

# Comment & Letters

## THE IRISH TIMES

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### Mr O'Dea's false statement

**T**AOISEACH BRIAN Cowen has a duty of care to the democratic system that goes beyond the knee-jerk protection of Fianna Fáil colleagues or the immediate concerns of government. That places him in an invidious position, because of the relaxed attitude adopted by his predecessors to ethical issues. But, at a time when public confidence in all forms of authority has waned, there is a need to promote high standards and to ensure political accountability.

After weeks of pressure from Fine Gael, Minister for Defence Wille O'Dea may attend the Dáil and explain how he happened to make a false statement, in a sworn affidavit, to the High Court last year. But only if Mr Cowen asks him to do so. This is a most serious matter for the Minister. But to appoint the Taoiseach as the effective arbiter of his behaviour complicates the situation considerably and may eventually create friction between the Coalition parties.

On two occasions in the Seanad, Fine Gael's spokesman on justice Eugene Regan raised the behaviour of Mr O'Dea and questioned his fitness for Government. The controversy will be extended to the Dáil today by Fine Gael justice spokesman Charlie Flanagan.

Last year, the Minister denied making false allegations against a Sinn Féin councillor in a sworn affidavit. He withdrew the document and apologised to the court only after his deposition was shown to be false. Mr O'Dea said that as soon as he realised the mistake he "put his hand up" and apologised to the court.

In other jurisdictions, prominent people have been sent to jail for incorrect statements. Here, Fianna Fáil closed ranks. Minister for Justice Dermot Aherne ignored the substantive issue and described Fine Gael's earlier in pursuing the matter as "despicable". Earlier, leader of the Seanad Donie Cassidy declared that the people of Limerick were fortunate to have such a capable representative. There is no question about Mr O'Dea's political or ministerial abilities. What is at issue is his behaviour in maligning a political opponent during an election campaign and the legal and political consequences that have flowed from that action. As a solicitor, Mr O'Dea must realise the seriousness of the situation if he does not, then Mr Cowen, who is also a solicitor, should be able to advise him.

This controversy is all about trust and accountability. Mr Cowen may be reluctant to engage in a Cabinet reshuffle because of possible destabilising effects within Fianna Fáil. If he fails to convince Green Party Ministers that the issue is being treated with the seriousness it

### Letters to the Editor

#### De Búrca's resignation

Madam, - Whatever Déirdre de Búrca's motives for resigning her Seanad seat and Green Party membership, I cannot share her view that Fianna Fáil is running "trings" around the Greens (Home News, February 13th).

The Greens have managed to get a lot of their policies implemented in Government, as an honest appraisal of their performance since entering coalition will attest. John Gormley has succeeded in halting a series of potentially reckless planning decisions all over Ireland since his appointment as Minister for Environment.

The Greens have been responsible for higher building and energy standards that can only benefit the majority of people. Another plus for the Green presence in government is the ESB's commitment to a Smart Metering programme.

As a campaigner against blood sports, I have been following the Seanad debate on the Dog Breeding Establishments Bill that aims to regulate so-called puppy farms, and that will soon become law.

Hunt kennels and greyhound breeders will also have to register under the legislation and this has prompted shrieks of outrage from both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael members of the Oireachtas, who insist that the Greens are exercising an inordinate degree of influence over Fianna Fáil.

A Fianna Fáil backbencher concerned about the inclusion of hunt

kennels in the proposed clamp-down on puppy farms warned last week that the Green Party is the "tail wagging the dog".

This view is echoed by many other members of the Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael parliamentary parties, and by strongly-worded proclamations on pro-field sport websites alarmed by the Greens' achievement in securing Cabinet approval for the longstanding Green commitment to banning stag hunting and fur farming.

That doesn't sound to me like a party that is having rings run around it by its larger coalition partner. Or am I missing something? The Green Party's major failure, in my view, is its apparent unwillingness or inability to communicate to the public just how much it has achieved since entering Government. - Yours, etc.

JOHN FITZGERALD,  
Lower Coyne Street,  
Callan, Co Kilkenny.

