

CRISIS: IS NEW CHIEF OUT OF TOUCH?

THE DREW KID ON THE BLOCK

Monster bill for Harris must pay dividends for the State

COMMENT BY NICOLA TALLANT



GARDA Commissioner Drew Harris applied a boots on the ground start to his career as the force's new chief, but in reality he couldn't be further removed from the officers who face down the threat of organised crime every day.

To many his appointment is a new start – an opportunity to shake up an antiquated organisation operating on cronyism and one that exists without having to account for its actions.

To others, it is a show of the growing strength of the 'Iron Lady' Josephine Feehily and the visions of other 'outsiders' for the force. Few nations have invited members from foreign police forces on to the interview board to appoint the top job. In fact, it is pretty much unheard of.

While an Garda Síochána have certainly proved themselves incompetent in the past on certain matters, it has not been found to be corrupt – unlike the former RUC and the U.K. police. Now, former members of those police forces are being called upon for their advice and governance.

An Garda Síochána has had it's

problems. The penalty point scandal, drink driving debacle and the tribunal involving allegations that whistleblowers were smeared at the highest level have all taken their toll on the public's view of the force.

In a way they are also a reflection of poor management – and like most big organisations they have suffered because some make their way up the promotions ladder politically rather than for their skill sets.

DAMAGE

That is the way of the world. And the damage that can be done by some who are promoted above their abilities often goes unrecognised for years. Incredible damage can be done with the sweep of a pen.

It is easy to criticise the Gardaí. It's also become a very popular stance to take in a world more and more reflective of the views of keyboard warriors and campaigners.

But the fact of the matter is that, by and large, when the Gardaí have been given the resources they have proved they can take on whatever threat there is to the State.

Forget about the crime statistics, they are not reflective of crime in our society, rather of how the budgets are spread and which areas are given a few bob to police.

Throw the money at nabbing street dealers and you will get results; give it to units policing burglary gangs and they will be caught; hold it back from fraud and fewer white collar

criminals will be caught.

It's not rocket science and it is not something that should ever be measured as a rise or fall in actual crimes.

What provided the perfect climate for the Regency Hotel and the growth of the Kinahan Cartel?

Was it the lack of ability of an Garda Síochána? Or was it the 2008 collapse of Lehman Brothers bank and the ripple effects of the worldwide recession that resulted in the cut-off of finances to our force?

An Garda Síochána policed a war that spilled in over our border for decades. They have more recently policed, very effectively, international narco-terrorism that also threatened the security of the State.

The successes against the Kinahan Cartel – the jailing of up to 40 members of the mob, the prevention of up to 50 murders, the raids, the seizures of drugs and high-powered weapons – are all reflective of two things: money and ability.

Criminals have a never-ending wallet to fund their wars and we as a society have to provide a decent budget to fight back.

The role of the Garda Commissioner has always been a political one as it is sanctioned by the powers of Government and answerable to them. But what if the Government is weak, wants to avoid conflict and is desperate to make the populist decision so it can stay in power?

Harris has been handed €250k a year, the same salary as the President

– significantly more than the €185,350 salary paid to Taoiseach Leo Varadkar – and a good €70k more than the previous Commissioner Noirin O’Sullivan. The PSNI recruit also has an option of bringing his own team to Garda HQ.

Behind the scenes his security issues are costing the State a fortune with two full-time highly trained Emergency Response Unit officers detailed to him at all times and his transport facilitated with one of the force’s much needed armoured cars.

He is in the post for five years – so that means a bill which will easily top €1 million to shadow him.

No previous Commissioner has required anything like that level of security to go about their business.

Many would suggest that had Assistant Commissioner John O’Driscoll secured the role he would have walked down his old stomping ground of the north inner city and

been congratulated by locals who know him by his first name.

It is understood that specially secured living quarters in the Phoenix Park are being prepared for Harris for his work in the Republic and that he is currently residing in Garda HQ.

REPORT

This week Harris responded to criticism of the use of fire protection face-wear by gardaí while policing an eviction in Dublin. He said they should not have been wearing hoods and said he has requested a report from the Assistant Commissioner in

charge of Dublin to see what lessons can be learned from the incident.

In a statement Josephine Feehily said she had spoken to Harris and was pleased he had issued a statement on the matter.

The question remains whether her role as head of the Policing Authority, which was established to oversee the performance of the Gardai, and others brought in to police the Gardai will become more influential under Harris.

There are uncertain waters ahead but one thing is sure, Harris’ role is one of the most costly appointments in the history of the Irish State.