that keeps real power "out of the hands of the barbarians". Then he stands up and delivers the payoff line: "And we are that system."

"What if a looper gets elected?"

When that episode was broadcast, local government in the UK was already more empowered than councils in Ireland are today, not least in education, housing and childcare. In the UK and around the world, policing and transport are also controlled locally – in Ireland, they're centralised, like most other meaningful powers.

Scully gives a simple example of how this over-centralisation impacts local communities: "You have the bizarre situation where local councils can put in a bus lane – but can't decide if any buses are going to run on it."

In the Irish political system, the idea of devolving any kind of power to a city mayor was beginning to make some people nervous. Among other concerns, the prospect of an outsider getting the job concentrated minds.

"I remember talking to Micheál Martin about it," says a prominent Limerick business leader. "He told me, 'What if a looper gets elected?' And that's the polite version."

A senior national official with knowledge of how the Limerick initiative was landing in Dublin says: "I could see from the beginning that the system was neutral, at best, on whether they wanted this to work or not. Even the people in favour were saying, 'We'd like it to work a bit, but not too well.' And the reason is because if it works too well, you have a Boris Johnson problem.

"Can you imagine if Dublin had it? How do you think that would end? People in the Department [of Housing, Local Government and Heritage] don't want to lose control. That was the big fear."

Even Sir Humphrey might have grudgingly accepted the outcome.

Rather than upend the traditional system, the new legislation effectively layered a mayor on top of it and downgraded the powers proposed by O'Connor's committee, including a role in how transport was run locally.

Still, it was a start – and it became the Limerick experiment. If it worked, others might follow. The role might even be strengthened. If it didn't, things could go back to the way they were.

But the legislation was long delayed and only passed three months before the election. By then, council staff were asking, "What does this mean for us?" An internal Limerick council memo seen by *The Currency* assured them that the election of a DEM "does not change the line manager structure".

Moran later heard about that memo. He claims it created the impression for staff that nothing was really changing.

The collision course was set.

Unstoppable force meets immovable object

Once elected, the turbo-charged Moran took on something that was both new and inherently ambiguous. He says he has a mandate for change, but the legislation doesn't give him enough ammunition to deliver it. The Mayor of London, for example, doesn't have a parallel chief executive in charge of hiring and firing.

The view of some is that an unstoppable force (Moran) has collided with an immovable object (Daly, representing the traditional system). Neither of them will give in. And a big part of this story has been their failure to co-exist.

At odds: Mayor John Moran and Limerick council's director general, Pat Daly. Photo: Don Moloney

On top of that, Moran has faced political opposition that has led to extraordinary scenes in the council chamber. Between them, Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil hold 23 out of 41 council seats. Independent Moran's powers extend to drawing up the council's budget and corporate plan but, as with Dáil budgets, he needs a majority to pass them.

So while he might see himself as Limerick's taoiseach, he doesn't have the numbers or the authority to exercise real control.

"What's happening in real time, in actuality, is a clash of mandates," says a person with deep knowledge of the new structure.

"The councillors have a mandate as well. And the worst outcome has happened – everybody has dug in on their mandate. They're saying, 'My mandate is as valid as yours – so hump off.' There were always going to be rows. So the challenge for John was to build alliances across the board. And it looks like that hasn't happened."

The third leg of the stool – the council executive – has been wobbling from week one.

Moran says he has been “really pleasantly surprised by the amount you can directly change, within the powers of what a CEO previously had”.

“When you look around Ireland, you will see some local authorities are doing very well,” he says, citing Cork City Council as an example. “And they’re doing very well when their executive is doing a good job.”

He leaves the corollary of that unsaid.

“These guys are just playing me for a patsy”

Pat Daly says Moran wants everything all at once – and that it’s just not realistic: “I keep saying to John, ‘You’re 18 months in, into a 100-year-old tradition. What are you expecting?’ And I’ve also said to him, ‘Success might be in year five, because the system is so traditional.’ I had to give him vapours after it.”

“To make that relationship work, you need two people who can live in the grey,” says a person who has worked closely with both men. “One of them – Pat – has been living in the grey all his life. The other is the most black-and-white person you will ever meet.”

“I think the description of Pat is accurate, in that his style seems to be right in the grey,” says Moran when I read him that quote, during the course of an interview this month that runs to four hours and 20 minutes. We had spoken on a background basis for almost three hours in early January.