Madam, - The assertion by members of the Green Party that the resignation of former member and Senator, Déirdre de Búrca and statements made by her regarding the Green Party and its leader John Gormley may have been motivated by disappointment and self-interest does not necessarily mean that her comments are not accurate. - Yours, etc.

FRANK BARR,  
Glassevin Woods,  
Ballyboggan Road,  
Dublin 11.

#### Averting a Greek tragedy

Madam, - Tim Carey draws erroneous parallels between the Irish situation of 2009 and the "Greek tragedy" of 2010 (February 12th).

One year ago, the implied rate at which the Irish Government could borrow for 10 years was in the region of 5.5 per cent. As I write it stands at around 4.5 per cent, because of the international financial community's recognition of the tough measures that have been taken to stave off IMF intervention and by taking short term medicine to improve our long term health.

One year ago, Greek government borrowing costs were at 6 per cent. Over the past fortnight they have oscillated between 6 per

cent, but out is their likely reward. The EU elite are fully aware the Greeks will not accept austerity measures from international money-lenders or other states without widespread protest, or even possible revolt.

Compare to Ireland where we've meekly accepted our medicine, apart from endless radio mean-ins and letters to the paper, and 150,000 marching a year ago behind trade union leaders who have since largely disappeared. The result? Higher taxes, cutbacks hitting the weak and poor, and the moral obscenity of Nama which the Government and RTE correspondents told us was the "the only game in town".

What about another game we

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#### Cold comfort in Paris

Madam, - Not a single pundit nor reporter seems to have mentioned the fact our rugby team went out to play in Paris last Saturday in sub-zero temperatures wearing T-shirts. Little wonder there were so many unforced errors. To paraphrase a line from that famous opera (*La Bohème*) also based in Paris: their tiny hands were frozen. Several of the French backline wore what appeared to be thermal T-shirts. Might I suggest the same attire and a pair of mittens next time we have to play in such conditions? - Yours, etc.

BRENDAN QUINN,  
Enniscrone, Co Sligo.

#### Kenyan honour for Irishwoman

Madam, - Elaine Bannon, a Dublin woman who has been working in Kenya with very poor people for the past six years, is being awarded the highest honour the President of Kenya can give for humanitarian endeavour. She is the first non-Kenyan ever to be given this honour, called the Order of Warriors.

In the past five years she has worked tirelessly in a semi-desert area, Rombo, in providing deep wells (giving clean water and irrigation for crops). She has been involved in building schools, and extensions to existing schools, and has provided sponsorship for 300 students at all levels of education. Ms Bannon has been instrumental in making three well-equipped clinics available where people are treated for as little as 50 cent a visit. In times of famine, she organises food programmes, and has a special nutrition outreach to help mothers, babies and those with Aids.

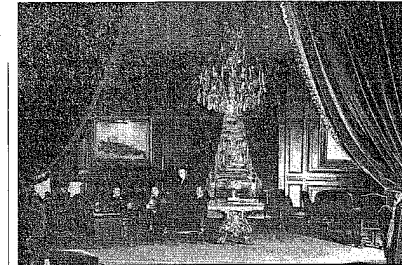
A group of people from the Rotary Club in central Dublin are climbing Mount Everest next month in aid of her work.

KATHLEEN O'KEEFFE,  
Coolaree Close,  
Beaumont, Dublin 9.

#### Controversy over incineration plan

### An Irishman's Diary

Chris Ashton



The Jockey Club, Buenos Aires, where the first annual Oxford-Cambridge dinner was held some 90 years ago. Dublin now has its own. Photograph: Dmitri Kessel/Time Life Pictures/Getty Images

**I**RELAND'S most celebrated Oxford son, Oscar Wilde, famously declared, "The two great turning points of my life were when my father sent me to Oxford and when society sent me to prison." Of his late return from Greece after the start of term, for which he was punished, he recalled, "I was sent down from Oxford for being the first undergraduate to visit Olympia." Some 70 to 80 Irish Oxford and Cambridge alumni, black-tied or evening-gowned, will gather in the Kildare Street and University Club on February 27th to pay tribute to Britain's two oldest universities.

