

The diminutive, dapper ladies man of Fianna Fáil politics is stepping down at the next election

A fondish farewell to the minister for fun

Two words sprang to mind when I heard the name of my TD and his intention to step down at the next election — “selfish bastard”.

Given that the good doctor James McDaid's healthy income from the state allows him the very best of counsel, I perhaps had better explain.

In the summer of the last general election, I was in Kerry trailing Martin Ferris as part of a commission for *Magill* magazine.

While down in the Kingdom, Donegal's “minister for fun” was at the height of his powers.

He was sent on an expedition to Kerry North to remind voters there that voting for Sinn Féin, especially at the expense of Fianna Fáil, was not an option.

Had I not heard the following live on Radio Kerry, I would not have believed it.

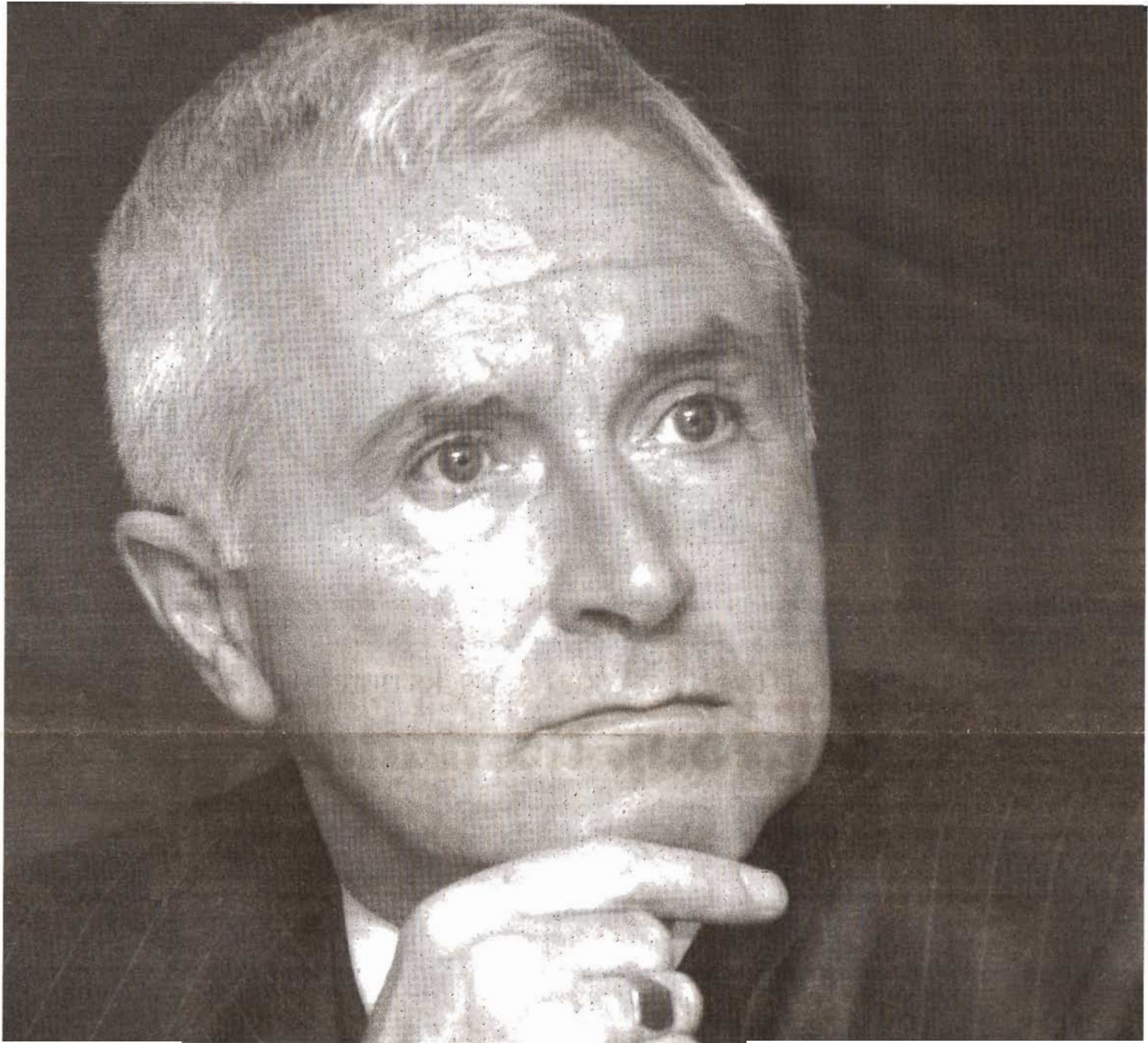
“What the people of north Kerry have to believe is that Fianna Fáil means money.”

