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McDonald can sit back as the government digs its own grave

The Dail returns next week with politicians focusing on the general election. It must be held no later than March 2025. As she returns to work after several months away from the political front line, what challenges face Mary Lou McDonald, the Sinn Fein president?

Political leaders are judged by election results. Everything else is secondary. In general elections, voters typically end up voting for continuity or change. Sinn Fein, and other parties of the left, will be campaigning hard for change. The government parties must argue for continuity.

The problem for the government parties is that Fine Gael has been continuously in government since 2011. That is a long time and many of its senior TDs have already decided to call it a day.

The outlook for Fianna Fail looks little better. Two of its ministers, Stephen Donnelly and Darragh O'Brien, occupy the key health and housing ministries but are overwhelmed by the challenges their departments represent.

The Green Party is dutifully rolling out its environmental programme, even in the face of voter resistance.

For McDonald, this political landscape calls to mind a comment by Napoleon Bonaparte, perhaps the finest military commander Europe has ever produced: "Never interrupt your enemy when he is making a mistake." As government parties make unconvincing attempts to persuade voters that they are doing a great job, Sinn Fein does not need to exert itself arguing the contrary: voters can judge government performance with their own eyes.

The catastrophically complacent performance on housing is a landmark example of this government's failures. In 2022, several years after a housing crisis had first been declared, there were just 29,822 dwelling completions even though the population grew last year by 88,800. No amount of bumptious buffoonery from minister O'Brien can make a silk purse out of this sow's ear.

McDonald and her party can just stand

back and wait for the apple of voter anger to ripen and fall into their hands.

Even the government's strongest card, the economy, sits on fragile foundations. The economy's spectacular statistical performance is not matched by individual life experiences. A key reason for this is that Ireland has the highest prices of any country in the European Union. Central Statistics Office data on actual individual consumption, adjusted for prices, puts Ireland below the EU average, behind Cyprus and Lithuania and ahead of Slovenia and Romania. We're not at the top of the EU table, merely mid-league.

The key challenges that McDonald now faces concern policy planning and candidate selection. On policy, the party needs convincing plans to dramatically boost housing output and to improve the management of the health services. It doesn't need to publish these plans: once in office, it simply must manage these areas demonstrably better than the current government.

Sinn Fein failed to run enough candidates at the last general election. But it is also clear that the party faces challenges finding uncontroversial candidates to run. Even though Sinn Fein had been warned about him, it still selected Jonathan Dowdall to run in the 2014 local elections in McDonald's own Dail constituency. It later emerged that he was actively involved in organised crime.

In 2020, Violet-Anne Wynne was elected in Clare to represent the party in the Dail. In 2016, the housing charity Rural Resettlement Ireland had obtained a court judgment for rent arrears of €12,126.40 owed by Wynne and her partner. In February 2022, Wynne resigned from Sinn Fein. She alleged that she was the victim of a campaign of "psychological warfare" from members of her local party, even though she did not have a problem with Sinn Fein TDs in the Dail.

With internal party management her priority for the next 18 months, don't be surprised to see McDonald take Napoleon at his word and keep a relatively low profile in the Dail over the coming months.

Poor government made Libya and Morocco disasters worse

Two natural disasters in North Africa have left thousands dead, obliterated villages and overwhelmed rescue efforts. In Morocco, the earthquake in the high Atlas mountains has killed at least 5,000 people and extinguished any hopes that anyone can still be pulled alive from the rubble. The flood in Libya has taken a far higher toll. Ten thousand people are missing and the death toll in Derna, the coastal town washed away by the breach of two nearby dams, may reach 20,000, according to aid agencies. In both countries, bureaucratic confusion and dysfunctional governments have made the disasters far worse: the United Nations has said that most of the flood deaths in Libya could have been avoided. Disease, hunger and more suffering are certain to follow.

The Libyan disaster was the result of Storm Daniel, in which 16 inches of rain – more than 260 times the monthly average – fell on parts of the coast in a single day. Derna is now all but inaccessible. Rescue efforts are hampered not only by the scale of the destruction but by the total lack of accountable authority. Libya is now, by almost any measure, a failed state.

