

Look Up

Malachy Clerkin

Redacted emails show FAI would rather look bad than be transparent

There were long stretches of Thursday's Public Accounts Committee meeting where the only conclusion a reasonable person could draw was that the FAI didn't care how bad this all looked. That they had made a determination – get through the morning and by lunchtime the outside world would have moved on. Survive the news cycle and hopefully something will break to distract people.

(RTÉ: "Don't worry, lads – we've got you covered.")

The only thing that links every scandal in every walk of life is that they all eventually come to an end. If you are in the centre of it, you generally have two ways of getting to the other side. The first is to come out and explain everything and get it over with. The second is to run out the clock, in the sure knowledge that people will get bored with hearing about you.

Which option did the FAI choose here? Let's judge them by their behaviour. In doing so, it's worth reminding ourselves what the core issue was. Chief executive Jonathan Hill was paid for 12 days of holidays that he didn't take. He has since repaid the money, in the region of €11,500, to the association. While it is by no means insignificant – especially since it resulted in €6.7 million of Sport Ireland funding to the FAI being withheld for a time – it's not exactly Watergate.

Dimmest possible view

Even if you take the dimmest possible view of Hill's actions and you decide that he deliberately pursued a nice little end-of-year bump to his salary – which he denies, to be clear – it's probably still survivable. A bit grubby and depressingly grasping given that he's already on over a quarter of a million quid a year. But even

in that hypothetical, it needn't have been overly difficult to style it out.

And if you take them at their word, it should be even easier still. By their account, this was incompetence rather than conspiracy. Hill made a joke in an email, it landed on the desks of finance people who didn't know it was a joke, the wheels were put in motion without the chief executive knowing. Crossed wires, a lack of clarity, an overpayment that everyone agrees shouldn't have been made. Once the mistake was discovered, Hill made it right.

So in effect, the FAI's position is that this whole thing was a case of them accidentally colouring outside the lines, one they tidied up in short order without any lasting damage having been done. If that's what happened, it's a positively quaint entry in the association's history. Previous iterations of the FAI would have

given up at least two Poland friendlies a year to get entangled in such a benign class of a balls-up.

You would think, therefore, that explaining the sequence of events to an Oireachtas committee ought to have been a walk in the park. Hill's opening statement on Thursday should have taken all of 20 seconds to read out: "Listen lads, we don't need to be wasting anyone's time here. This happened, it's our fault, we feel a bit silly about it in all honesty. Here are all the emails, these are all the people you need to talk to, ask us anything you want. We have nothing to hide."

Instead, here's how the FAI approached it. They began by asking for the date to be pushed back. When that was denied to them, they broke with parliamentary convention by delivering their submissions at 11.28pm on the night before a 9.30am meeting.

Key witnesses

When they did provide them, vast portions of their correspondence were redacted and therefore useless to the committee. When they arrived for the meeting, they did so without two key witnesses – their former finance director and director of people and culture. It seemed unfair on both, but it was the FAI's choice to play it that way.

Once the committee hearing began, Hill's approach was maddening to the politicians (who, it should be said, generally did their job with a commendable lack of grandstanding). The FAI chief made out that he had nothing to hide while at the same time doing very little to give light to the things he claimed not to be trying to hide.

He copped to making the initial request but claimed it was meant as a joke. He thereafter washed his hands entirely of the process and claimed that his only interaction was to answer an email at the



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end of the year asking how many days of holidays he had left to take. He said the next thing he knew of it was 10 weeks later when he was informed that the association had decided to pay him in lieu.

Here's the best-case scenario news for the FAI. Put all of the above facts together

and they look like a laughing stock. They look like a shower of eejits who can't find their asses with both hands. They look like a clown show who are so incompetent with the people's money that they can't be trusted not to take a joke so literally that they dole out a grand day to their chief executive without him knowing about it.

The worst-case scenario is that people just don't buy it. It's that they add all the obfuscations and the redactions and the nothing-to-do-with-me-guys together and decide that the FAI aren't being open and honest here. It's that they form the view that if the FAI can't be transparent about small potatoes like this, it doesn't bode well for bigger stuff in the future.

Taxpayer money

Only last June, the FAI set out a chronically necessary facilities plan that would require an injection of €517 million of taxpayer money across the next 15 years. They need the confidence of the Government now more than ever. Oddly, they could have used the Hill overpayment to grow that confidence – look at us, we made a mistake and we were the best boys in class about publicly doing all we could to fix it.

But by getting lawyered up to the teeth, by citing confidentiality, by trying to delay and hide the facts of the thing, they had to know they would look incredibly bad. To the public, to the Oireachtas, to everyone paying attention. And yet they did it anyway.

