



# Colm O'Gorman

**A**MNESTY International Ireland held its annual conference at the weekend in TCD and while all appeared calm on the surface there are serious problems within the organisation, where former One in Four campaigner and PD candidate Colm O'Gorman is the executive director. The finances are in free fall and Amnesty has been drifting away from its original core objectives, adopting a broader-based approach which has failed to please many members. On top of that there is currently a review of staff-management relations taking place, with allegations, ironically, of "a culture of fear" inside the Temple Bar headquarters.

It may come as a surprise to readers that Amnesty International Ireland (AII) would be the sort of place where some staff might allege anything so authoritarian as "a culture of fear" but under Colm O'Gorman's tenure at the helm, human resources have been a serious source of tension within this human rights organisation. The chairman of AII's executive committee is accountant to the stars Gaby Smyth (currently being sued by Adam Clayton of well-known Amnesty supporters U2) and he is now examining a number of submissions outlining the concerns of staff in AII.

Smyth had headed up a three-member sub-committee – along with legal eagle Jennifer Caldwell of Maples and Calder (and formerly Binchy's solicitors) and Dr Ray Murray, a senior lecturer at the Irish Centre for Human Rights in NUI Galway – which oversaw a significant restructuring within AII last year. The restructuring led to a number of redundancies in order to cut costs but, significantly, did little to reduce the overheads at the top of the organisation, which have grown since O'Gorman arrived from One in Four in February 2008 (more of that anon).

AII's industrial relations problems predated this restructuring exercise, although they were no doubt exacerbated in the aftermath of the cuts. Staff meetings held last year featured claims of unhappiness and unease by some staff members, leading to Gaby Smyth meeting with the staff (and O'Gorman) in February this year when, according to an email seen by Goldhawk, he was informed that "people are afraid to openly raise concerns about what is happening in the section". It was agreed that he would receive staff submissions (the deadline was last month) although O'Gorman did make it clear that any allegations should be backed up by evidence.

Among the submissions received by the AII chairman was one from the union representatives, which claimed that "differences with upper management are often needlessly personalised. This can lead to a fear of speaking out, of being undermined in front of others". The submission also referred to low staff morale and a lack of respect for staff. One recent issue which shocked some staff members involved an AII employee leaving the office to attend to her baby daughter, who had been rushed by ambulance to A&E. On her return she was threatened with disciplinary procedures for leaving her post, on the ground that "force majeure" did not apply as the child was under the care of medical professionals. Siptu was highly critical of this intervention, arguing that its own legal advice was "absolutely to the contrary" of the view adopted by AII and recommending that proceedings should be initiated with the Rights Commissioner.

## PRIORITIES

If the human rights of the staff in Fleet Street don't seem top of the list of priorities at AII, it is also true that those priorities that are in place for AII's campaigns these days often stray far from the traditional human rights issues – "prisoners of conscience", etc – with which the Amnesty International name is associated. Indeed, one of the issues raised in the union's submission to Smyth last month was that "there is a greater focus on externally-funded projects among upper management than on core Amnesty International work". These projects include, for example, a campaign to change the Irish laws relating to access to the provision of healthcare and to make mental health a political priority. This campaign has not been funded by Amnesty's own fundraising efforts but rather by a €1m grant from Declan 'Ryanair' Ryan's One Foundation. This funding runs out in June and O'Gorman hopes to have it renewed to underpin a campaign on constitutional reform.

Another big backer of AII is Chuck Feeney's Atlantic Philanthropies, which provided \$1.1m in 2009 to fund programmes under the headings of "accountability and democracy in Ireland" and also "affordable rights". It is worth looking at the Irish campaigns which O'Gorman *et al* now deem priority ones for the organisation. What might be deemed 'old style' Amnesty issues include the Irish role in extraordinary renditions and a campaign entitled 'Demand Dignity' focusing on "the human rights abuses that fuel poverty". Then there is gender-based violence and female genital mutilation campaigns, which focus on Ireland as well

as internationally. However, also high on the agenda is the One Foundation's mental health campaign and a campaign to "demand greater accountability in how Government allocates resources and improves access to social and economic rights".

These latter campaigns clearly stray into areas already well catered for by other charities and NGOs. In the recent general election campaign, O'Gorman came up with three questions to put to Irish politicians "to ensure our prioritised issues make the programme for government". Number one concerned reform of healthcare and number two related to the introduction of laws "to increase transparency and accountability in mental health planning". Only the third question, relating to an investigation into the use of Shannon Airport as "a staging post for CIA operations known as extraordinary rendition" might be considered a core Amnesty issue. That said, Amnesty International worldwide has widened its agenda and the issues that are prioritised in any 'chapter' (eg. Ireland) are voted on by members.

## ISSUE

Another issue on AII's plate is human rights education, but interestingly this is funded by the Irish Aid division of the Department of Foreign Affairs (€130,000 in 2010). Maybe this is why, while the parent Amnesty International website claims that the organisation is "independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion", the Irish website merely notes that it is "independent of any political ideology, economic interest or religion". A subtle but significant difference.