The overthrow of Colonel Gaddafi, after 50 years in power, by the Nato-supported uprising in 2011 left the country adrift. There was no plan for government, no force to disarm the militias, no way to establish hope for a new democracy.

Britain, which with France led the western intervention under David Cameron's premiership, must take its share of the blame. Warring tribes, aided by Islamists, widened the long-standing split between the east and west of Libya. A

shaky but internationally recognised government is in place in Tripoli, but in Benghazi a rival government rules. An uneasy truce prevails, threatened by the intervention of Russian Wagner group mercenaries. The two sides have been unable to set a national response to the emergency.

This is of huge concern to Europe, and not only for humanitarian reasons. Libya is exporting terrorism, criminality and illegal migration across the Mediterranean. Almost all migrants from Africa and elsewhere are funnelled through Libya by gangs sending them north in flimsy vessels. The European Union has tried paying Libya to clamp down on migration. This has proven little better than danegeld.

Local deals have kept much of Libya's oil flowing, but there are no serious international attempts to restore Libya as a unified, functioning country.

To the west, Morocco has a properly constituted government but has capriciously limited aid offered by several nations, including France. Tensions have been growing over the bizarre behaviour of its king, Muhammad VI, a tired ruler who has come under the influence of a former criminal and his brother, and who spends much of his time in France and in a holiday house in Gabon. Bereft of royal authority, his government can make few decisions. The king even took his time to express his condolences to victims.

Natural disasters test any nation. But the suffering visited on the people of Libya has been exacerbated by the failure of the international community to bring order. Chaos there will inevitably make itself felt across the sea in Europe.

You can misquote me on that

Was it really the famously morose WB Yeats who said: "There are no strangers here; only friends you haven't met yet"? The quote appears on the medals produced for this year's Dublin Marathon, to mark the 100th anniversary of Yeats's Nobel prize for literature.

Fact-checker QuoteInvestigator.com traced the line to a 1961 Irish tourism promotion, while doubts about the origin of the quote made The New York Times quip: "The attribution cannot hold."

However, a spokeswoman for the event blithely shrugged off the controversy, saying that "the sentiment still stands", and there is, indeed, no proof that Yeats didn't say the words.

Nor, for that matter, can we be sure Samuel Beckett never said "may the road rise before you", that Patrick Kavanagh didn't say "may the wind be always at your back", or that James Joyce never said "may you be in Heaven half an hour before the Devil knows you're dead".

Brenda Power
In Vera Pauw and FAI's war of words, I trust her

Would a male football manager have been treated so disrespectfully?

Between them, Vera Pauw and Luis Rubiales have ensured that women's football has been making front-page headlines in this country all summer, for very different reasons – which have nothing to do with football, and everything to do with women.

Rubiales finally resigned last week after the player he kissed, without her consent, made a formal accusation of sexual assault. The sheer arrogance with which he held out for three weeks, portraying himself as a victim of "social assassination" and "false feminism", was alarming.

He truly believed he could get away with this behaviour by making it a gendered construct – that's women for you, now. To Rubiales, Jenni Hermoso was not an athlete who had more than earned his respect and deference. She was just a woman, hot and sweaty and standing in front of him in clingy shorts – what else was a red-blooded Spanish man to do?

It was, he said, a kiss he would have given his daughters, other subordinate females in his charge. Why not say it was a kiss he would have given any midfielder on the men's team? Because Hermoso's sex ultimately defined his treatment of her and should, his wounded protestations implied, have defined her response to it. She was a woman first, a victorious footballer second, and she would have done well to remember that.

And Pauw would have done well to remember it, too, when the FAI told her not to respond to a 7,000-word article in The Athletic that caused massive disruption to her preparations for the World Cup last July.

Parsing the association's explanation last week for Pauw's termination as head coach of the national women's side, her insistence on addressing the criticisms in the article against the FAI's "advice" was central to her undoing. Last week Jonathan Hill, the football body's chief executive, denied that he had advised her not to respond to it: "I wouldn't say to Vera, 'Don't do something.' You know Vera."