It is entirely reasonable to wonder why. What could they not reveal that was worth taking such a big reputational hit over such a minor scandal at such a crucial time?

If the answer lies behind the black lines on those emails, the FAI would be wise to start unredacting them as quickly as possible. Otherwise, this one might not go away as easily as they think.

Women's soccer International friendly

Gleeson pleased with 'solid performance' in Florence

Mary Hannigan

Draw against Italians proved Ireland belonged at the top level, says head coach

Seven games, six wins, one draw. Eileen Gleeson might be forgiven if she'd started thinking that this international management lark is a walk in a park, but with the challenges ahead mighty ones, she's not losing the run of herself.

Still, she was chuffed with her Republic of Ireland side holding a team ranked 10 places above them to a scoreless draw in their own back yard, on a rainy night in Florence, in what was her first game since her appointment as Vera Pauw's permanent successor following that interim spell at the helm. Not least because her charges had to adapt to a different formation to the one they used in their all-conquering Nations League campaign last year.

"It was a very solid performance, I'm proud of the girls," she said. "We changed to a back four to see how that looked, and they adapted really well, they went toe to toe with Italy. And we want to be adaptable, we don't want to be tied to any formation. We were still aggressive, we were able to push the full-backs up high, and I think we showed tonight that we belong at the top level."

Potential

"For me, that performance just shows how this team has really developed. Over the last few years they've become hard to beat, but I think in terms of potential, they wanted to express themselves a bit more creatively and play a bit higher up the pitch. I think that they've shown that they can do that."

"Of course there's things to work on, but it's really promising. The talent pool is getting deeper, we're getting more options, we've got some very good young players coming through, we've got more play-

ers playing in higher level leagues and fully professional. It's a really positive time for the team. We wanted to be in League A, we're there – and I think we've shown tonight that we certainly belong there."

It was a game of limited thrills, but in the absence of several key players, among them centre-half Louise Quinn and three of Gleeson's top-of-the-shelf midfielders, Denise O'Sullivan, Tyler Tolland and Sinead Farrelly, as well as Jamie Finn, who suffered an anterior cruciate ligament injury in training on Thursday, she had to ring the changes.

Qualifying game

She was, at least, able to welcome Niamh Fahey, Jess Ziu and Jessie Stapleton back in to the fold, Ziu making her first appearance for Ireland since the World Cup qualifying game against Slovakia in September 2022, the month before she suffered an ACL injury when playing for West Ham. And Leanne Kiernan returned too after another lengthy spell on the sidelines, coming on in the second half having not played for Ireland since last June.

"Leanne's lightning pace causes trouble for everybody and anybody, it's great to have her back. Amber [Barrett] wasn't in the last camp, she's in tonight. She comes on, she has a really strong impact. It makes it more competitive, it keeps people on their toes and it gives us a lot more options."

Should Kiernan's "goal" have stood? "It was super tight," said Gleeson, but she conceded that she didn't have a close-up view of the moment she was deemed offside, and with no VAR on duty, she was left none the wiser.

Next up for Gleeson and her team is the visit of Wales to Tallaght on Tuesday for another friendly. After that, they have one more week to go before the draw for their Euro 2025 qualifying campaign is made. With one of world champions Spain, France, Germany and the Netherlands guaranteed to be in their group, things are about to get a whole lot trickier. The walk in the park is done and dusted.



Valuable outing for Ireland against Italy despite no goals



Gavin Cummiskey Reports

Fixture in Florence marks the return of several key players from injury

Italy**Republic of Ireland**

No fear. Not from this Republic of Ireland side, not in Florence, or anywhere else.

Italy created the better chances at Viola Park but Leanne Kiernan's second-half goal was ruled offside by the Albanian officials as the opening international of 2024 finished scoreless.

Nonetheless, it was a valuable outing, just to witness Ire-

land hold pace with a football nation ranked 14th in the world. And to see the return of several key players from injury. Kiernan, Jess Ziu, Niamh Fahey and Aoife Mannion in particular.

Unfortunate happenstance

An unfortunate happenstance seconds before kick-off occurred when Minister for Sport Catherine Martin bumped the women's team off their advertised RTÉ television slot, on the News Now channel, as the Green Party TD was asked if she would step down in the wake of RTÉ chairwoman Siún Ní Raghallaigh's resignation.

The game's absence from the main channels is down to the Six One news and unmovable juggernauts, The Simpsons and Home and Away, on RTÉ Two. When the Minister stepped off the Leinster House plinth, the game was 15 minutes old.

Ireland adopted a new formation, with injury to Louise Quinn prompting a back four as Katie McCabe and Jessie Stapleton started on either side of Caitlin Hayes and Fahey.

