

# Profile: *Junior Minister Hildegarde Naughton; ideas-free, but vaguely secular, ascendant, and thoroughgoing, Fine Gaeler*

*Naughton's decent stance on the Eighth Amendment led some arts liberals types to start talking about Naughton as being some sort of left winger*

By Kevin Higgins

**H**ildegarde Naughton journeyed from Oranmore via a French and Economics degree in NUIG and a spell as a primary teacher to a year working on the Commodities Market of the Chicago Board of Trade to momentous election to Galway City Council in 2009.

She's now a 'super' Junior Minister of State at the Department of Transport with special responsibility for International and Road Transport and Logistics, and a parallel Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications with special responsibility for Postal Policy and Eircodes. Glamorous it's not.

Naughton now attends cabinet though, despite the fact she has *been* a good number of things, she doesn't appear to have actually *done* anything, politically at least. Still she's only 45 and she's not finished yet.

It's even said that inebriated Fine Gaelers at party functions in the superior bits of Salthill have been heard to mutter what people think is the word "Hildegarde" when the discussion turns to the dark matter of who takes over the party leadership when Leo Varadkar is sent away to wherever it is people like him go when they stop being leader of parties like Fine Gael.

Such gin and tonic induced mutterings are, surely, over stating the case. But one can see the logic. Hildegarde is the sort of exemplary posh girl who gives a certain class of Fine Gaeler warm feelings. But unlike, say, Dun Laoghaire TD Jennifer Carroll MacNeill, Naughton doesn't give the impression that she gets pleasure out of inflicting pain on poor people.

Her rise through the party ranks has not been characterised by any apparent reservations about her party's tendency to always favour the

haves. If she has qualms, she has kept them to herself.

Naughton's election to Galway City Council in 2009 was a shock, most of all for her running mate, long standing Fine Gael Councillor, and renowned bookmaker, John Mulholland, who apparently didn't see the refuse truck coming to take him where former Mayors of Galway go to be recycled.

Mulholland had represented Galway City's most prosperous ward on the Council for a quarter of a century. Naughton, a trained classical soprano, was mostly known for playing first Calamity Jane and then Yum Yum, in Gilbert and Sullivan's Mikado in Galway Patrician Musical Society productions. But she took the seat.

Similarly, then Government Chief Whip Sean Kyne's seat was meant to be the safer of the then two Fine Gael seats in Galway West when Naughton entered the Dáil after the 2016 election. Kyne is a serious type with a furrowed brow second only to that of another Fine Gael great, Neale Richmond TD for Dublin Rathdown and, of late, loud advocate of pouring all manner of heavy weaponry into Ukraine.

Unlike Richmond, Kyne rarely expresses what could be called an opinion. Indeed, he seems to have spent most of the Eighth Amendment repeal referendum campaign hedging his bets in his garden shed.

Hildegarde, on the other hand, overtly backed, and publicly campaigned for, repeal. Naughton's stance on this issue is to be welcomed and it is good that when times got rough for Fine Gael in February 2020, it stood to her in holding her seat whereas Kyne, who seems to have kept quiet in the hope of keeping an option on the holy-Mary-Mother-of-God vote, was the one who got flushed, to the Seanad.

Naughton's decent stance on the Amendment led some arts liberals types to lose what passes for their minds and start talking about Naughton



as being some sort of left winger or, at least, 'progressive' and she took a strong secularish line too on the National Maternity Hospital.

In fact, she is, on all the issues that count, made of the usual reactionary blue-blooded stuff without which Fine Gael would cease to be itself. This was illustrated during a comical episode while she was Mayor of Galway City in 2012. In June 2011 Galway City Council unanimously agreed to a proposal by then Labour Councillor Billy Cameron that a permanent monument in memory of Latin American revolutionary Ernesto 'Che' Guevara – an actual left winger – be placed on the Salthill promenade as a tribute to Guevara's Galway ancestry via his father Ernesto Guevara Lynch, whose forefathers came from Claregalway.

The structure was to be jointly funded by the Cuban and Argentinean embassies and based on a design by artist Jim Fitzpatrick, creator of the iconic Che image which has adorned millions of t-shirts and student bed-sit posters.

However, when Declan Ganley and a couple of anti-Castro Republicans in the US House of Representatives huffed a little, Mayor Hildegarde dutifully collapsed and the majority on Galway City Council followed suit.

Apparently, she hadn't been aware that Che Guevara was a blood-curdling communist.

In a statement to the *Connacht Tribune*, Naughton said: "The history since his life and death has shown that the type of society he was advocating was no more equitable than what he was fighting to displace".

So Hildegarde Naughton isn't much of a one for action or ideas but for Fine Gael she's sound on the big questions and, in a tired and ageing party looking to rejuvenate, she's younger than Heather Humphreys so she'll do. **L**