

## Oligarchy Now?

We live in a Republic in which all citizens are regarded as equal in the eyes of the law. All Irish citizens owe the Irish state what Article 9 of the Constitution describes as a fundamental duty of loyalty. We do not live in some kind of post-communist Russian oligarchy where the great and the bad pose as the great and the good, live off-shore and pay no Russian taxes, and seek to control and manipulate the media and to influence democratically elected politicians like puppeteers.

Or so it seemed until this week.

This week marks the anniversary of the Moriarty Tribunal Report and the publication of the Mahon Tribunal Report. It also marks the anniversary of the present Fine Gael-Labour coalition with the greatest majority in the state opposed in the Dail by a weak and fragmented kaleidoscope of multi-coloured shards.

Does this week mark a new departure in terms of public standards and accountability? Read on.

We now understand, thanks to the Mahon report, that even the highest office in the democratic system, that of Taoiseach, can be captured and exploited for improper purposes in a way that betrays us all.

We look to the holder of that office to demonstrate clearly and beyond contradiction that the lessons of Moriarty and Mahon have been learned and taken to heart.

On Monday, as part of his St Patrick's festival US trip, the Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, knowing well that the Mahon report was imminent, took to the balcony of the New York Stock Exchange for the ritual ceremony that provides a good photo-opportunity to convey the message internationally that Ireland is "back in business".

He did so in the company of Denis O'Brien, a man who was found by the Moriarty Tribunal to have spent years attempting to funnel hundreds of thousands of pounds in a clandestine way into the hands of Michael Lowry, who as we know was a member of the same Government as Enda Kenny when he last sat at the Cabinet table.

The event was sponsored by Irelandinc, an organisation sharing its address with a number of other businesses owned by Denis O'Brien. It was, in short, effectively a Denis O'Brien sponsored event. Ian Hyland, editor of Business and Finance, was centre-stage on the balcony. I had not appreciated until I attended the recent Business & Finance Awards in the National Conference Centre that Business and Finance too had been swept into the slipstream of Denis O'Brien who featured heavily in the very glitzy event – a tour de force for a publication which had very precarious finances until recently.

If this week is the new beginning in terms of political standards and accountability, we are in very, very serious trouble already.

If Enda Kenny has not read the Moriarty Report (and I genuinely suspect that he only skimmed through it), he had better read it now – slowly and carefully.

No Taoiseach with decent personal standards (which I still think Enda has) could have both carefully read the Moriarty Report and stood on a balcony at the NYSE as the effective public guest of Denis O'Brien in the week that marked the anniversary of Moriarty and the week when Mahon was to be published.

It isn't as if all this happened by accident. Barry Maloney, a decent honourable man who had been in the past a fellow-promoter of Esat- Digiphone and whose evidence to the effect that O'Brien had confessed his intentions to make payments to Minister Lowry was accepted by the Moriarty Tribunal, had made public his unhappiness that Enda Kenny's Government had invited Denis O'Brien to participate at the Dublin Castle Economic Forum last year. He publicly declined to attend the event on that account. He wrote to Enda Kenny to tell him so.

And if you check back on the Dail debate on the Moriarty Report, there are hints that Enda Kenny and current Fine Gael ministers have not fully taken the report on board.

This week too, the Financial Times reports that Denis O'Brien plans to use the INM AGM in June to assume control of the company in concert with Dermot Desmond.

If that happens, a broad swathe of Ireland's media, including national and regional papers and national broadcasters, will have fallen into the hands of Ireland's Oligarchs. We are in danger of going the way of Putin's Russia or Berlusconi's Italy. Very wealthy men who don't like Tribunals or their reports, and who have adopted foreign residence to avoid paying our taxes, will dominate our media.

A recent Seanad debate about the media revealed that Pat Rabbitte, the Minister with responsibility for the media, reads and sometimes enjoys what I write in this paper.

On Thursday's Primetime, Pat Rabbitte was clearly very uncomfortable when asked about the implications of the balcony scene on Wall Street. He loyally extolled Enda Kenny's personal standards. But he studiously avoided the elephant in the room.

The Denis O'Brien issue is not going away for Pat Rabbitte or for Enda Kenny. There is still a small but influential clique in Fine Gael that has a hankering for mending fences with Michael Lowry and adopting Denis O'Brien as their cheer-leader. They know who they are.

We may well hear justified criticism from Government Ministers of those Fianna Fail ex-Ministers who attacked the Mahon Tribunal. They might pause to consider the invective from O'Brien and Desmond against Moriarty.

The time has come for a clear media ownership policy and law to save us from becoming a Jurassic Park dominated by our very own Russian Oligarchs.

Owning football clubs, paying Trappatoni's salary, sponsoring Frontline journalism, running Irelandinc – these are all very well.

But the Oligarchs are not buying into newspapers as sound commercial investments or as trophy assets.

O'Brien is losing on his INM investment. Desmond must have a reason other than dividends for building up his INM portfolio.

Their motive, I think, is influence and control of public debate. Sam Smyth's fate is instructive and is a warning.

This is where Pat Rabbitte and Eamon Gilmore come in. They lead the second party in Government. They have departmental responsibility for the media.

If FG is content to politically rehabilitate O'Brien and hand over the bulk of our media to Oligarchs with records such as these, so be it.

If Labour is content for us to go down the road towards the puppet democracies of Putin and Berlusconi, God help us all.

The Oligarchs are waiting in the wings.