McCabe plays right back for Arsenal. Well, she does, and she doesn't. The Gunners Galactico squad encourages wide players to raid forward and fill space others vacate.

The Irish captain will struggle to add to her 26 international goals in the position but it showcases her technique in tight spots.

Also, McCabe took the defensive shackles off Izzy Atkinson. Atkinson is an athletic winger and left West Ham for Crystal Palace in search of game time. She can't stop scoring for Palace, so her selection was warranted here.

Atkinson understands the Irish system Eileen Gleeson and former Cork City manager Colin Healy are implementing. She ran directly at the Azzurre Femminile, particularly Juventus's Sara Gama on the occasion of her 140th and final cap. Gama retired in the 49th minute, getting a James McClean send-off from the Fiorentina crowd.

This is why friendlies should be outlawed: the Italian team halted play, with floods of tears to embrace their skipper. Christian Girelli took the armband when the game resumed.

With Atkinson showing well down the left, the right side looked lopsided as Heather Payne and Jess Ziu got in each other's way. Ziu had been missing since 2022 after suffering an ACL tear. She took the Denise O'Sullivan slot, but Italy squeezed the centre so Ziu drift-

ed right to good effect.

Not that the hosts had it all their own way. FAI director of football Marc Canham keeps talking about Irish sides having a certain DNA. A high-energy, collective pursuit of possession that chimes with the great

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Italy's world ranking

26

Ireland captain Katie McCabe's international goals tally

nights in Irish football history.

In Florence, that reappeared in the form of a hectic, high press as Atkinson and Ziu backed up Kyra Carusa, who hassled the first Italian to take possession off goalkeeper Katja Schroffenegger.

Carusa had a half-sight of goal early on, but the best chance of the first stanza fell to Martina Piemonte. Courtney Brosnan was almost lobbed by

her Everton team-mate when Stapleton allowed Piemonte goal side. She dinked the ball over the Irish goalie but it dropped wide.

Nil-all at the break, Gleeson made five changes before the 70th minute as Amber Barrett and Kiernan brought renewed energy to the contest.

Blind pass

Almost immediately, they should have combined for a goal as Kiernan's fast break needed a blind pass into the box for Barrett to finish. Italy survived this, and a follow-up shot by Lucy Quinn rolled wide.

That wasn't the clearest Irish chance of the game, mind. Barrett was cut from the squad last year but her value remains undimmed. On the next play, she cut a low cross to the back post for Kiernan to finish.

As the Liverpool striker wheeled away, the offside flag spoiled a special moment. Tight call. VAR would have been interesting.

The build-up deserves a mention as Heather Payne and Quinn squeezed Ireland downfield before Barrett found Kiernan.

Others made an impact. Mannion defended well on return from knee trouble and Abbie Larkin appeared to twist and

■ **The Republic of Ireland's Amber Barrett in action against Italy at Viola Park in Florence.** PHOTOGRAPH: GIUSEPPE FAMA/INPHO

nutmeg Azzura, almost at will. Now it's just a matter of fitting all these attackers into the same starting XI.

Ireland will take 0-0, especially after Michela Catena blazed over a late chance with only Brosnan to beat.

Must be the luck Gleeson has brought as head coach. That's seven games in charge now, six wins and a draw with Italy, scoring 20 and conceding two.

The unbeaten streak can continue when Wales come to Tallaght on Tuesday night.

ITALY: K Schroffenegger; S Gama, C Salva, E Linari; B Glonina, A Galli, G Greggi, E Oliveira; M Piemonte, C Girelli, G Dragoni. **Subs:** A Bonfantini, B Bonansea, E Bartoli, E Severini, M Catena, A Caruso
REPUBLIC OF IRELAND: Brosnan (Everton); Stapleton (Reading); Hayes (Celtic); Fahey (Liverpool); McCabe (Arsenal); Payne (Everton); Connolly (Bristol City); Littlejohn (London City Lions); Atkinson (Crystal Palace); Ziu (West Ham United); Carusa (San Diego Wave). **Subs:** Lucy Quinn (Birmingham City); for Littlejohn (half-time); Kiernan (Liverpool); for Atkinson, Barrett (Standard Liege); for Carusa (both 61); Larkin (Crystal Palace); for Ziu, Agg (Birmingham City); for Stapleton (both 65); Mannion (Manchester United); for Payne.
Referee: Emanuela Rusta (Albania).



■ Republic of Ireland Ireland assistant coaches Colin Healy and Emma Byrne with head coach Eileen Gleeson. PHOTOGRAPH: GIUSEPPE FAMA