

**ARTICLE FOR SUNDAY INDEPENDENT  
BY MICHAEL MC DOWELL S.C.**

Last Sunday, Ireland received a 3:1 drubbing from Croatia in Poznan. As we now know, worse was yet to come. But I am not writing this to add to the tsunami of comment on our footballer's Euro Cup experiences.

The following morning, as I picked up my papers at the hall door, I was struck (and a little bit disappointed) to see that the Irish Independent had decided to devote its main story to the fact that Seán Fitzpatrick, the former Chairman of Anglo Irish Bank, had attended the Poznan match.

My initial reaction was that whatever view one had of Mr. Fitzpatrick, it was hardly front page news that he, like thousands of others from Ireland, had travelled to Poland to support the national soccer team. It isn't a crime for him to do so. He is not in some form of internal exile. Whatever view one takes of Anglo Irish Bank and his role in it (and I have strong views on that subject), he has not been prosecuted for any criminal offences arising out of his stewardship of that bank and is, accordingly, free to travel to Poland.

I read down through the front page newspaper story and two further features of the article caught my eye. One of them was the statement that Mr. Fitzpatrick was staying overnight in a €550 per room per night luxury hotel in Poznan.

The second item that caught my eye was the statement that he was seen in the company of P. J. Mara, whom I know.

My reaction, reading the story, was that it was possible that Seán Fitzpatrick had been given a gift by a relative or friend of a trip to Poznan and that he had casually bumped into other Irish people with whom he was acquainted when he came under the notice of the Irish Independent reporters.

I still didn't think that the story merited front page coverage in a national newspaper and my view on that matter hasn't changed.

On Tuesday morning, I saw the same story covered as the front page main item in the Irish Daily Mirror.

However, this time, the Irish Daily Mirror's article claimed that Seán Fitzpatrick has spent the night in the company of Denis O'Brien and it claimed that Mr. Fitzpatrick and Mr. O'Brien had both been guests at the Sheraton Hotel.

Again, if Mr. O'Brien and Mr. Fitzpatrick are friends, there is nothing wrong or improper in them sharing each others company.

Indeed, it is likely that Denis O'Brien must have had a long-standing acquaintanceship or friendship with Seán Fitzpatrick given that he and his companies had borrowed €833.8 million from Anglo Irish Bank at the time when it was nationalised (an indebtedness which has been progressively reduced to under €500 million and, according to an Irish Independent story is due to be further reduced to €300 million this year as part of "*an extensive, agreed debt repayment plan*" with IBRC (the successor to Anglo Irish Bank).

If Denis O'Brien was the friend who was paying for Seán Fitzpatrick's presence in Poznan and, perhaps, providing him with transport there, then surely that was as newsworthy a piece of information as the fact that P. J. Mara was seen in his company in Poznan on the same evening.

If the Irish Independent and the Irish Daily Mirror are content to fan the flames of "*public anger*" by keeping tabs on Seán Fitzpatrick, that is their prerogative. It does not make all of his movements newsworthy.

But if his movements are newsworthy, the question that arises in my mind is as to whether the Irish Independent, who covered the matter on Monday, were aware of the involvement of Denis O'Brien in the story.

It strikes me as strange that they would have noticed P. J. Mara socialising with Mr. Fitzpatrick in Poznan but not have spotted Denis O'Brien doing the same, if the Irish Daily Mirror story is true.

If indeed the Irish Independent were in possession of the same facts as the Irish Daily Mirror, the question arises as to why P. J. Mara was selected for mention as socialising with Mr. Fitzpatrick and Denis O'Brien was not mentioned in the same context.

Of course, the true explanation may be that the Irish Independent sources in Poznan were unaware of Mr. O'Brien's presence there. But if the Irish Daily Mirror story is true, they must have become aware of the presence of their major shareholder on the occasion by Tuesday.

By then, the "*public interest*" or "*public anger*" angle of the story had developed to warrant some further inquiries, one might have imagined.

No mention of the Irish Daily Mirror story was made on RTE and, as far as I can see, no follow up coverage appeared in any other newspaper. Maybe I should relax and rejoice in the fact that some of our newspapers are adopting a more mature editorial policy about Mr. Fitzpatrick's movements. Or maybe I shouldn't!