

Opinion & Analysis

Inside Politics

Pat Leahy



This Dáil is nearing its end and it's not before time

The no-confidence motion in Minister for Housing Eoghan Murphy, that narrowly failed in the Dáil on Tuesday night, shook the Government. Ministers were by and large by the reality that Leo Varadkar's administration will probably not withstand another such challenge.

Something changed; you could feel it around Leinster House. The complacent, fuzzy expectation that everyone could trundle on until next summer and then have a general election amid sunshine and

long evenings was mangled in the shreds of political reality.

Another motion of no confidence – this time in Simon Harris – is widely anticipated in February. That will probably take place after a Boris Johnson-led British government finally supervises the UK's departure from the European Union at the end of January – a historic event which the Government hopes will focus attention on its mostly far-sighted and measured performance on the Brexit issue. It will. But not for long. The Brexit

event will also signal the end of Micheál Martin's self-declared obligations to Varadkar. As such, the Taoiseach is thereafter at the mercy of the Fianna Fáil leader when it comes to the continuation of his administration.

And not just him. There is now a very real question as to whether the Government can command a Dáil majority – even if Fianna Fáil continues to abstain. The three essential Independents on Tuesday were Michael Lowry, Noel Grealish and Denis Naughten; each has reason to be sour at Fine Gael, none is guaranteed to continue their support. And each knows that voting for this Government is an increasingly unpopular stance.

With exquisite timing the independent-minded Fianna Fáil TD John McGuinness told the Dáil on Thursday that he would vote against any future confidence motion. You do the math, as the Americans say: the Government had a majority of three on Tuesday night with Fianna Fáil abstaining. Then (minutes later, it seems) Fine Gael's Dara Murphy resigned. Independent Donegal TD Thomas Pringle was absent and won't be next time. That's a majority of one. If McGuinness carries through on his threat, it's a majority of, er, zero. The mood in Leinster House was pretty clear: judgment cometh, and soon.

If developments signalled that this Dáil is nearing its end, it's not before time. If confidence and supply gave the country a stable government when it needed one

(while also serving Martin's great project of rehabilitating Fianna Fáil), and sustained it during the national peril of Brexit, lately it has curdled into a sullen lethargy, punctuated by three-way political rows frequently as spiteful as they are castrated of real potency.

If this Dáil was ever interested in constructively wielding the power that the Government's minority status gave it, it no longer is: the debate on Tuesday was dire, even by the standards of such things.

There was hardly a single constructive idea floated by the Opposition beyond "build more social housing", a slogan, not a policy. For its part, the Government couldn't admit that its housing policy is clearly insufficient for the task. Its response was twofold: 1) our plan is working; 2) and if it's not working, it's not our fault. It takes a special kind of chutzpah to run these arguments simultaneously.

Dopamine levels
Really, it was dreadful stuff. Readers who are having too much fun this weekend and are seeking to reduce their dopamine levels can read it on the Oireachtas.ie website; otherwise, here's a taste.

Deputy Shane Cassells (Fianna Fáil TD for Meath West): "The nonsense coming from the left here tonight is a Wendy house solution that would have us in an even worse scenario."

Deputy Mick Barry (Solidarity-People Before Profit TD for Cork North-Central):

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"You are a spoofer."

Cassells: "The choice for the people of Ireland will come soon. The people of Ireland can make the choice to give their children a better future, where the basic principle of having a home is not a fairy tale like the spoofers to my right, but an attainable reality because one party has always ensured that there were houses for our citizens and that party was Fianna Fáil."

Mick Barry: "Spoofer."
An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: "I remind members, including Deputy Cassells, to use parliamentary language."

Cassells: "The Leas-Cheann Comhairle should remind the Shinners of that."
And so on.

Some people in Government are surprisingly sanguine about housing as a

political issue. Just as they are about health. Whatever about Opposition hyperventilating, they believe, most voters know that houses can't be built overnight and they also know – because they see them – that housebuilding is accelerating. Lurking behind this is the unspoken appreciation that increases in house prices are not viewed by many voters as an unalloyed evil, shall we say. More people (70-ish per cent) own their own homes than don't, after all. That figure is likely to be even higher among Fine Gael voters.