You'd wonder if the FAI did know Vera. Before Pauw's arrival, I suspect that the only Irish female footballer most casual sports fans could have named was Stephanie Roche, and only then because Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo were caught ogling her legs at the goal of the year awards in 2015. But it was clear from the outset that this feisty, charismatic, brutally frank and utterly authentic Dutchwoman was literally going to be a game-changer.

You didn't need to know Vera; all you had to do was watch her being interviewed, or read that startling tweet revealing that she'd been raped by a prominent Dutch football official 35 years ago, to realise that this was a woman who

● Why does RTE need to occupy "one of the most lucrative sites in western Europe", Patrick O'Donovan, a junior minister, wondered last week, "when Virgin Media can broadcast out of an industrial estate in Ballymount?" And it is arguable that the national broadcaster no longer needs such a central campus, since it has a Dail studio for political access and traffic to Donnybrook can be a nightmare. A hub off the M50, such as Ballymount, would make news crews more nimble when it came to responding to breaking stories around and outside the capital. Not, as we saw last week, that a prompt response to an apparently sensational incident is always best advised.

Virgin dispatched a news crew from Ballymount to Portmarnock beach after a local astrophysics enthusiast reported an apparent "meteor strike" which made a large round hole in the sand. So Virgin News decided to look into it, so to speak, and interviewed the amateur expert, who produced a large rock and confidently pointed out scorch marks made when it seared through the Earth's atmosphere. The discovery left the expert "totally shocked", he declared, but that was nothing to the surprise of the two men who'd spent the previous evening digging the hole with green plastic spades.

Look, it was a slow news week, all right, and it might have been a meteor, and if it had been a bigger meteor, say the size of a small car, it might have taken out all of north Dublin, and then you wouldn't be laughing and posting pictures of sandcastles on social media claiming to have found evidence of alien settlements. And it's good to know that, in the event of an alien landing/cosmic event, Virgin News will be far faster out of the blocks than those cautious sloths in Montrose.

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A show of support would have spiked the press corps' guns

wouldn't hold her whist. Especially not in the face of injustice.

If the FAI had had her back, it would have issued a statement dismissing The Athletic article as meddlesome rubbish that had the effect of derailing the Ireland team's preparations for their biggest challenge yet. Such a show of solidarity and support would have spiked the guns of the press corps by implicating them in the daft and flimsy allegations in the piece.

The most serious charge in the article was that Pauw, during her time as coach of Houston Dash, had "fat-shamed" a player who went on to develop an eating disorder. It is simply unimaginable that such an allegation would ever be made about male players and coaches – what's fat-shaming for sportswomen is merely dietary discipline for men. Oh, and she once made another player cry.

The FAI now says that the article, and Pauw's decision to respond to it, had become a distraction when, in reality, it was their lack of support that had made it so. And, from her account of her termination, the FAI positively seized on the piece.

When her failure to heed the FAI's advice about the article was raised at the final meeting, she says, she protested that the allegations were false. "And then it was said, 'False? Do we actually have a garda vetting of you, Vera?'" The FAI professes bewilderment at this exchange, but I believe her, and there's little doubt that this was a loaded question: as a disobedient woman, there was no knowing the extent of her maleficence. Who are you really, Vera? A stealthy danger to the poor helpless women in your care? A shape-shifting sorceress who has cunningly concealed her true nature? Or a straight-talking Dutch woman who doesn't do platitudes, pandering or people-pleasing?

The contrast with Pauw's summary dismissal and the indulgence shown to the men's manager, Stephen Kenny, between the FAI's treatment of its most successful women's team coach and an unsuccessful man in a corresponding role, is arguably unfair to Kenny. It's not that he has been treated more favourably – it seems inevitable that his contract won't be renewed either – but that Pauw has been treated markedly less so.

It may be said with hindsight that perhaps Kenny wasn't the best man for the job, but nobody can look at the performance of the Ireland women's team and deny that Pauw was the best manager they've had.

