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Paul Healy's week

People Power 1 Head Shops 0

Like a bolt from the blue – reminiscent of the initial arrival in our midst of Head Shops – the end came. That's if it is the end. At least there is hope that it may well be. It's over for now anyway, and a lot of people will be breathing a massive sigh of relief.

I am referring of course to the dramatic initiative by the Government earlier this week which had the stunning impact of resulting in Head Shops throughout Ireland – including 'High Times' in Roscommon – closing their doors quicker than one could say 'there's a bit of political leadership at last.'

The Government crackdown was unexpected, dramatic and devastating. Suddenly, with immediate effect, many of the products being sold as 'legal highs' are deemed illegal, with imprisonment threatened for anyone convicted of supplying or possessing the controversial substances.

Within hours 'closed – for now' signs were going up in Head Shops around the country – and the shutters were going down.

It's a stunning success – and a fairly rare one – for 'people power.' It's a stunning act of political leadership – and a fairly rare one – by the Government.

Here in Roscommon, we must enthusiastically congratulate the Roscommon Anti-Head Shop Committee, whose members must be in shock this week at the scale of their achievement.

Confirmation congratulations

I'm confident that I speak for everyone involved – children, parents, family members, teachers and the wider public – when I say that last Saturday's Confirmation ceremony in the Sacred Heart Church in Roscommon was a very memorable event.

I was really impressed by the manner in which Bishop Christopher Jones officiated. He was warm and welcoming, putting everyone at ease, and his interaction with the young people receiving the sacrament of Confirmation was beautifully apt.

It was a lovely ceremony and I think credit goes to Bishop Jones and all the priests who concelebrated with him. Congratulations meanwhile to all who were confirmed. And glorious weather made the celebrations all the more enjoyable!

Shock at tragic death

Every now and again I find myself in Foxe's Bar in Roscommon enjoying a quiet pint. In the past year or two the pint was often served by Ronan McCormack, a young man who I didn't know at all except through his work as a barman there.

It often struck me what a friendly, good-humoured and likeable man he was; he had a terrific personality, was a brilliant barman and seemed to always be in good humour. He had a refreshing attitude to life.

Like everyone else I was shocked to hear of Ronan's tragic death in a traffic accident at the weekend. It is clear that he was an incredibly popular young man, and I know from speaking to some of the army personnel present at the funeral, that he was a rising star in the Defence Forces.

The funeral earlier this week was emotional and heart-rending, and also a great tribute to the popularity of Ronan McCormack and evidence of the heartache in the community and the sympathy felt for his loved ones.

Our sympathies to Bob and Jacqui, Angelina, Fiona, Clement, further family members and Ronan's huge number of friends, acquaintances and army colleagues. May he rest in peace.



Members of the Anti-Head Shop Committee pictured in Roscommon town.

I know from speaking to some members of the committee in recent weeks that the campaign was taking its toll, and that was evidenced by the reduced protests. But the determination had not wilted. Every week or so a new

initiative was dreamed up by these determined people, whether it was organising interviews for the press, appearing on RTE's 'The Frontline' or writing to the owner of the premises. All the while ongoing weekly protests

continued outside the shop in Castle Street, Roscommon. The Roscommon committee had led the way in what developed into a mass opposition to Head Shops across the country. The *Roscommon People* broke the story of

the arrival of a Head Shop in Roscommon and a small number of concerned people responded, firstly organising a petition and then setting up a protest committee. The rest is recent history.

We give out about our Government a fair deal, but this week it is only right to say that this was an example of real leadership. In fact it makes you wonder why the Government doesn't act firmly like this more often!

This crackdown is the type of decisive and dramatic leadership that we have been crying out for from people like Taoiseach Brian Cowen. All involved deserve full credit for acting as they have done this week.

On Tuesday evening, stunned members of the Roscommon Anti-Head Shop Committee gathered outside the 'High Times' shop in Roscommon to celebrate. They had got 'closure' in every sense. The shop had closed. The campaign had succeeded. It was a stunning success for 'people power' and one hopes that these wretched shops are indeed closed for good and that they will not bounce back into our lives...through loopholes.

Young people will walk down the streets of Roscommon this weekend. They may face temptation, and no doubt illegal drugs are available through particular channels around the town – sadly. But they will pass an empty premises and there will be no high times to be had via a hatch or an open door, no sinister gateway offered. Good riddance to it.

Finneran and Kelly raise political temperature

The not very thinly-veiled animosity between the most established politician in the county and one of the most ambitious, promises to develop into a full-scale verbal running battle in the coming months.

Cllr. John Kelly, one-time Independent, now a Labour man, may be wrapped up in bed with Fianna Fail folk in the Council chamber – but he doesn't want to be tucked in by Fianna Fail's Mr. Big in this county, Michael Finneran.

Finneran is the man who must defend the Fianna Fail-led Governments of recent years – something he's happy to do – and as such he is very much in the political line of fire for Kelly.

Kelly romped to success in the 2004 local elections and when he decided to run in the 2007 general election he wasn't slow about taking on then Deputy Finneran and Fianna Fail.

Finneran was re-elected in 2007 and subsequently promoted to Minister of State status. Cllr. Kelly had a good election



Minister Michael Finneran and Cllr. John Kelly.

outing, but he was not on the winners' podium. As the election dust settled he made what was arguably an ill-judged comment, indicating that while he had been dancing alone up to now he might tango with Fianna Fail or Fine Gael (if it meant an offer of marriage and a reception in Dail Eireann).

Ever since, Fianna Fail and Fine Gael have watched his every move with the same nervousness with which a stressed teacher might view a potentially errant pupil.

A few months ago, Kelly made his move; he had found a political partner, but it was the dashing Eamonn Gilmore, and if Kelly's Council bed was occupied by Fianna Failers, he would be going home at night to the cuddlier-than-ever Labour Party.

Some would say that if the determined and impressive Kelly is to gain election to the Dail he will have to leave a Fine Gael man trailing in his wake; yet his arrows remain firmly aimed in the direction of Minister Finneran. The Minister is not just duck-

ing; now he's off-loading a few arrows of his own. Last week, admittedly when given an invitation to do so by this writer, the Minister taunted Kelly, calling him an opportunist and pointing to his alleged willingness to dance with 'devils' if it means securing the keys to political paradise.

This week Cllr. Kelly responded by claiming that Minister Finneran is suddenly showing a new-found interest in South Roscommon of all places (where Finneran's career began). Kelly says Labour are making strides in Monksland and surrounding areas (which, given the Minister's background is a bit like telling your enemy that his neighbours now prefer you to him).

There are many more dancers ready to take to the election dance floor – some of them very high-profile – but for now, the pre-election atmosphere is defined by the Minister and the Labour man and the tensions that separate them.