“I wouldn’t call it bad management, but my sense is that Pat is happy to delegate much more than I would under the circumstances,” he says.

Limerick City and County Council director general Pat Daly.

“One of Pat’s great strengths is he can kind of convince you, leaving a room, that you’re getting everything you asked for. But then delivery doesn’t come – and you get more and more frustrated. But I don’t think black-and-white is the way I would describe myself. I would describe myself as very logical and thoughtful.”

Daly says the organisation is already at full stretch – and Moran keeps pushing. “He kind of came in swinging, because he wanted everything done yesterday. So we were just saying, ‘John, that’s not the footing to start on.’

“John’s patience is wafer-thin. He’s not the best listener. I’ll say, ‘John, I’m telling you now, that can’t happen for three weeks.’ It’s that controlling piece – ‘I don’t trust, I verify.’ And so I think John is saying, ‘These guys are just playing me for a patsy.’ And that is not the case.”

Whatever about that, no other mayor would have interrogated McManus’s offer and found it wanting. No other mayor would have dreamed of antagonising a Freeman of Limerick – and especially *this*

freeman – within days of taking up the job. But to Moran, that was part of why the people had elected him – because none of his 14 rivals would have looked under the bonnet and scrutinised the terms of the deal.

"I think about the implications"

The International Rugby Experience **hadn't worked.** It was going to cost money to keep it open until 2027, which was a precondition of the deal to give it away. Exactly how much money depended on who you believed, but the real deal-breaker for Moran was that the council could never sell the building.

Daly and the council team who negotiated with McManus's people were happy to let that go. Moran wasn't.

"I say it as I see it," he says. "Some people will absolutely love that. And some people won't. I'm probably pretty logical about things, just as a style, right? I trained as a lawyer. I read statutes. I think about the implications of doing things."

In this case, Moran's logical brain had a question: "When is it right to make a mayor or a council commit a city for thousands of years to the maintenance of a building?" There were "a lot of issues", including Vat exposure, but that one stood out to him.

The International Rugby Experience proved short-lived.

The problem was that there had already been a handshake between the negotiating teams before Moran's election. And in McManus's world, once you shook hands with the council, you could take that to the bank.

Moran says he wasn't made aware of the handshake – and that when the numbers changed, Daly came around to his position on the cost of keeping the building open until late 2027. "There was a sense among all of the councillors and me that we had dodged the bullet," says Moran.

More talks followed. Even when the negotiations reached crisis point, Daly and the executives close to him thought the deal was salvageable. But then Moran put €300,000 from his mayoral fund on the table to keep the building open for three more years.

That was the last nail in the coffin. McManus, widely considered to be a billionaire, felt insulted. He was also upset by "misrepresentations" made to councillors about his gift, which focused on "alleged negatives".

There was a familiar pattern when interviewees for this series were asked questions about McManus and the building he tried to donate: they mostly clammed up or asked to go off the record. But his unhappiness was in plain sight.

"Deep, deep, deep upset for JP and the family"

"It wasn't about the money, it was about the principle," says one person familiar with McManus's position. "JP was saying, 'Look, we did a deal on that – and you should honour it.'"

McManus was not available for comment, but several sources confirmed he resented how the handshake agreement had been overturned and the way the gift had been "falsely portrayed" to councillors. "It caused deep, deep, deep upset for JP and the family," says one.

McManus walked. For months, the council hoped he might come back to the table, unaware that he had decided to find another taker for the building.

Earlier this month, the Limerick-based Minister Patrick O'Donovan, not known to be an admirer of Moran, confirmed it would become home to a new regional branch of the National Museum of Ireland.

"I would like to thank Mr McManus and his team for supporting this shared vision for the region," he said. Officials from O'Donovan's department and the museum were joined by members of the McManus family for the announcement. Neither Moran nor anyone from the council was present.

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A couple of months after the meeting attended by McManus, another major row broke out when Moran cancelled the Christmas market in the city. He wasn't happy with how it had been organised. He had wanted a business plan, a detailed budget analysis. He had been asking since February – and he wasn't getting any of it.

When he finally saw the plan in September, he didn't think much of it. He wrote a 20-page memo about how things *should* have been done – and then told Daly to take over the project.

Again, his political rivals seized on the fallout.

