

IT'S INDEPENDENCE DAY



She was a stalwart member of the Green Party, serving as an MEP for 10 years. Now, thoroughly disillusioned with the party's performance in Government with Fianna Fail, **PATRICIA MCKENNA** has decided to leave – and to run as an independent in the upcoming European elections. In a remarkable interview, she lifts the lid on life inside the party and accuses the leadership of being hypocrites and opportunists. **WORDS Jason O'Toole**

As political bombshells go, this is a big one. In a move that will inevitably send shockwaves through the Green Party, Patricia McKenna is quitting the party and running as an independent candidate in Dublin in the upcoming European elections, *Hot Press* can exclusively reveal.

The Greens have every reason to be shaken by the news. Given the level of public discontent with the current government, of which the Green Party is part, Patricia McKenna has every chance of causing an upset and recapturing the seat she first won in 1994 when she made political history by topping the poll, becoming Ireland's first ever Green MEP. Back in 2007, McKenna contested the leadership of the Greens, won by John Gormley, and garnered a respectable 36% of votes. It is conceivable that those disillusioned Greens, who voted for McKenna's anti-coalition stance back then, could support her now. Either way, McKenna's decision to run will split the Green vote and could ultimately scupper the party's chances of regaining the European seat. McKenna held the seat for an impressive ten years, before losing in it 2004 – though she attracted 9.4% of first preferences at the time.

While McKenna has been widely perceived as an honest and straight-talking politician, she has up until now held her tongue on many issues in an effort not to upset her now ex-party colleagues. However, she has decided to use the *Hot Press* Interview as a forum to announce her decision to leave the Greens. What follows will inevitably make uncomfortable reading for her erstwhile party colleagues...

JASON O'TOOLE: Why are you leaving the Greens and running as an independent candidate?

PATRICIA MCKENNA: I was deluding myself, thinking that things are going to change within the Greens. I feel embarrassed about being a member

of the Green Party because of what we said in the past and the promises we made, which we failed to deliver on. My relationship with the Green Party is over now – that's it. It's a part of my life that is gone – finished – and I have to look at where to go from here. I have over 10 years experience working as an MEP and would like to offer that to the electorate and to work on their behalf again.

Why did you wait until now to announce your intent to run as an independent?

I thought long and hard about this decision. I want to provide voters with an alternative. I feel it's important. It's the start of a new beginning for me. I was genuinely considering putting my name forward to run for the Greens – I've put half my life into the party – but the more I thought about it, the more I realised it wasn't going to work. I just knew that I couldn't run under a Green Party ticket and pretend that everything was alright because I'd be lying. I withheld going public until I was sure I could get everything in place and until I had discussed my decision with some key people, whose advice I value.

The majority of the Green Party members – including those in government – are going to hear about you running as an independent through this *Hot Press* interview. What do you think their reaction will be?

I reckon they will be glad to see the back of me as I'm an uncomfortable reminder of what they used to be! I'm sure Fianna Fail wouldn't like to see me elected (*laughs*) because it would be problematic for them. If I had been elected when they were negotiating to go into government things would have been very different – there was no way I would ever have accepted what happened.

Are you saying that people wanted to get rid of you?

I would say a lot of them in there (in government) do. In relation to John Gormley, I don't know. We were friends and I liked the guy. But John has got his own agenda now. He's leader of the party and a Minister. But overall I would say they'll be glad

to get rid of me because I keep reminding them of the promises they have reneged on. They'd prefer if everybody just went along with what's going on. It's a bit like a religious convert. The Greens have converted to the type of spin politics they were always so critical of and now they are more zealous than the rest – one dare not criticise.

Are you expecting that there will be attempts at so-called "dirty tricks" campaigns against you?

Yes. Everything that I might have done wrong or said will be thrown up – and more! Things I didn't do or say! I fear there will be a huge attack on me.

By the Greens?

They have the wherewithal to mount such an attack and I reckon they will be getting advice from their new buddies. I am not looking forward to that. But maybe they will do the right thing and accept that I have valid reasons for my criticism and departure.

Paul Gogarty recently said that you didn't have a strong voice in the party.

I totally disagree. You must remember that I polled nearly 36% of members' votes when I contested the leadership contest. I reckon that because they allowed people to vote by phone and fax for John (Gormley) on the morning of the vote, it might really have been closer to 40%. A colleague of mine, who was in the party at the time, was there for that count and reckoned the same thing. She wasn't happy with that procedure.

Are you trying to suggest that there were irregularities?

