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## Comment

### Laird almighty!


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TO HIS detractors, he's 'leaping Lord Laird', a slightly barmy Northern Ireland peer who jumps from one mad-hatter project to the next. To his admirers, he's Ulster's Braveheart, tackling injustice wherever it may be. It's a comparison he warms to: "I admire Braveheart, but he met a sticky end . . . hung, drawn and quartered. I'm very well-hung you know, but I wouldn't want to be drawn and quartered."

Laird likes nothing better than to don his kilt and do battle.

Last week, he entered uncharted territory . . . the republican heartland of South Armagh.

Under parliamentary privilege in the House of Lords, he named those he believed were involved in the Provisional IRA murder of Paul Quinn (21).

"I'm not normally identified with South Armagh, but people down there asked me to do something about the murder because they know I've got a loud mouth. In my Ulster way, I felt even more obliged to help them than those from my own community because they'd the guts to approach me in the first place.

"They are lovely people, they just want to live and let live. They said it was time the Provisionals got off their backs."

Laird believes the British government and senior security figures aren't too anxious to bring Quinn's killers to justice:

"They view South Armagh as a write-off. 'Let them get on with it,' is the attitude. It was the same during the conflict.

The British saw South Armagh purely as an SAS training ground."

In case anyone reckons the murder is just an excuse for a unionist to jump on the anti-IRA bandwagon, Laird insists he loathes all paramilitaries:

"I've no time for the so-called freedom fighters of the UDA.

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Making their latest statement on Remembrance Sunday was obscene. Margaret Ritchie (SDLP Stormont minister) hit the nail on the head by denying those boys money."

With a mane of silver hair and a penchant for pin-striped suits and ostentatious shirts, Laird cuts a striking figure.

"I can't stand being understated, " he declares. "It's important to be properly stated at all times."

DUP colleagues note how he bounds down Westminster corridors with outstretched arms and a head buzzing with plans. "Of course, I bound, " Laird says. "I want to counter the image of the dull, dour unionist . . . and you must have passion in life."

He has a "wonderful life", he says, spending half his time in an impressive Victorian mansion in East Belfast, and the rest in London. "I love London, who wouldn't? If you don't love London, you're dead."

He's fond of Dublin too: "It was a bloody good place to get pissed, but I haven't touched alcohol since my heart attack in January. It's surprised me how little I miss it." He once got into trouble for spending public funds on a 375 return taxi to Dublin. "I didn't do anything wrong. Walking through the streets of Dublin from a car park, in my kilt, would have been a security risk."

Under parliamentary privilege, he has made allegations on the Frank Connolly and Phil Flynn cases. However, it's the "corruption, cronyism and underlying sectarianism" which really bugs him. "The South is very wealthy, and well done to them. But the attitudes haven't caught up with the money. There's been more development of the wallet than the mind."

"I was amazed when the Dail agreed to pay the legal costs of paedophile priests and the compensation for their victims. I wouldn't do that if a Church of Ireland clergyman was a paedophile. And requiring an Irishlanguage qualification to get planning permission for a bungalow in Galway is scandalous. Imagine the outcry if you had to learn Ulster-Scots to build a house in Ballymena?"

He was proposing to stand in May's Dail elections but the heart attack prevented it. "A unionist like me would have been an ideal candidate. I'd have raised some very challenging questions."

He hates nationalists telling him he's Irish. "Being born in Ireland doesn't make you Irish. The Duke of Wellington got sick of being told that too. He asked if he was born in a stable, would that make him a horse?"

Laird has two cats: 'Roaring Meg', named after that most loyalist icon . . . the cannon used in the Siege of Derry; and 'Betsy Gray' named after a Co Down Presbyterian rebel killed in the 1798 insurrection.

He certainly can't be pigeon-holed as a sectarian, reactionary unionist. On a delegation which visited Long Kesh in the '70s, he was ordered not to talk to IRA prisoners. Laird chatted away to them regardless and left the jail declaring that conditions must be improved.

He's ashamed he didn't speak out against internment. He

opposed the British government's infringement of civil liberties post-9/11. "I'm for the Kurds and against blood sports. I see myself as a left-of-centre human rights campaigner, a champion of the outsider."

He's been one himself for much of his life. Born two months premature, he was always the smallest boy in class. He was bullied and was bad at sport. He dreamed of being the swashbuckling hero in school plays, but always landed the female roles: "No boy my age had handled so many female parts!"

Dyslexia meant he failed his exams. He fared no better with girls: "I was a big lanky teenager with a rash of spots and all this testosterone. I wanted girls. They never looked twice at me, but I learned to make them laugh. I later discovered that making women laugh is a great attribute."

His father was a Stormont MP and, on his death in 1970, Laird inherited the seat. When Stormont collapsed, he was unemployed. He went to the dole office in East Belfast but found it so humiliating, he walked out. He decided to "make an opportunity out of a disaster" and set up his own business. John Laird PR is the North's oldest PR company. Within a few years, he owned the office block next door to the dole.

So, how would he market himself?

"I'm glad I don't have to. Facing the electorate every parliament would be difficult. I know I'm not everybody's cup of tea. Often those with uncomfortable things to say aren't that popular."

He enjoys the House of Lords hugely.

"Intellectually, I'm against it, but its sole defence is it works. It's the only effective brake on the government these days."

He's friendly with the crime writer, Baroness Ruth Rendell. She studies him "with great interest". He reckons he'll "probably turn up in her next book".

His heart attack was followed by heart failure in August: "I'm going through the menu of cardiac problems but, in some ways, it's an honour. I've learned that life is very precious. Live for the moment, live to the full, and try to help as many people as you can. Dying is the last thing John Laird will ever do."

CV Occupation: Flamboyant Ulster Unionist peer Born: April 23 1944 In the news because: Under parliamentary privilege, he named individuals allegedly involved in the IRA murder of Paul Quinn

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