Of course, the Irish organisation still focuses much of its attention overseas and AII campaigns for human rights in a number of 'priority countries' – Colombia, Iran, Israel/Palestine and Zimbabwe – but in recent years AII has been focusing much of its attention closer to home, on economic, social and cultural rights. This appears to have accelerated under O'Gorman and, for example, he has initiated what is termed the 'Post Ryan Report Project' which has involved employing a researcher to examine the evidence from the investigations into clerical abuse of children. A press release was issued last July stating the AII "has decided that it has a responsibility to look into the context in which human rights violations revealed in recent Irish reports [the Ryan Commission and Murphy reports] took place".

All worthy stuff but the area of child abuse within the Catholic Church is one that is increasingly crowded with organisations providing services and campaigning on behalf of victims. This is, however, an area that Colm O'Gorman knows well, having suffered abuse himself as a young boy at the hands of paedophile priest Fr Sean Fortune, before going on to successfully sue the Church here for €300,000 and receive a public apology. He detailed his experiences in his bestselling

book, *Beyond Belief*, and also established the One in Four charity to provide support for survivors of sexual abuse.

One in Four made O'Gorman a household name and he certainly wasn't shy to push his own personal profile. However, the gloss came off a little when it emerged that he was being paid €80,000 a year at One in Four, an organisation where his partner Paul Fyffe was also a director. While O'Gorman's salary raised eyebrows in One in Four, it is not known what he is pulling in at Amnesty and the organisation is not saying. This contrasts with the UK, for example, where there is a statutory requirement to provide information on all staff earning over £60,000 in the annual accounts.



Gaby Smyth

However, what is clear is that the costs at AII have mushroomed since his arrival, while income has been in free fall. When O'Gorman arrived in Amnesty International Ireland at the start of 2008 to replace Sean Love, he brought with him his PA from One in Four, Bernadette Morris. There followed a structural change at the top of the organisation with additional senior positions created and, as a result, the amount paid out in directors' remuneration jumped from €131,000 in 2007 to €262,000 in 2008 and €272,000 in 2009. Given that Amnesty's finances have simultaneously been taking something of a beating, this is not going down well with the grassroots. Membership numbers are behind target and an expensive door-to-door recruitment campaign (€400,000 in 2010), using an outside company called Total Fundraising, has failed to deliver, as a result of a very high "attrition rate" (ie. members signing up for four years but then cancelling their direct debits). Income from donors has also dropped off a cliff and the 'major donor' programme has now been scrapped completely, having brought in only €30,000 last year according to figures seen by Goldhawk.

Denis O'Brien was previously a very big backer of Amnesty but now directs a large

chunk of his dosh to his Frontline human rights charity, headed up by long-term Amnesty International activist Mary Lawlor. O'Gorman's decision to bring in Sean FitzPatrick as his guest to the Amnesty Christmas 2009 annual corporate lunch at the Shelbourne Hotel and seat him at the top table, did little to boost income from the suits. This is the sort of PR blunder AII and Colm O'Gorman can do without.

While part of the reason for the haemorrhage of members is the economic situation, there are those who believe that the ongoing shift by Amnesty away from its 'core work' and focus on campaigns relating to poverty, healthcare and clerical abuse are part of the problem. And, despite O'Gorman's own undoubted media skills, the fact that Amnesty is playing in an increasingly crowded field makes it more difficult to generate media coverage. In fact AII cannot be considered a high profile organisation in terms of media coverage here. The annual conference in TCD last weekend didn't even get a mention in *The Irish Times*, although in getting Barack Obama's health policy adviser, Ezekiel Emanuel (brother of Rahm), over to deliver the keynote address, O'Gorman did get Amnesty some airtime on RTÉ radio. That said, the fact that the keynote address was on 'health reform' points back to the perceived problem faced by AII in terms of its identity. (The keynote speaker at Amnesty International UK's national conference next month will be one Mary Robinson – a former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.)

## DEFICIT

As a result of the fall-off in membership and lack of corporate backing, Colm O'Gorman has seen Amnesty's financial position implode, with a deficit recorded in 2010 of €440,000 – ten times that of 2009 – albeit boosted by €128,000 in 'exceptional items', which relate to redundancy payment and other HR costs (for example an external agency had to be brought in last year on foot of a bullying complaint – unrelated to O'Gorman – resulting in an investigation). The inability of the organisation to raise any decent lolly from events has not helped and the fundraising events division has in fact now been shut down. One such effort involved paying an outside agency, Acara, €21,000 to organise a trek to Vietnam which never even took place.

Colm O'Gorman has a lot to prove to Amnesty International Ireland members who balked at his appointment three years ago. Certainly, his PD background – briefly as a Senator and then 2007 general election candidate in Wexford and even would-be leader – were difficult to square with his 2008 claim that he had "an affinity with his new employer [Amnesty] going back 30 years." This was despite the fact that his party leader, Michael McDowell, had refused to meet a representative of AII or even accept a phone call from the same quarter after he had also refused the organisation access to Irish prisons to conduct a survey on racism. What some members want to know is whether Colm O'Gorman is the right man to lead their human rights organisation. The jury is still out.