To me, it seemed a hamfisted attempt to bludgeon people in a fiercely independent area.

He was perceived as “coming down from Dublin”. People in politics, of course, require political judgment. When the votes were counted in Tralee, Ferris was duly elected although at the expense of Labour rather than Fianna Fáil.

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I hadn't and she quickly informed me that she had been at a "youth conference" in the town the previous evening. McDaid had stood up during a discussion of youth suicide and blurted out that anyone who contemplated suicide was, and I quote: "a selfish bastard".

I contacted two other young people who I thought might have attended and they both confirmed to me without prompting that the talking point of the evening had been McDaid's outburst.

I took the scoop to Declan Lawn, the then editor of *Magill*. As is often the case with monthly publications, the issue was already put to bed.

So I took the story to the *Evening Herald* and it made the front page.

A dreary general election suddenly had a story. Fianna Fáil locally and nationally spun in opposite directions. Locally, the word on the street was "he didn't say it".

I was invited onto Joe Duffy's *Liveline* radio show, which took the Letterkenny line on this appalling gaffe.

I was asked if I had been at the meeting. No.

Was this a Sinn Féin stunt to discredit the minister? No.

How many people told me



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**PHIL
MAC GIOLLA
BHÁIN**

colfirmnists@dailyireland.com

independently that Minister McDaid had said this? Three.

The *Liveline* went dead.

He did say it.

End of spinning

In Dublin, the day after, Séamus Brennan swiftly admonished McDaid in no uncertain terms.

With the election safely over, Donegal's first cabinet minister in decades was demoted to a junior portfolio in the Department of Transport.

Around the same time, Brian Cowen, a man I personally admire, spoke to a private meeting of Fianna Fáil people in Dublin.

The leaked statement from the meeting, which was not contested, was that Cowen thought that "Fianna Fáil must divest itself of the mantle of corruption".

When the C word is used in regard to Fianna Fáil, people usually think of the definition as coined by Mr Justice Fergus Flood — Ray Burke, land deals, brown envelopes left on sideboards, offshore accounts.

There is, however, another definition of corruption. It is the corruption of the self brought about by the belief that you are untouchable.

Dominant party systems tend to throw up politicians who forget that they are answerable to the people.

The sad thing is that McDaid with a Fianna Fáil ticket would have been re-elected in Letterkenny next time around, such is the party's brand power in Co Donegal.

In my native Glasgow, the joke is: "Put a Labour rosette on a monkey in Glasgow and it would be elected."

In that sense, the electorate are wholly culpable for such politicians.

Much has been made of McDaid's alcohol addiction, marriage breakdown etc.

In my ten years in Letterkenny, my enduring sense of the people of the town was that there was a deep sympathy and understanding regarding his personal difficulties.

The west of Scotland had equipped me with every euphemism for mitigating and explaining someone's alcohol addiction. Donegal is no different.

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Such conflicting evidence did not seem to run along party lines. It did seem to be pot luck as to which Jim McDaid you would meet.

Diminutive, dapper and something of a ladies' man, he seems in retrospect a very high-risk choice for party managers. The same party managers must now pick his successor.

Privately, they must be kick-

ing themselves that Senator Joe McHugh went with his mother's Fine Gael side rather than his father's Independent Fianna Fáil.

Fianna Fáil managers are currently looking to Independent Fianna Fáil as a possible source of the next Fianna Fáil TD for the town.

Personally I think those managers might well experience a "Mary Lou moment" when the young senator from Carrigart upsets a lot of people's calculations, as he did in the council elections within his own party in 1999.

That is the future, McDaid is the past.

It is a shame that the suicide gaffe will probably be his defining moment, for his time in politics was not all bad.

On the plus side, McDaid's place at the cabinet table brought long overdue investment to the northwest.

Donegal should, of course, have got the investment as of right.

However, as anyone who has travelled on Albert Reynolds' bypass will tell you, it just doesn't work like that.