This level-headedness may serve Fine Gael well in next year's election. But it misses the potential for election debates to be framed around personal stories of the failure of public services. Big trends are important, of course. The economic news is robust and consumer confidence (an obsession with Varadkar) may catch up with it after Brexit. But people relate to personal stories as a way of understanding the world.

The whiff of complacency around the Cabinet also rather ignores one of the obvious facts around this administration – it is flat out of energy, purpose and mission.

If there is to be a political salvation for Varadkar, he will need a new departure, a new project, a new narrative for the Government. Economy done. Brexit done. Public services next, starting with housing and health. But there is no sense that anything of the sort is contemplated.

World View

Paul Gillespie



EC must wake from geopolitical slumber

The new European Commission is "truly geopolitical", according to its president Ursula von der Leyen, who took office this week. By this she means it must respond to rapidly changing international realities in the distribution of global power.

China's arrival as a frontline power, the United States decoupling from postwar multilateral commitments on politics and economics, Russia's disruptive role in Europe, a turbulent neighbourhood in the Middle East and Africa and climate breakdown all feed into these changes. If the European Union does not become a key global actor it will lose influence – that is the mantra driving Von der Leyen's team. They say the commission must wake up from its geopolitical slumber.

Nato's 70th birthday summit this week illustrated several of these forces at play, as Germany, France and a departing UK responded differently to Donald Trump's transactional view of the transatlantic relationship. The Germans disagree with French president Emmanuel Macron's view that Nato is brain dead and that the EU must assert a more sovereign role in defence and security as well as in other spheres, including by resetting rela-

informed by European experience. He says regulatory competition with China and the US on climate, digital and cyber issues can set world standards. His support for a stronger euro regime chimes in with wider dissatisfaction over German complacency on the matter. A recurrent theme is the need for France and Europe to balance other world powers as these changes proceed.

An impressive group of French analysts and researchers on political economy echoes Macron's concerns. Gabriel Zucman from the University of California has become the major analyst of growing wealth inequalities in the US and how to tax corporations and the super-rich more effectively to counter them – including in his analysis of Ireland as a tax haven. He draws on Thomas Piketty's work on capital and inequality to do that.

Thomas Philippon's new study *The Great Reversal* contrasts the strong competitive position of the US 20 years ago on digital, transport and incomes, when he arrived there from France, with its oligopolistic and more unequal one today. It has lost its competitive edge as a result of corporate capture of policy-making through lobbying and the exorbitant cost of political campaigning. As a result Europe's competition regime makes it more dynamic, innovative and capable of setting world standards than a US which has lost its cutting edge.

Christine Lagarde's role as head of the European Central Bank and her commitment to make climate more central to its work adds to this picture of French policy energy. It sharpens up the EU's soft power, pushing it to become harder, smarter and sharper on the world stage, according to Zaki Laidi, an international relations theorist in Sciences-Po. He says soft power is becoming weaponised particularly through US-China rivalry and digital technology.

The new commission feeds into this policy mix and is influenced by it. Irish policy needs to think its way into this sphere as its geopolitical anchorage between the EU, the US and the UK, stable for the last generation shifts profoundly. That exposes Ireland to several new challenges. Bridget Laffan of the European University Institute recently told the Royal Irish Academy in a public discourse available online.

They include a need to rethink policy on corporate taxation and European security. Ireland also needs to think carefully about its position as a small state vis-à-vis France and Germany. The recent alignment with the Hanseatic group of northern liberal states led by the Netherlands is disliked by the French and risks alienating southern and eastern EU members.



Sometimes euthanasia is the right choice



Peter Cluskey Opinion

Ireland should urgently legislate for assisted suicide. It is the humane thing to do

There are many hard choices to be made in life, especially if like Vicky Phelan and the 221+ women caught up in the CervicalCheck scandal you are fighting the odds for every extra day. Even then, there is no harder choice than embracing euthanasia.