Maybe the FAI's biggest mistake was not putting Pauw in charge of the men's team in the first place – then nobody could possibly have been fat-shamed, nobody could have been triggered by her direct manner, and hardly anybody would have burst into tears. brenda.power@sunday-times.ie

Hadley Freeman
Coco Chanel shows us why fashion isn't floss

The designer caught the moment when women broke away from the home

The Chanel exhibition – which opened yesterday at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London – is great fun, as fashion exhibitions generally are. After all, looking at lovely dresses and imagining which you would wear in another life (a Chanel sequinned lounge suit? Chanel pyjamas?) is a lot more enjoyable than the usual museum fare of bones and thrones. But is that all it is?

Fashion exhibitions are often seen as the museum equivalent of superhero movies for cinemagoers: you'll get the crowds in, but not the highbrow credibility. It is safe to assume the Chanel exhibition was timed to coincide with the start of London Fashion Week, which, like fashion in museums, is largely treated as light relief. Something to cheer up the news amid all the stories of unemployment and war.

But where news editors see run-brightening, readers often see dumbing down: "This isn't news!" was the most common response to my hard-hitting article about whatever Sienna Miller or the Queen wore to the shows. To which I always mentally responded, "Actually, it's the only news and you are required to read it." It doesn't matter how often fashion writers reel out the facts of how many billions fashion contributes to the economy or how many hundreds of thousands of jobs it provides. It is still treated as meaningless candy floss. The Chanel exhibition is a good rebuttal to that, largely thanks to Gabrielle "Coco" Chanel herself, who in many ways exemplified – not always deliberately – how fashion should be seen. The V&A knows this, which is why it has emphasised her in the name of the show: *Gabrielle Chanel. Fashion Manifesto*. The curators make many references to how this tiny woman who grew up in rural France, raised by

nuns, invented the "modern woman's wardrobe", aka clothes women could wear without rib-breaking corsetry. Which is nice.

And then there's the Nazi stuff, which is less nice. Given that fashion magazines now claim to be so right-on, trumpeting about how inclusive they are (as long as the people being included are thin, young and conventionally attractive), there is a hilarious irony that this year's big fashion exhibition is celebrating Chanel, who shackled up with a Nazi during the war and spied for the Third Reich. Stick that in your inclusivity pipe and smoke it, Vogue.

She should have been tried for treachery after the war, but her old friend Winston Churchill intervened – possibly out of loyalty to his cousin and her former lover, Hugh Grosvenor, the Duke of Westminster, possibly to stop her from revealing those in the British upper classes who were similarly pro-Nazi. It was through that social set, incidentally, that Chanel discovered her love of tweed, which is still the label's signature fabric.

This has all been long known. The twist in this exhibition's tale is that Chanel was also in the French Resistance. The journalist Justine Picardie has unearthed a membership card that showed Chanel was in a branch of the Forces Françaises Combattantes. Whether

Chanel did as much work for the Resistance as she did for the Nazis is impossible to know, as the French Resistance was scattered and secretive, whereas the Nazis famously kept good records. Nonetheless, this discovery has been seized on gratefully by Chanel fans.

Some have suggested that this discovery shows how canny Chanel was, hedging her bets by backing both sides. I suspect that credits her with too much perspective. Political loyalties in Vichy France were, in some cases, confused to a degree that seems inexplicable now. When my great-uncle Alex escaped from the train taking him to a concentration camp, he was hidden in a village by a Vichy official, General Perré, for the simple reason that he liked Alex. After the war, Alex – who had lost much of his family – testified in Perré's defence (to no avail – Perré was punished for collaboration).

Another designer who exemplifies how jumbled things were in France was Chanel's contemporary Christian Dior. On the one hand his sister, Catherine, was such an energetic member of the Resistance that she was sent to Ravensbrück and only just survived. On the other, his niece, Françoise, took a liking to the Nazis and was later an enthusiastic neo-Nazi.

More than any other art form, fashion is a great sociological record: it captures how people really live, because everyone wears clothes every day. In her work, Chanel caught the post-suffragette moment when women became liberated from corsets and needed to look smart out of the house. In her life, she embodied the mess of France's wartime record, as well as the spirit one needed to live and thrive as an unmarried woman in the early 20th century. The story of Chanel is as fascinating as the times in which she lived. Plus, darling, the clothes are fabulous.

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Chanel shackled up with a Nazi, but also joined the Resistance