No. I just think those votes by phone and fax were crucial in pushing me back down from around 40% to 36%. I wasn't going to win it, but even 36% against all the odds – against the party machinery – was a great vote.

The Greens are saying they want to recapture the European Parliament seat they held in Dublin for 10 years. There's no mention of the fact that you won that seat for them.

I'm written out of history (*laughs*). I feel it's



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important the electorate have an alternative to vote for. One of the constructive things I was able to do in the European Parliament, from a Green point of view, was highlighting Ireland's noncompliance with EU legislation and EU laws on the environment. If a Green Party member gets in, that is not going to happen now because they will be told, 'Don't rock the boat - we're in government! You can't be highlighting the government's failures!' MEPs who are in a party that is not part of the government are good at highlighting their own government's failure to comply with environmental laws. But when those governments change in those countries - and the Greens get into power as a part of a coalition - then the MEPs back off because they've been told by their party leader at home, 'Look, your party colleague is Minister for the Environment and you cannot embarrass us!' So, therefore you need independent people to highlight Ireland's noncompliance.

Have the Greens achieved many of their election promises while in government?

Not on the issues we really campaigned about, like Shannon, Tara and the Shell to Sea campaign. The area of climate change/energy issues is the only thing still on the agenda for the Greens. But we knew that the problems with climate change were going to get so enormous that the Government could no longer ignore it. It's the same in every country in Europe - whether the Greens are in government or not. And it's the same in other parts of the world. The Greens are taking credit for things that were already in the pipeline as a result of EU Directives. While Eamon Ryan is very clever at claiming ownership of all this, it's clear that we have to do it anyway.

You really believe the Greens have sold out?

I do. There's a huge number of issues that we campaigned on and were meant to have prioritised that have been pushed to one side. It's the betrayal of the electorate that is difficult for me. In the past,

you could trust the Greens. You could say: they're committed, and they'll stick to what they believe in. For me, that was fundamental. We weren't going to abandon our principles just for the sake of getting hold of some power. But that's exactly what we've done. We've done more damage to politics than other parties because of the fact that we were on this pedestal. We were seen as something unique - a party that could be trusted. And the suddenly, people realised the Greens can't be trusted either. Even back at the time of the last European Elections I was told to back off on some core green issues, such as animal welfare and our failure to comply with EU environmental law. Indeed, I was instructed in writing not to raise the issue of Ireland's failure to comply with the EU's Nitrates Directive - even though it was party policy and supported by the Greens in Europe - because I might upset the farmer vote!

One of your former Green colleagues Paul Gogarty recently said in this magazine that the Greens are prostituting themselves by being in government with Fianna Fail.

Well, I wouldn't use the language that Paul used! But what Paul said is correct. The terminology of prostitution is basically that you sell yourself for money. In our case, it's money and power. I wouldn't mind if we had the power and were using it to achieve some change. But I can see nothing. We were always strong on the issue of ethics in politics and respect for the taxpayers' money. Yet now we have a situation where TDs are given extra bonuses just because they're in there (the Dail) so many years. We get rid of a few junior ministers and we give them massive golden handshakes of over 50 grand! Then you have all the chairs of committees in the Dail getting 20 grand a year for the privilege! When I was in the European Parliament, the chairs of all the committees and vice presidents and presidents - they did not get extra money for it. It was a privilege and

honour to do it. But in Ireland, it's got nothing to do with privilege and honour - it's got to do with how much money can you rip out of the system.

What did you make of Gogarty resigning from his position as Green spokesperson on education but remaining as chair of a government committee on education?

Any Green chairing a committee should say, 'On principle we will not accept this payment'. And put it up to the others that they shouldn't be accepting it either. They should forfeit that money. Look at education - it was one of our biggest issues at the last General Election. We made serious promises in relation to education and we turned out back on that. We said we were going to prioritise children. We even used children in our party political broadcast. And then we turn our backs on them! I remember speaking at public meetings on the issue of education and saying, 'The only ones you could really trust are the Greens'. I genuinely feel that people listening to me believed it - and now I feel like I let everybody down. Our policy was excellent but abandoning it appears to be the price we made to have a junior and two senior ministers.

Prior to becoming Minister for Communications, Energy and National Resources, Eamon Ryan was involved in protests organised by the Shell to Sea Campaign.

