

# McKinseygalitarian no more

*The Enormous Mind of Stephen Donnelly at work for Fianna Fáil and the country in time of post-Covid*



By Kevin Higgins

**W**hen management consultant Stephen Donnelly strode majestically onto the Irish political stage just before the 2011 general election I was impressed.

I particularly remember an appearance on *Tonight with Vincent Browne* during which he was asked if there had ever been an example, in the history of the world, of a country which had cut and taxed its way out of an economic slump. Donnelly answered without a blink: England during the industrial revolution, in the immediate aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars.

By the time of this television appearance – I can still see the brothel-red background which was just one of the things which made that show so memorable – Donnelly had been elected as an independent TD for Wicklow in a campaign directed by his protégé and acolyte Niall O’Tuathail, who in the last two general elections was the Social Democrats candidate in the Galway West constituency. It was aided too by paid PR consultant Conor Dempsey who years later got into a little trouble over too assiduously, and unpaid, promoting Donnelly’s interest on Twitter.

Donnelly’s smartness appeared to be part of a refreshing political reset after the years during which Irish politics had been dominated by Fianna Fáil, a party which during Brian Cowen’s Taoiseachship often gave the impression that if its IQ dropped one point it might turn into a piece of hairy bacon. Donnelly continued to impress during his first Dáil term when he was

just one of twenty TDs to vote for Clare Daly’s early bill proposing a referendum to repeal the 8th Amendment. The entire Labour Party voted against, while Sinn Féin abstained because their Ard Fheis had not yet voted – though it soon afterwards did – for repeal, but *Donnelly voted yes*.

When the Social Democrats were formed in 2015, Donnelly was announced as one of the party’s three co-leaders. He easily retained his seat in the 2016 general election but bizarrely told the media in early September 2016 that he was leaving the Social Democrats to again sit as an independent. “Some partnerships simply don’t work”, was all he had to say. It’s the sort of thing withered male academics tell friends over bottles of good red wine after their wife has found them naked with their students in the hot tub.

One guessed that there had to be more to it. I mean, he’d only been a member of the Social Democrats for a little less than fourteen months. One imagined perhaps some vicious internal Social Democrat power struggle? I picture two very well-mannered people, both with the weekend *Irish Times* rolled up under their arm, racing to get the last of the anchovies in Sheridan’s, Galway. Around that time he was interviewed in this magazine by egalitarian Niall Crowley who found yes Donnelly was sort of egalitarian too. “Are we short of political vision? Yes. Do we need more political vision? Yes. Would the public respond positively to this? Yes... politicians need to get better at laying it out”. He seemed afire at the end of the interview. McKinseygalitarian was the headline.

Then a very terrible thing happened. In February 2017, he announced that he was joining Fianna Fáil which had: “the best team most closely aligned with my politics”. It was Roger Waters leaving Pink Floyd to join Foster and Allen. The young man with the enormous brain who had come racing in to rescue us from the Banks, the IMF and Fianna Fáil had decided that the only way you solve the problem of Fianna Fáil was by joining it. Donnelly’s idea of the “best team” now included Willie O’Dea and Pat ‘the Cope’ Gallagher.

Donnelly seems really to be one of those people who thinks you can transcend ideology by being the smartest person in the room. The problem with Ireland wasn’t a structural one – our gross disparities of wealth and fanatical adherence to low corporate tax rates.. The real problem was that Stephen Donnelly wasn’t on the committee running the country. A man of enormous importance in his own mind, he genuinely believed back in 2008-11 that the solution to Ireland’s banking crisis would have been to have himself in the room when the big decisions were made.

When he joined the cabinet as Minister for Health in 2020, all that was solved.

Given this mentality, it’s no surprise he stepped forward to lead our health service through the Covid apocalypse or that he appears unlikely to be the one to deliver the free universal health care which everyone now pretends to be in favour of. He has given us many amusing moments, though, for which we must thank him. My personal golden Stephen Donnelly moment was when he told a television journalist that children were more likely to catch Covid on a trampoline than they were at school. I think that’s what he said.

Even were he to be forced to fly into political exile in a second-hand helicopter it wouldn’t knock off a flitter off his granite opinion of himself. His political career probably won’t finish in exile unless it’s the sort where some international think tank or European institution pays him to think important thoughts in Brussels or New York. But the thoughts won’t be of us. **L**

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