



By **Michael O'Farrell**

INVESTIGATIONS EDITOR

TAOISEACH Micheál Martin and An Tánaiste Leo Varadkar ignored a letter from a woman who was subjected to misogynistic abuse in a WhatsApp group set up by Green Party TD Brian Leddin.

Their failure to respond contrasts with EU President Ursula von der Leyen response to the woman through a spokesman, saying it 'saddens' her 'to hear about the gender-based online targeting you have endured'.

Justice Minister Helen McEntee is to spearhead a new drive to tackle all forms of abuse against women in the wake of the killing of Ashling Murphy.

Last weekend, Ms McEntee promised to 'eradicate social and cultural attitudes – among men – that contribute to women feeling unsafe.'

She said: 'That means appropriate education, from primary school up, on healthy relationships, gender equality and consent. It means changing our culture so we are not bystanders, but call out inappropriate behaviour when we see it – in the workplace, in the pub, in the WhatsApp group.'

Ms McEntee was on maternity leave during the controversy which meant she has never before been asked to address the matter directly.

When the Irish Mail on Sunday asked her to address the failure of the Government parties to sanction Mr Leddin, a spokesman said she believes 'it is important that all of us together learn that we must challenge attitudes which can be undermining and damaging to women and Mr Leddin has said he should have challenged such comments and regrets not doing so'.

'The Dáil should lead by example'

The spokesman added: 'Minister McEntee believes that there is no place for such misogynistic and demeaning language in any discourse and that it must be called out everywhere, including WhatsApp groups.'

We asked Ms McEntee to address the failure of many male TDs – including the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste – to show the kind of leadership she is now calling for.

'The Taoiseach, Tánaiste and others have said that men have a lead role in bringing about the necessary cultural change to achieve zero tolerance of violence and abuse against women. The Minister believes there is a responsibility on those in public life to take action to demonstrate a zero-tolerance approach,' her spokesman added.

Yesterday, a spokesman for Tánaiste Leo Varadkar addressed the Leddin scandal for the first time. He said: 'The Tánaiste fully backs Minister McEntee's plans to shortly publish an updated strategy based on prevention, protection, prosecution and policy co-ordination which will take a zero tolerance approach to violence against women. She will publish a detailed action plan outlining the exact measures to be undertaken across Government and State agencies and clear timelines for when these actions will be completed.'

But he didn't answer direct questions as to why he did not respond to the woman.

Mr Martin also did not respond to a letter sent last September from the woman targeted in the WhatsApp group set up by Mr Leddin. Similarly, he did not respond when asked by this newspaper to address the woman's concerns this week.

A spokesman for Green Party leader Eamon Ryan this week said: 'Minister Ryan fully supports Minister McEntee in developing a new strategy on domestic, sexual and



Minister has pledged zero tolerance of ALL violence against women, yet...

Taoiseach still hasn't responded to TD's chat app scandal

GREEN TD IS SILENT AS FEMALE RIVALS ABUSED BY TEXT

SLURS: How the MoS reported, above, on the abuse last August and, inset left, EU President Ursula von der Leyen

gender-based violence, which will have input from across government. He is pleased to see that it will be underpinned by clear actions, timelines, clear accountability mechanisms, and will be properly resourced.'

The belated

responses contrast to how the EU Commission addressed the matter when the woman – a respected Limerick-based professional – wrote directly to Ms von der Leyen. She referred the matter to the head of the Commission's gender equality unit, Karen Vandekerckhove, who responded before Christmas.

'It saddens me to hear about the

gender-based online targeting you have endured,' Ms Vandekerckhove wrote. 'All forms of gender-based violence and harassment can have far-reaching effects. In addition to negative health consequences, they can result in withdrawal from societal and political discussions and negatively affect women's democratic participation.'

The woman – whose face was emblazoned with the word 'c***' on Mr Leddin's WhatsApp group – said events last week had reignited her sense of vulnerability.

She said: 'Threats posed in WhatsApp groups encourage others to implement those threats. They enable and they feed abusive behaviour. The Dáil should lead by





ABUSIVE WHATSAPPS:
Limerick Councillor Elisa O'Donovan

Timeline of the sexism scandal

WEEK ONE:

Wednesday, August 25 – The MoS calls Deputy Brian Leddin to ask about his involvement in a misogynistic WhatsApp group which has targeted abuse at local Limerick Councillor Elisa O'Donovan and a second woman.

We agree to speak off-the-record on condition that Mr Leddin commits to providing a formal on-the-record response afterwards.

Thursday, August 26 – In response to a request from Mr Leddin, we send him the specific examples of the WhatsApp abuse we intend to publish.

Friday, August 27 – Mr Leddin provides a short written statement saying he did 'not encourage such comments or engage with them but on reflection should have intervened to voice my unhappiness with such language'.