MC of the event, Dublin lawyer Mark Pery-Knox-Gore (Oxon.) will propose the toast to the Irish President; I will do the same for Queen Elizabeth. Minister of State Martin Mansergh (Oxon.) will speak and lead his fellow alumni to toast the Light Blues. Barrister, biographer and London *Times* obituary writer of Ireland's good and great, Charles Lysaght, President of the Irish Cambridge Society, will lead the reciprocal toast to the Dark Blues.

Oxford and Cambridge alumni span the world. Cambridge claims 192,000 to Oxford's 180,000, though in alumni societies, about 180 each, they're level-pegged. The island of Ireland accounts for some 3,000 Oxbridge alumni, evenly divided between the two universities, although many, attending as post-graduates, owe their primary allegiance to Irish universities.

To make up the numbers, Ireland's Light and Dark Blue graduates have amicably joined forces to establish the Oxford and Cambridge Society of Ireland, which joins an exotic mélange of comparable societies, 40-plus, including five in southern Africa, 13 in Asia (among them China, India, Japan, Vietnam, Thailand, Philippines, Singapore and Malaysia), seven in Europe, four in the Middle East and eight in North America, not least New York.

The sole Latin-American country, Argentina, held its first annual Oxford-Cambridge dinner some 90 years ago. Why should Buenos Aires pay tribute to England's most ancient universities? From the mid-19th

century, for 100 years, though their numbers were minuscule, Britain was pivotal to Argentine commerce, industry, banking, railway construction, livestock-breeding and sporting clubs. The dinner is part of that legacy.

Convened in Buenos Aires' illustrious Jockey Club, its November 1918 genesis, coinciding with the Armistice, perhaps signalled hope of a new dawn for humanity. In 1987, courtesy of the British ambassador, it was held for the first time in the ambassadorial residence, compared with which, no other venue-club, restaurant or hotel-could hope to compete. From the walls of the vast reception room monarchs of the House of Windsor and their consorts, variously stern or benign, gaze upon Oxbridge alumni resident in the eveningwear below.

Until the 1960s, Anglo-Argentine undergraduates dominated the event.

Nowadays guests are older and more diverse: post-graduates from other Commonwealth countries, the US and Argentina, with women accounting for 20 per cent. In a country now long removed from the British presence, in its attachment to pomp and pageantry, to oratory in the language of Milton and Shakespeare blended with undergraduate mischief and self-mockery, it continues quintessentially Oxbridge. Rightly so.

Here I must declare a personal interest. From 2004, living in Buenos Aires, I attended four consecutive dinners. Two years ago with my Argentine wife, Ana, I moved to Dublin, and later that year

attended the annual Oxford University Alumni Weekend, at which I met Lady Nancy Kenny, director of Oxford alumni relations. I sang the praises of the Buenos Aires dinner, prompting her to ask me at once to check out the prospects for a Dublin chapter of Oxford Alumni Society (OAS). To this I cheerfully agreed.

Two Trinity dons, while impressing upon me the enormity of the task ahead, got me started. "I do think you have your work cut out for you," Joseph O'Gorman replied to my inquiry. "Many Irish graduates simply are not interested in this type of association. . . Oxbridge graduates in Ireland, if Irish, hardly need such a network, and if English, would tend to see Ireland as just 'next door' to England." English-born Dr Gerald Morgan wished me luck while describing the cautionary tale of his own short-lived Dublin OAS and of others which had come to naught.

Joseph O'Gorman commended me to Martin Mansergh who suggested I consider instead the idea of an Oxford-Cambridge Society. The penny suddenly dropped. Why not an Oxbridge dinner à la Buenos Aires? This led me to Charles Lysaght, and to Mark Pery-Knox-Gore who then enlisted two other Oxford alumni, Deirdre Kilen, biochemist and GP, and John Carroll, self-confessed ardent angler and salmon conservationist. With Mark chairing our meetings and attending to most of the detail, the five of us plotted the inaugural Irish Oxbridge-Cambridge dinner. cpmashton@yahoo.com.ar