"When things aren't going his way, everybody else is at fault," the Fianna Fáil council leader Michael Collins tells *The Currency*. "The whole Christmas thing was John's remit. He didn't give enough responsibility to people to deliver it, because he didn't trust they could deliver it. Then he handed it back to the council and blamed them."

To counter that narrative, Moran went on local radio. On October 22, he told Limerick Live 95's Joe Nash that the council's Christmas proposals weren't "good enough", adding: "I think I was elected to introduce higher standards on this kind of stuff, and be more demanding."

That is a theme he returns to again and again when talking *to The Currency*.

It's also a line of attack that puts Daly and the executives close to him into defensive mode. "We are a really good authority. We won Local Authority of the Year in 2018 and 2023. You don't go from that to shite," says Daly.

Sitting opposite Moran in the radio studio, Nash knew the comments were strong. "As he was talking to me, I felt this was likely to cause a reaction," he says. "But truthfully, I really didn't expect it to have the impact that it did."

John Moran's local radio interview caused ructions.

At City Hall, Daly was listening to the interview in his office. It angered him.

"He kind of threw us all under the bus a bit. So I was upset, yes. Normally I'm pretty balanced. People were saying to me, 'We're getting killed here. We're doing our best. We can't seem to keep the man satisfied," he says.

Briefly, Daly considered phoning Live 95 and asking to go on air. "But then I said to myself – 'Don't do it, it wouldn't be a good look'. It would have been, 'Right, mayor – we've got Pat on the other line here.' Imagine that."

Instead, Daly started writing an email to the entire council staff, as well as the councillors, about Moran's interview. He would use diplomatic language, but the message would be clear: "I wanted to protect staff. People had said to me, 'We're not being protected.' And I'd said, 'No, you are actually, because you don't know the straight talk I have with John.'"

There was another reason for the email. Daly says it was "about putting a line in the sand. 'Don't do it again.' It's like the guy in the match who might give you a kick in the head. And if you don't do something about it, you'll get a kick again. I just felt that a line had been crossed."

Moran disagrees with Daly's assertion that he threw staff under the bus, saying: "If you listen to that interview, I still think it was very measured, given what I actually know."

Back in the radio studio, Nash moved on to his next item – another tribute to the retiring Limerick hurling captain Declan Hannon. Moran made his way to City Hall for a meeting on the 2026 budget. Soon, all hell broke loose.

Moran: "The radio interview led to an episode in my office that was just unacceptable behaviour – by Pat. Where I was physically manhandled out of the way."

Daly: "We just had a fairly robust exchange."

That's one way of putting it.

"What are you trying to hide, Pat?"

Opinions might differ on what exactly happened in Moran's office that day, but one thing is not disputed. The relationship between the council's two big beasts collapsed to a new low and has not recovered. The following account comes from interviews with both men.

Daly: I had arranged for the management team to brief the mayor on the budget. And he said, "Well, I'm bringing a lady."

Moran: I had asked a highly trained professor of accounting [Dr Kathleen Regan, of UL] to come and help me because I couldn't get comfortable with the level of information I was getting. I had got her to sign an NDA the day before.

Daly: I said, "John, what's that about? This is highly, highly unorthodox." Which it was – for all sorts of GDPR and confidentiality reasons. If the councillors had become aware, they'd have said, "What's going on here, DG? You're the accounting officer – what's going on?"

Moran: When she arrived at the office, he refused to allow her into the room. I'm like, "What are you trying to hide, Pat? She's only going to be asking questions to help me."

Daly: I said, "John, you were the secretary general of finance. And you're telling me you need someone to help you with questions? How will that play for you, if it gets out?" Which was me trying to be helpful.

Moran: I was like, "I do know the questions – but I just don't have

enough time to ask them all. And I want somebody else to look at the information."

Daly: I said, "But John, you have nine advisers in there, including me. Why do you need verification?" I felt that what he was saying to the head of finance was (a) I don't trust you, and (b) I don't believe you.

Moran: I was going out the door saying, "Look, there's no point in having this conversation as far as I'm concerned. I'm going to have that meeting. Or if you're not going to allow her to come in, I'm going to explain to the other directors why we're not having a meeting."

Daly: I said, "John, you're not. Stop that."

Moran: He got up from his chair and pushed me away from the door.

Daly: He was going out the door, I was going out the door, we both grabbed the door together. That was it. There was nothing beyond that.