Eamon was a prominent Shell to Sea campaigner and publicly critical of the Corrib Gas project before he went into government. We had a message on our party website urging all members to support and join the Shell to Sea campaign. The Rosspoint Five, who went to prison, were guests at our annual convention and we gave them a standing ovation and promised to fight their case. But we just abandoned them. We even adopted a resolution promising what we would do for them in Government. Eamon Ryan raised concerns about the fact that the Government constantly took Shell's side. Now he is

the Government Minister responsible for the project and the deal remains the same – with Ireland having no control over the gas, with Shell being able to sell the gas to the highest bidder and the State getting no royalties. It beggars belief that in the current recession Eamon is accepting this giveaway gas deal and not demanding a renegotiation.

These things are often far harder to do than it appears from the outside....

Look, I really don't know how Eamon can live with himself after all his promises. Eamon has an incredible gift of sounding positive and he inspires people and gives them hope but what good is that if he does not follow through? He should hang his head in shame because he gave people false hope and inspired them in their fight, only to leave them high and dry once he got the power to do something for them. It's incredible to think the Greens are on the sides of the big multinationals and those who are exploiting our resources.

What are you talking about?

In the area of wind energy, small individual developers have been forced to sell their interests to big corporations. Ireland's energy security can only be guaranteed through ownership of our own energy, but if the Minister does not wake up to this, soon it will be too late and even the profits from our wind will be going into the pockets of big business – most of which will be foreign owned. And this is happening on the Greens watch. I think it's crazy.

Were some of the Government Ministers also involved in the Shannon protests?

I was down in Shannon a few months ago for a conference on the anniversary of the invasion of Iraq. I was making transport arrangements to go down with some of the anti-Shannon protestors and somebody said to me, 'Why don't you ask John Gormley – we gave him a lift down the last time (laughs)! Ring up his office and see what time he's going down at?!' And I said, 'Yeah, right!' John and Eamon and Trevor – they were all there, you know? – protesting. Now they've forgotten all about the protestors – and the issues.

What you are claiming here in effect is that John Gormley has lost all credibility as a politician.

I really hate saying it, but yes. He once strongly criticised Michael McDowell as being the Tammy Wynette of Irish politics! 'Stand By Your Man!' And then he turned around and he was the Tammy Wynette of the Green Party, standing by Bertie. John has ended up behaving exactly the same as Michael McDowell. I have to point this out: many members of the party were outraged at the cuts in funding to the Equality Authority. However, John Gormley told us that he had succeeded in having the cuts and changes to the Equality Authority reversed. At our Annual Convention he said, 'I'm very glad to report to you this evening that we have succeeded in our mission'. But a question to the Minister in the Dail revealed that this is not the case at all. So either John was playing us for fools or Fianna Fail is playing him for a fool. Either way it's just not acceptable.

I don't want to put words into your mouth, but you are effectively saying that the Greens in the Dail are nothing but hypocrites?

Definitely. They are political opportunists. It's political opportunism where you jump on the bandwagon of a campaign and support it and you promise the people that you are going to pursue their issue. And then as soon as you get into power, you say, 'Please go away! We can't do anything for you'. It's leading people up the garden path. It's giving false promises. It's gone past being a joke at this stage because so many people feel betrayed. Look at public transport, which was always top of the Green agenda. If someone had told me a few years ago that the Green Party would be in Government and that Dublin Bus would be protesting outside our offices because of cuts to their service I would have said, 'Yeah, dream on, not a chance'. But that's what has happened.

Some cynics have suggested that the Greens are staying in government long enough to secure their Ministerial pensions.



Patricia McKenna as a young campaigner. Current Green minister John Gormley is in the middle of the back row. The photo was taken in Dublin's Mansion House

I don't know. I don't know what *else* are they holding on for. You can see that they have been seduced by power and being in government and the so-called credibility that it gives you and how you're treated by the establishment. The membership of the Green Party has changed as well. There's a lot of new members who see a possibility of getting up the political ladder quicker in the Greens than they might in another party. They should never have gone into government with Fianna Fail on the deal that was negotiated anyway. It was a very bad deal. They sold themselves short. There are now some inconvenient truths that need to be faced up to. In particular: was it just a coincidence that responsibility for Tara and incineration became a bit blurred?

What do you mean?

The 'Save Tara' campaign and opposition to Incineration were two major campaign issues for the Greens, but these were taken out of our hands. Dick Roach signed off on Tara as his last act before leaving office and thus let us off the hook. Even more amazingly, on the very day that we were voting to go into Government with Fianna Fail, Dublin City Council officials were signing off on the Poolbeg incinerator – again taking out of our hands the responsibility for an Incinerator in Ringsend, which is something that John Gormley swore he would oppose tooth and nail. Now he will be presiding over the construction of a massive incinerator in his own constituency. Not only will he be subjecting his voters to dangerous substance such as dioxins, but he will be ensuring that a truly sustainable waste policy will be impossible as the need to feed this massive toxic monster will destroy any incentive to reduce, reuse and recycle. I just don't understand how John Gormley can allow one of our core policies to just go up in smoke. Incineration involves the release of high levels of CO₂, the main greenhouse gas. I just don't know what happened to the passionate campaigner I used to know.