That's why it struck a chord recently to see Vicky call for the legalisation of assisted suicide in Ireland and declare it an option she might want to consider, depending on the progress of her cancer. It was a view I recognised – borne of a terrible practicality.

It struck a chord for three reasons: because it always takes courage to say what nobody wants to hear; because there's nobody better qualified to open this debate in Ireland than Vicky; and because my own wife, Adrienne Cullen, chose euthanasia in not dissimilar circumstances a year ago.

Adrienne was 58 when she died quietly by euthanasia at the Netherlands Cancer Institute in Amsterdam at 10.15am on New Year's Eve 2018. Because she couldn't take opioid-based painkillers, her

options were severely limited. Her pain had become uncontrollable and was going to get worse.

After six years of constant debilitating struggle, she was not going to see 2019, nor could she face it. Medicine had nothing more to offer, except a way out. And that way out – euthanasia or assisted suicide – has been legal in the Netherlands, in tightly controlled circumstances, since 2002.

Adrienne was left with terminal cervical cancer after one of the country's largest university hospitals – UMC Utrecht – failed catastrophically not once but twice.

It "lost" test results showing she had cervical cancer, and then – quite remarkably – also misread a separate Pap smear showing the very same thing.

Although she did everything possible to avoid the day, Adrienne knew she was dying.

Medical error

It was that unavoidable, in-your-face, 24-hour-a-day knowledge that motivated her to take on the hospital that harmed her and then did its utmost to "set her adrift", the words of a leading expert on medical error – now the world's third-largest cause of death, after cancer and heart disease.

Adrienne forced the hospital to pay a record settlement, the highest in the Netherlands though pitifully small in comparison with Ireland or the UK. She forced a written apology, the first from the chief executive of a Dutch hospital to a patient it had harmed.

She delivered the first in a series of annual public lectures named after her, at which – in front of an audience that included the Irish ambassador, Kevin Kelly, the director general of the Dutch Health Inspectorate, Ronnie van Diemen, and the chief executive of UMC Utrecht, Prof Margriet Schneider – she detailed the

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gagging clause the hospital pressured us both to sign and that she turned her back on.

Most importantly of all, her extraordinary tenacity led to the introduction in the Netherlands of internationally recognised "open disclosure" protocols in all major hospitals – setting out exactly what hospitals must do in cases where patients have been harmed.

The point about all this is not just to list Adrienne's achievements, impressive though they are in a few short years, in a country not her own, and facing certain death.

The point is that she could never have faced those battles without knowing that euthanasia was there in the background as an escape hatch. That's what she called it: "My escape hatch."

That's why I used the word "embrace" in relation to euthanasia in the first sentence of this piece. Adrienne embraced it without reservation as a means of carrying on stronger and more determined than ever. I supported her in that. And I have absolutely the same sense about Vicky.

Adrienne Cullen was 58 when she died quietly by euthanasia at the Netherlands Cancer Institute in Amsterdam. Her pain had become uncontrollable and was going to get worse

Adrienne and Vicky were in regular touch in the year before Adrienne's death. I contacted Vicky the other day to make sure her views on euthanasia are as reported. They are, without equivocation.

Like Adrienne, she has thought long and hard about her beautiful family and about managing her circumstances as best she can, for as long as she can.

Typical generosity

"It takes a brave person to choose euthanasia, to understand why you are choosing it, and to stick to it as the best option when the time comes... and, as you know better than anyone, Adrienne was that brave person," Vicky responded with typical generosity.

There is bureaucracy, of course, a lot of it, and that's a good thing; psychological assessments, medical assessments, and finally, the obligatory agreement of two doctors independently of one another that the time has come.

My job that morning was not to lose my nerve, not to let Adrienne down. We were lucky in that we had the support of a Dutch friend who was there for both of us and for whose strength I will be eternally grateful. I held one of Adrienne's hands. She – our friend – held the other.

It won't surprise you then when I say that Ireland should legislate to legalise euthanasia, as a matter of urgency. It is the humane thing to do. And our legislators should be guided by Vicky Phelan and women like her. It is the very least they can expect.

Peter Cluskey writes for The Irish Times from The Netherlands