Daly finished writing his email and sent it the following morning, marked "For internal circulation only". It was as close to a declaration of war as a public official can make in official correspondence. Within hours, it was on the *Limerick Leader* website.

"I have listened to the interview and I fully understand and share the sense of disappointment that some of the remarks have caused," Daly wrote.

Many of those who received Daly's email had known nothing about Moran's interview. "As soon as it landed," says a council official, "there were emails and WhatsApp messages flying all over the place from people saying, 'Jesus! Has anyone got a link?'"

The next day, Moran countered with his own email to staff. "There are two sides to every debate," he wrote.

That Friday, both men went to the opening of the Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Autumn School in Bruff. "Let's just say they were keeping away from each other," says one of the attendees.

An FOI request refused

Moran also wrote to Daly after the office episode. Not long after, *The Irish Times* put in a Freedom of Information (FOI) request seeking correspondence between the two men within a specified timeframe that would have captured the email Moran sent after the row in his office and Daly's reply.

However, the emails were not released. A local authority can refuse to release correspondence if it contains personal information about an identifiable individual.

Daly suspected Moran's hidden hand in the FOI request. "You have an executive colleague who is priming stories," he says. "That's my view. It's very, very, very high wire. And it goes back to not letting stuff go. It goes back to, 'I'm right, and I'm right, and I'm right.'"

Moran takes the view that the public has a right to know what's going on. "I'm criticised when I disclose stuff from the organisation," he says. "He [Daly] considers it leaking, he doesn't like it. I actually think it's probably not an unhealthy way to approach things."

Moran's political rivals made hay. Amid acrimonious exchanges in the chamber, Fine Gael's John Sheahan said the council had become a "shit-show" and that it had been "working fine prior to the introduction of the directly elected mayor".

Collins and Sheahan proposed and seconded a motion of confidence in Daly, a highly unusual move. On the other side of the council divide, it was seen as a naked political manoeuvre against Moran.

"It's hard to have two taoiseachs"

In simple terms, the clash between Moran and Daly is one between a disruptor and a custodian, a battle made possible by legislation that kicked to touch rather than give the mayor enough powers to end all debate about who runs the show. Or as one councillor put it, about "who's the gaffer".

Moran puts it another way: "It's hard to have two taoiseachs, right?"

"It was structured that way deliberately," says Diarmuid Scully, a member of the committee that proposed the new DG role. "It wasn't an oversight or an error. I think it can work if people focus on what their respective roles are."

The problem is, they also have to agree on what their roles are.

"You can't legislate for everything," says Daly. "You can split the job, but you can't legislate for partnership in a real way."

There is, though, another dimension that the legislators never saw coming. What Daly didn't say, but would not deny, is that you also can't legislate for a mayor who believes he has a mandate to drive the kind of change no local authority in Ireland has experienced in the history of the State.

Nobody expected a mayor who sends multiple emails after midnight – and is so unrelenting that even the people who have fallen out with him wonder how he can possibly keep working as hard as he is.

A mayor like John Moran.

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The world according to Mayor John Moran, part one

Moran's bible is his five-year mayoral programme, a 107-page document setting out what he calls "More for Limerick".

"It's based on an election manifesto, so anything I don't deliver in five years, I've got to explain to the public why I didn't deliver it," he says. "It's like a programme for government. They didn't expect, perhaps, any mayor to come with that level of detail and promises."

They did not.

Moran often draws on his experience at the Central Bank (a nine-month stint) and as secretary general of the Department of Finance (2011-14) at a time of national crisis when explaining the challenge facing him now.

"We changed significantly the governance of the Central Bank," he says. "We brought in risk functions at the Department of Finance and all Michael [Noonan, the minister] ever said was, 'Keep going'."

A lot of the change back then was "about tracking stuff", he says. Moran is big on holding people accountable for the delivery of what he has promised the public in his extensive – some say too extensive – mayoral programme.

"I would say the transition Limerick City and County Council is going through reminds me of the Central Bank during the crisis," he says.

Daly doesn't buy into the comparison nor agree that Moran's time at the Department of Finance gives him a proper frame of reference: "I've said to him, 'This is local government and service provision, they're different things.'"

Moran isn't having that: "The only person who has actually worked in both [central and local government] is myself. I can tell you it's very similar. To be honest, what's really happening with Pat now is that people are focusing more on the lack of delivery. I can't hire people. I can't put people in to solve it. It's the DG who lets me hire people.

