

Varadkar: The Tánaiste was aware of Garda campaign to smear McCabe

By **Jake Hurfurt**

FRANCES Fitzgerald was aware of the Garda campaign against Sergeant Maurice McCabe when she was Justice Minister, the Taoiseach admitted yesterday.

Speaking to Marian Finucane on RTE Radio 1, Leo Varadkar confirmed the emails that came to light last month showed 'that there was some level of awareness, but not any detail' by the former tánaiste about the smear campaign against the Garda whistleblower.

The Disclosures Tribunal was established to inquire into, among other things, whether there had been a campaign against Sgt McCabe waged by Garda management, and what level of knowledge there was within Government.

Before and after she resigned on Tuesday, Ms Fitzgerald maintained that 'she did not recall the emails' – and yesterday the Taoiseach maintained that he regretted the resignation, and believed his former minister would be vindicated in the Charleton Tribunal.

Asked whether Ms Fitzgerald took a political view on the emails, the Taoiseach said that she would have heeded the advice that it was not a matter for her to get involved in, especially when advice to that effect came from the attorney general.

Despite her resignation, which stopped a general election, the Taoiseach continues to believe Ms Fitz-

'It's still my view that Frances acted properly'

gerald did nothing wrong and that the Charleton Tribunal will vindicate Mrs Fitzgerald after it hears all the evidence.

He said: 'I don't necessarily think that [her resignation to halt a crisis] is the right thing, it's still my view that Frances acted properly in terms of her obligations and I would have preferred this to have been dealt with at the tribunal, it would have been fairer.'

It was only on Monday, November 27, that the Taoiseach received all the relevant documents, he argued – although a preliminary report was available two days beforehand. That report did include the key second email that sealed Ms Fitzgerald's political fate.

Challenged on the fact that Fianna Fáil leader Micheál Martin would have been in the dark about the extent of the scandal as the two party leaders negotiated to stave off a general election, the Taoiseach said Mr Martin was given 'the stuff we had as we went along'.

Knowing that he had provided the Dáil with misleading information on three occasions, as outlined by the Irish Mail on Sunday last week,

Rugby video cost €10k

THE Government spent nearly €10,000 promoting Ireland's ill-fated Rugby World Cup bid in a three-minute video on social media.

The promotional video featured Taoiseach Leo Varadkar, then-tánaiste Frances Fitzgerald and Sports Minister Shane Ross alongside sports stars such as Brian O'Driscoll.

Amid increasing concerns that the €5m Strategic Communications Unit, announced by Mr Varadkar, will be used as a party political tool for Fine Gael, the news that the video cost €9,500 was called 'the potential tip of the iceberg' by Fianna Fáil TD Thomas Byrne. His party leader Micheál Martin told Mr Varadkar in the Dáil, 'There is a huge danger of the blurring of the lines between bona fide departmental campaigns and full-blooded political campaigns.'

Last month, the 2023 Rugby World Cup was awarded to France.

A fine FG-FF bromance

CONVICTION is growing across Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil that the high-wire negotiations between Leo Varadkar and Micheál Martin over Frances Fitzgerald have significantly extended the life of the government.

Senior sources within both parties have noted 'a subtle change in the public exchanges' between the men. One top Fine Gael source noted: 'It's not quite a bromance but things have changed; they might manage to be frenemies.' A Fine Gael Minister said: 'There is a big difference in tone. I don't think they will ever go jogging in the Park, but a working relationship has been forged.'

The fact that Martin is seen as having won their first big bout may have enhanced the relationship. Senior FF figures noted that 'a thaw has entered the relationship' which had been characterised as 'an icy distance'.

A Government spokesman declined to speculate on the bromance issue but conceded that the meetings between the pair had 'been useful and constructive'.

Mr Varadkar said a barrister has been appointed to investigate why the documents only emerged into the public domain via leaks.

Mr Varadkar was also questioned about his handling of the growing political crisis as his administration edged closer to a general election last weekend. He credited British spin doctor Alastair Campbell with a lesson in realpolitik. 'There's a rule in politics, or there's a rule created by Alastair Campbell, if a minister is the centre of a controversy for more than 11 days, it just has to

'They offered the total solidarity of Europe'

be ended. That's quite a cruel approach, I think, but we got into that space, there was a feeding frenzy that was going on for so long that people were coming to the view that this needed to be ended.'

He also played down suggestions that Fine Gael's confidence and supply agreement with Fianna Fáil had been compromised by recent events. 'My intention is to bring in another budget, because the deal we have with Fianna Fáil, the confidence and supply agreement, is a three-year deal,' he told Ms Finucane. 'There is absolutely no doubt that if Fianna Fáil wants to cause an election they can do that.'

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The moment Micheál knew he had the upper hand
...and the grimace on Leo's face looks like he knew it too!

had been an 'extremely unpleasant' experience, said the Taoiseach.

The document trawl by the

Department of Justice had been ordered to put all the information into context, explained the Taoi-

seach, he said: 'I was certain I didn't want any more of [what] was a drip-drip-drip of information coming out.'

Refusing to indicate whether he thought there was collusion between the Department of Justice and An Garda Síochána, the Taoiseach said: 'That's why we have a tribunal, and this is one of the reasons why I would prefer that we'd allowed these matters to be decided at the Charleton Tribunal.'

He said there would not be a 'witch hunt' into why legal requirements to hand over the emails at the centre of the scandals were not met.

Leo planned snap election... but changed his mind

THE Taoiseach was planning a snap general election until senior party strategists told him last Saturday that Fine Gael could not contest such a task credibly in the short time-frame he envisaged, the Irish Mail on Sunday can reveal.

Mr Varadkar's erratic political strategy during the crisis over former minister Frances Fitzgerald has seen a significant critical rump emerge in the Fine Gael party.

Formerly loyal TDs were openly critical of Mr Varadkar this week after he stood by Ms Fitzgerald until the last moment.

By **John Lee**

The Tánaiste ultimately resigned under pressure from Mr Varadkar and senior civil servants on Tuesday, just hours before a motion of no-confidence that could have triggered an election.

Sources close to the talks between Mr Varadkar and Fianna Fáil leader Micheál Martin said 'it was clear' that Mr Varadkar entered discussions on Wednesday, determined to lead Fine Gael into an election. 'But it was clear by Saturday that he had

done a full U-turn and was determined to avoid an election. He did not appear to have a particularly well thought-out strategy,' said the source.

Another Cabinet source added yesterday: 'There were a number of politicians in the party at senior level that felt that we didn't want a general election but if it was going to come to it let us get on with it. The Taoiseach himself articulated that view on the Six One News.'

'He said: "I don't want an election. I don't think the country needs an election. I think

it would be an unnecessary election.'

'He said you could argue that if we are to have an election to have a quick, sharp short one.'

However the senior minister, who is close to the Taoiseach, confirmed that there was a strong opposing view in the party.

'But in headquarters there was a genuine concern that we weren't going to be ready for a number of reasons.'

Last night, Fine Gael officially denied they weren't prepared for an election or that the Taoiseach had been so informed last week.