Do you really believe a deal was struck to allow the Greens off the hook?

Perhaps we will never know. But you have to wonder did Fianna Fail say to the Green's during negotiations, "Look lads we will help you get around these difficult issues by providing an escape route. Then you can act the innocent and say, 'It's out of your hands'." There is now growing evidence that the Green Party were planning to go in with Fianna Fail long before the elections and that behind the scenes both sides were quite happy with this prospect. Fianna Fail would let the Green Party take credit for introducing green legislation, which they were going to have to do anyway to comply with EU obligations.

And if there was any flack from Fianna Fail voters, the Greens would take responsibility – which would suit the Greens as they could portray the impression that they were getting their own policies implemented. It's a win-win for both sides.

What do you make of Trevor Sargent stepping down as leader of the party because of his pre-election commitment not to lead the Greens into government with Fianna Fail?

Trevor said he would not lead the Green Party into government with Fianna Fail – yet in the Mansion House he urged everyone to support going into government with Fianna Fail. He was instrumental in getting the members to vote in favour. And when the result came out, he said it was the proudest day of his life! I don't understand it. I just find it schizophrenic!

That meeting in the Mansion House was described by one member as being akin to a convention of the Moonies!

First of all, we didn't see the Programme for Government until we got into the Mansion House. We weren't allowed to take the Programme for Government out with us. We had a massive document to try and read in a very, very short space of time – and then vote on. It was all very strange. We were told they got four Ministers – I've never seen the fourth one. That wouldn't have made any difference to me as it wasn't about Ministerial positions – it was about the Programme for Government. The people who were not happy with it felt it was a strange set-up where you had people placed all around to *work* on people to get them on their side. It was a very, very well organised event by very clever people.

Did they try to "work" on you? Were you asked to tone down your criticism?

On the day of the Mansion House event, people said to me, 'Look, there's going to be two Sinead seats coming up! Keep quiet! Go easy!' or whatever. That would have been me shut up for the rest of my life.

How bad has the stage-management been?

News that the party leadership issued instructions that councillors ballot papers were to be inspected, to be sure they voted for Fianna Fail Seanad candidates just astounded me. How could my party, which had always criticised the way other parties operated, try and infringe on the rights of its elected representatives, just to ensure that Fianna Fail were kept happy? They were not in with Fianna Fail a wet week and yet they were outdoing even Fianna Fail when it came to getting their own way. The principle of secrecy of the ballot box and free choice were thrown out the window, so that we could prove to Fianna Fail we were onside! Ironically the

two councillors who did stick their necks out – Nessa Childers and Bronwen Maher – later left the party and are now running against the party.

Aren't the Greens really just propping up the people – Fianna Fail – who are responsible for creating the economic turmoil in the first place?

Before we went into government we had highlighted the kind of problems that we can now see, in relation to the obsession with development and builders and speculators – and the kind of preferential treatment they were being given by the Fianna Fail-led government. Now we see a situation where those same people are being bailed out by a Government in which the Greens have a say. And it's the smaller, ordinary people who seem to be paying most of the price.

Will the Greens be able to last the full term in government?

I have a feeling John Gormley is particular is worried that if the Government falls he may not get his seat back in Dublin South-East. So for him it's better to go the full term. Eamon Ryan on the other hand is more than likely to survive and I think that he has been waiting his time to take over as leader. Ironically, I would consider John as the Greenest of them all in there, yet I think he will be one of their first casualties. In a few years time, Eamon Ryan will be the leader and I am not sure where John will be.

Isn't there a real danger that they could all lose their own seats next time around?

Yes, it's a possibility. We seem to have become a single issue party: 'The Climate Change Party'. But Trevor Sargent and Eamon Ryan are the safest bets to survive.

The last party to go into coalition with Fianna Fail was the PDs who are now defunct. Do you think history could repeat itself with the Greens?

It is possible because other parties are taking up the Green agenda. It has become mainstream. But some of the other ecological issues and social justice issues which were part of the Greens manifesto aren't being taken up seriously by the other parties – that's why I feel there is a huge political vacuum in the system where a lot of people think, 'Who the heck do we vote for now?'