“I wanted to get him to bring in consultants to help. It took nine months to actually get to a point where we could do a public procurement to bring them in. So I have constantly got this feeling that I’m being resisted.”

Daly says Moran’s expectations “just have to be tempered a bit to say, ‘I’ll give you time and space’. But we don’t get time and space. It’s ‘I need that done by tomorrow.’”

Back and forth it goes, over and over, two men who see the council’s new world very differently.

Pat Daly and John Moran. Photo: Don Moloney

“Any other mayor would have been completely swamped by the system. A huge thing for me is that he is trying to bring accountability to the executive,” says a high-level businessman who supports the mayor and has knowledge of how the council executive operates. “Progress is slow in people taking ownership,” he adds.

That view was endorsed when Grant Thornton surveyed members of a committee that supports the delivery of the mayoral plan. The results, disclosed to the committee in January, have been seen by *The Currency*.

The survey of mostly external stakeholders found that “delivery is constrained less by intent and more by unclear leadership, weak ownership and insufficient collaboration”. It also found that “ambition has outpaced execution” and that the problem was “fundamentally a change and culture challenge”.

It pinpointed “resistance to change, territorial behaviours, and perceived loss of power” among the reasons for the organisational disruption but also said the mayoral programme was “overly ambitious”.

Moran saw the results of the survey as confirmation of what he had believed all along: that he was being resisted. A full Grant Thornton report will follow and its work is reportedly costing around €300,000.

Someone who has known Moran for a lengthy period offers a different perspective on why things have unravelled and puts Moran’s leadership style at the heart of the problem. “John always has the answer. John is never wrong about things. He’s happy to wait for people to realise, ‘Oh, you were right’. And weirdly, I don’t think John knows that he’s doing that. Even if he’s told, I don’t think he knows he’s doing it.”

He put his finger on something I’d been trying to figure out about Moran. He has huge ability, but his undoubted brilliance does not extend to a high level of self-awareness or emotional intelligence. In both the unforgiving arena of politics and the traditional world of local government, that was always going to be a problem.

(Interview edited for length and clarity)

Alan English (AE): Pat Daly's view – and the view of others, including councillors who are frustrated with you – is that it's your way or the highway. They say you don't do compromise. You project a sense of utter certainty that they find difficult to deal with.

John Moran (JM): So, if I'm faced with how to actually manage a situation like we're in, my training sends me to the law. I read the legislation. I work out what it's saying in black and white, and I work out what the implications are. And that shouldn't come as a surprise to people, because I trained as a tax officer.

AE: And they might say that's all very well and good. But maybe this is a role that doesn't demand the certainty of a lawyer's training. It demands the flexibility of somebody who needs to bring people with them.

JM: It requires that too, but that's a different thing. And this is where I think there's a projection that I'm not bringing people with me.

AE: There is.

JM: That's absolutely wrong. So the majority of the councillors are working really well with the mayor. The majority of the staff are working really well with the mayor, if not the predominant majority of the staff.

AE: Again, that would be disputed.

JM: Well, of course it would, if your interest is not having this work, or if you want to try and politically attack somebody who's mayor. Maybe people are under pressure. The way they used to get their results was a very comfortable arrangement, I'm sure. There was a rejection of a lot of those ways of working, as far as I'm concerned, in 2019 [plebiscite] and 2024 [DEM election].

AE: And you're pushing back on a lot of the old ways. But you're doing so when you haven't got the votes. So their view is that you have to adopt a more conciliatory, pragmatic approach.

JM: But we *are* adopting a pragmatic approach. Look, I think they assume I've never done a negotiation in my life. I've spent my entire life doing negotiations.

AE: And what about the view that you don't do compromise?

JM: But it is easier to compromise when the other side explain the logic of why you're wrong, or why they're right. And not just say, 'I have the numbers and I should get my own way.' In order to get to a compromise, you have to understand on both sides, fairly, what the rules actually were supposed to be.

AE: There's a view among the council executives that you need to take some wins – that when they think something in your mayoral programme has been ticked off, you're still not happy with it.

JM: Maybe you can call me Roy Keane if you want … [but] that's where you've got a fundamental clash in approach. That's why you map everything out, quarter by quarter. It's an example of somebody who comes from an environment where outcomes matter – like when we were capitalising the banks. The [Limerick] hurlers suffered for years and years. And then somebody came in and brought in the right supports for them, so they could focus on delivering on the field. That's what a local authority in Ireland should be doing.