Saturday, August 28 – We ask Mr Leddin if he will apologise to the second woman – since he had previously sent a text apology to Cllr O'Donovan when he thought another newspaper was going to publish the story. He declines to do so.

Sunday, August 29 – We publish our first story under the front-page headline 'Green TD is silent while rivals abused by text'.

Green Party leader Eamon Ryan, says there is no place in politics for 'demeaning' comments and says Mr Leddin is engaging with the party's executive.

WEEK TWO:

Monday, August 30 – An emergency meeting of the Green Party's executive committee takes place via video call.

The party is closely divided into factions on the issue but – with Eamon Ryan seeking to draw a line under the matter – the executive decides against any sanction.

Wednesday, September 1 – We ask the Green Party for details of Monday's executive meeting and a list of those present. The party insists these details are internal matters that cannot be made public.

Friday, September 3 – Protests are held outside the Green Party HQ in Dublin and Mr Leddin's constituency office in Limerick.

Sunday, September 5 – We publish further details of abusive messages from the WhatsApp group as seven senior Green Party members – including Deputy Leader Catherine Martin and MEP Grace O'Sullivan – publicly break ranks to call for Mr Leddin to be sanctioned.

Vile texts in group set up by Deputy

IN THE WhatsApp group set up by Brian Leddin members make a number of derogatory comments and threats against Cllr Elisa O'Donovan and another Limerick professional.

The starkest example of this is a November 2019 discussion in which Deputy Leddin suggests that a photo of the female professional could be used as the group's profile picture.

Another member then proceeds to make this change and includes the word 'c***' across the woman's face.

Mr Leddin does not intervene to call out this abuse. In another instance, a member of the group posted a screengrab of a tweet of Limerick Cllr Ms O'Donovan.

ABUSE: TD Brian Leddin did not stop sexist slurs



The member then posts a number of angry emojis followed quickly by: 'What an absolute c***'.

These three separate comments are all timestamped 8.37am. At 8.38am, Deputy Leddin posts three laughing emojis. Three minutes later at 8.41am he posts the following comment: 'Might be worth retweeting that?'

It is not instantly clear what he is referring to and Green sources have insisted it was not to the slur.

But at no stage did Mr Leddin respond to the side-by-side juxtaposition of the slur with his emojis.

At another time the group speaks of Ms O'Donovan as 'craving fame' and at one point a member suggests they'd sleep with her saying: 'I nearly would if that drunk. And she didn't talk.'

WEEK THREE:

Friday, September 10 – The second woman subjected to threatening and abusive comments in the WhatsApp group personally writes to the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and Green Party leader Eamon Ryan calling on Mr Leddin to resign. In her letter, the woman, who has a long history of voluntary public service and charity work in Limerick, described how she continues to be attacked online.

Saturday, September 11 – Via their respective spokespeople, we ask the Taoiseach, Tánaiste and Eamon Ryan to address the second woman's letter. The Taoiseach and Tánaiste do not respond at all. Eamon Ryan promises to write to the woman 'next week'. Mr Leddin issues a legal threat to the MoS in a bid to prevent further articles.

Sunday, September 12 – We publish details of the second woman's letter and a call from the National Women's Council of Ireland for political parties to show leadership.

Our coverage also features Caitriona Gleeson, the CEO of Women for Election. 'If the WhatsApp group had an image of a gay male politician in it last week – with a slur across the picture – would we have had the silence?' she asked.

WEEK FOUR:

Monday, September 13 – The Green Party holds its annual party think-in. When Mr Leddin is asked by reporters if he would like to apologise to female party members, minders step in to shut down questioning on the premise that the topic is 'a legal matter'.

From this point on this justification – apparently based on Mr Leddin's baseless threat to sue the MoS – is used to stop any attempt to discuss the issue.

Friday, September 17 – As he had previously promised, Eamon Ryan responds to the second woman's letter. However, he says he cannot discuss the WhatsApp group because 'as I understand the matter is now the subject of legal consideration'.

Dublin Green Party TD Neasa Hourican expresses regret at the manner her party has silenced the controversy.

'We haven't ever really discussed it and now we're in a kind of a place where it's a legal issue – apparently – and I can't raise it any more,' she said. 'I do know there are issues around misogyny in many political parties and when something like this happens it's actually a chance, it's actually an opportunity to talk these things through and make sure we are getting it right. I'm not sure we are.'

example and call out their colleagues who they know have engaged in reprehensible and abusive conduct.'

Limerick Councillor Elisa O'Donovan, who was also subjected to abuse in the group, said: 'I think most women know that WhatsApp groups are toxic towards them. Ms O'Donovan said Mr Ryan had

ensured there would be no 'real repercussions for those that engage in sexist and demeaning behaviour towards women'.

Seven senior Green Party members – including Deputy Leader Catherine Martin and MEP Grace O'Sullivan – criticised the party's failure to sanction Mr Leddin.

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