Photo: Don Moloney

AE: I think most people would say that level of ambition is commendable and admirable. But the organisation itself appears to be suffering from some sort of trauma. I know you've pushed back on that perception.

JM: I pushed back hard on that.

AE: The story has become national. It's on the TV news, *Morning Ireland*. It's big. And even councillors supportive of you are saying, "God, this is terrible. We wanted to be the trailblazers in this. And now other cities are looking at us, thinking, 'We don't want a directly elected mayor if this is what it leads to.'" Now you can't deny that that is definitely happening.

JM: No, but there's a counter view – that this is an exercise to sabotage the role of a directly elected mayor that other counties want.

AE: I think we can agree that we're not in a great place at the moment.

JM: See, I don't agree with that.

AE: You don't agree with that?

JM: No. You're making that assumption. That's a wrong assumption, right? The reality is very different from what people are trying to portray.

AE: But you're effectively at war with the director general.

JM: The reality is we are having conversations. Is it perfect? Absolutely not. But this is what happens in real politics. Step back from that. We agreed to the budget, right? We increased rates, which the majority [of councillors] wouldn't do the year before. We agreed a Local Property Tax. So I don't think it's fair to say that the thing isn't working. It may not be working the way some people want it to work – and the way it used to work before.

AE: Your whole approach – and you described it in one way as a Roy Keane-style approach – is relentless and exhausting for you on a personal level, I'm sure. But perhaps also exhausting for some of the people you're engaging with. Do you see that? The people who are saying, "This guy is constantly getting into the weeds. He just won't let anything go."

JM: Look, I had a situation recently – and it's still being investigated – where an asset we were supposed to be selling was valued at a certain amount. It just felt wrong to me. At a meeting in the council, it was acknowledged that maybe one of the questions I was asking might be right. And the impact was that the value of the asset might be double what I was being told. So at the moment, the mayoral order is not signed because nobody has answered that question. Now, the people of Limerick want me asking those questions. They don't want me to give up.

AE: A lot of them would still wish you'd get on with people more.

JM: But you're saying "get on with people" as if that's everybody. I've not had one person outside of the city council building, or outside of the chamber, suggesting I should be doing things any differently. Quite the contrary. The people who are the most influential in the status quo that you're changing have the greatest difficulty coming on board.

AE: Would you admit to any mistakes?

JM: I think I totally underestimated how ill-prepared the organisation was for this.

AE: But that's a mistake that pushes it back on them.

JM: No, it's not. It's a mistake that pushes back on me in the sense that the use of the mayoral fund at the beginning should have been put way more into building capacity in the organisation.

AE: But would you admit to any mistakes where you feel now, "I screwed up there."

JM: So if I had put that capacity in place, it would have released ...

AE: You've already made that point. Is there anything you can think of that you would have done differently?

JM: I don't beat myself up.

AE: You can't think of any examples?

JM: The real point for me, which is the one I was trying to make, is that I expected that there would be a greater understanding of what this change meant.

AE: People are saying, including Pat Daly, that you're not helping yourself by getting bogged down in detail. He says he can't get you out of your own way. He thinks you're being unreasonable in expecting every single plank of the mayoral programme, 330 things, to be tracked in real time, all the time.

JM: I don't consider it to be unreasonable.

AE: He does.

JM: I realise that. That's the problem.

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The 2022 job interview process

The profiles and interviews published after Moran's election in June 2024 cited the big jobs in his remarkable CV: CEO of Zurich Capital Markets, head of wholesale bank supervision at the Central Bank, secretary general at the Department of Finance, board member of the European Investment Bank; chair of the Land Development Agency and other institutions; founder of his own consulting firm with blue-chip clients (Uber, Nomura, Revolut, Warburg Pincus and others).

What none of the pieces mentioned was that in 2022, Moran applied for the job of CEO of Limerick City and County Council – and was beaten to the position by Pat Daly, who had been acting CEO since 2019. Nor has there been any public disclosure of the fact that Moran came close to challenging Daly's appointment in a High Court judicial review.

Why did he feel justified in contesting the interview panel's decision?

"There were a number of things that happened in the context of that competition that seemed unusual to me, as somebody who's done an awful lot of public appointment competitions in my time," he says.

In his appeal against the decision not to give him the job, Moran submitted "13 or 14 grounds upon which I was concluding that this didn't make sense," he says.

For example?

“In the final interview, I didn’t get qualifying scores on strategic thinking and delivering results – both of which struck me as rather strange, given that my main public sector experience had been delivering a troika programme that was lauded across the world, and thinking strategically with Michael [Noonan] about how to get us out of a pickle that we were in.”

There was another “unusual” aspect of the process, he says. The way he describes it, the job specification was written in a way that benefited Daly and included “an awful lot about economic job creation” – a strong point of Daly’s.

He is not suggesting that Daly “ever played any role in drafting it [the job spec] – I don’t know that”. But he was “told by the department that it was actually sent up and drafted by Limerick”.

In a statement, Limerick City and County Council said it “rejects any suggestion that the process contained anything ‘unusual’. The process followed was the national standard chief executive recruitment model, identical across all local authorities.”

It said the recruitment process was independently run by the Public Appointments Service (PAS) and that the council’s Corporate Policy Group “completed a standard key skills and challenges questionnaire which PAS seeks from all local authorities in advance of a chief executive recruitment”.

A PAS statement said: “The recruitment process was conducted in full accordance with the Commission for Public Service Appointments (CPSA) Code of Practice.”

“I went into the interview process with an agenda of change,” Moran says. “I suspect Pat went in saying, ‘I’ve been the interim CEO for three years, it’s all going really well, I’ll keep going.’”

Daly says he was unaware that Moran had applied for the job “until it had all transpired”.

“It’s a sealed process,” he says. “You hear rumours in the system that maybe someone might have gone [for the job], but you don’t know. I heard latterly that he competed. I was surprised that he’d gone.”

What if he hadn’t got it? “I remember chatting with people and saying, ‘If I don’t get it, I leave. I don’t want to be the bad smell in the kitchen. If I’m not needed, I’m not needed.’”

He later became aware of Moran’s appeal against his failure to get the job, but doesn’t want to comment on it.

The Conn Murray subplot

A quick trip back in time. Daly got the interim CEO job in the first place when Conn Murray, who had led the council for seven years, left at the end of his contract. Murray announced his departure 16 days after the result of the mayoral plebiscite. The two men are close friends and Daly was best man at Murray’s wedding.

In 2013, Murray was angered by a media report about the appointment of Daly to a senior role at Limerick council after an internal process. The *Irish Independent* had obtained a copy of his marriage certificate. At the time, a council spokesman said that while Murray had recommended the appointment, he had not been involved in the selection process.

Conn Murray, the former CEO of Limerick City and County Council.

While still serving as council CEO, Murray established Limerick Twenty Thirty (LTT) as a special-purpose vehicle to acquire and transform disused sites in the city. It's one of the DACs Moran has been fighting with councillors over. After stepping down from his CEO position, Murray succeeded Denis Brosnan as LTT chairman.

In December 2025, Murray announced he was resigning as chair and stepping away from public life. He did so after what Moran describes as "a significant battle" between him and elements of the LTT board.

"Some of the board went and got legal advice that the mayor was not the shareholder of the company," says Moran. "It was literally delivered to justify why I should step out of the affairs of Limerick Twenty Thirty. I had to get a senior counsel to trump their legal opinion. Maybe they saw me as troublesome – I would ask hard questions."

Murray doesn't see it that way. "It wasn't just some board members," he says. "The board asked for a legal view in terms of the interpretation of the legislation, as it was coming in. And I can assure you, nobody was afraid of hard questions."

Murray will have more to say in part three of this series.

Onwards to the mayoral election

The appeal process went on for months after Moran failed to get the CEO job, but in May 2022, Limerick councillors ratified the PAS recommendation. They confirmed Daly in the post before Moran "had concluded whether or not I would go forward with the judicial review".

But by then, he was fighting bowel cancer and had "other things to worry about". He has since made a full recovery.

"I went for the role because I essentially felt I could contribute to Limerick," he says. Fighting the cancer became his new priority – "but in either event, you couldn't do a judicial review of a council decision. So we had to do an election".

In other words, if officialdom wouldn't let him have the big job, maybe the people would.

And key to understanding the controversy now swirling around Moran's head is how that election was won – and how open warfare erupted within days of his inauguration as mayor.

Turbulent Mayor – the full series

Part 2 – "I could do many other things that would be an awful lot easier"

Part 3 – What next for the Limerick experiment?

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