

[Transcript] Leading / 27: Feargal Sharkey: Teenage Kicks, Bobby Sands, and saving our rivers

Welcome to the Restless Politics Leading with me, Alistair Campbell, flying solo today without Rory Stewart, who is logistically challenged, shall we say, between airports. But I'm delighted to be joined by somebody who you'll have heard, if you listened to the Restless Politics Question Time a few days ago, and who has got a very, very interesting history. We'll talk a bit about your childhood. We'll talk a bit about your career, very successful career as a musician. But the reason why you're on Leading is because in recent months in particular, you've become a really prominent and significant voice in a very, very important cultural, political, social, economic debate. And that is water. So welcome, Virgil Sharkey. Alistair Campbell, thank you very much. And thank you for the glorious praise and wise words and insight, all of it completely untrue, of course. I don't think it tells me bashful and retire quietly back to my home in North London. I don't think you will, because I think there's a wonderful quote from Roosevelt who said, people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. Yeah. Now, I get the impression that you know a lot about the water industry, that you do your homework, you do your research, you're mildly obsessive. But more importantly, you care. Now, I guess your character is key to this. You've obviously got a personality that you're driven and you, if you decide upon something, you go for it. I just want to go right back to the beginning. You ended up living most of your life in England. But how much of a Northern Irishman do you feel? I would listen distinctly because it's what created me. And it is very Freudian, but invariably tell me about your childhood. And in my case, that was quite an interesting childhood. My father was chairman of the Labour Party in Derry when there was such a thing. Yeah. Do you think, by the way, do you think there should be again? Oh, I think there should be. Oh, absolutely. And that's ironically enough, when my father passed away, the Irish Times did this quite big obituary. And even in the 1950s, he spent huge amounts of time in this ultimately futile effort of trying to reach out to the Protestant community on the simple basis that everybody needed to bury the hatchet of sectarianism, because the industrialists in Northern Ireland were using that division to separate the working classes, to diffuse their ability to make a cohesive, strong argument about pay conditions, holiday pay, maternity pay, housing and everything else. And it was used to exploit the working classes in both communities. Now, as it turns out, I could argue that my dad was clearly 40 years ahead of his time and trying to make that argument. And he never made the inroads to it. He was also a branch secretary of his local union, the Electricians Union. I'm still traumatized and probably spend years in therapy about being taken as an eight, nine year old child to a meeting, a union meeting, and I'm in a room with 400 other men and my father. They're all referring to him as brother Sharky. And as a confused eight-year-old, I'm going to who the hell are these people? I've never met any of these. You're not my brother. You're not my uncle. You're not my dad's brother. I have no idea who you are. What are you calling my dad, brother Sharky? The truth is, in the Sharky family, wasn't my dad was the political powerhouse. Like all good Irish matriarchal families, that would be my mother. My mom was massively motivated about the civil rights movement, massively motivated about trying to preserve the Irish language and culture and the arts, and was friends with people like Brian Freeland and Chano Casey and all kinds of people. And it was my mom who, on the morning of April the 9th, 1969, demanded that the whole family climbed into the car. The dad drove us all to the opposite side of Ireland, whereas a family,

[Transcript] Leading / 27: Feargal Sharkey: Teenage Kicks, Bobby Sands, and saving our rivers

we took part in the people's democracy civil rights march between Belfast and Dublin, protesting against injustices to the Catholic community in Northern Ireland.

You'd have been 12. I was 10. You were 10 then, okay.

10, 11. Just a minute. And just on your names, we know you as Fergal Sharky. You're actually called Sean Fergal Sharky. Sean. Oh, bloody hell. You're called Sean Fergal Sharky, right?

And just tell us who you were named after. If anybody knows a song, an Irish song called Sean South from Gabriel. Sing it, sing it. I'm afraid not even the Restless Politics podcast can afford that excessively modest fee. Sean South and Fergal O'Hanlon were killed,

attacking a police station in Northern Ireland in January of 1957, a year before I was born.

My mother, clearly without the aid of Ultrascan or other aides, clearly decided that if her newborn child was going to be about a boy, she was going to name him Sean Fergal in honour of two dead IRA men.

Now, what might that tell you about my mother's politics?

Well, it gives me a fair indication that she wasn't maybe as committed to the Labour Party causes your dad. And how do you feel about that?

Oh, well, listen, conversely, it's one of those things that I grew up in a household where it's extraordinarily thinking about it. And it is incredibly frightening, but I hope it does answer your question. There was nights in my kitchen that the local plumber, the electrician, the housewife, the local poet, the local schoolteacher would discuss bringing down the national government in Northern Ireland. And I watched as a 10, 11, 12-year-old child. I watched the local housewife electrician, plumber, or electrician schoolteacher bring down the bloody government in Northern Ireland or play a role in achieving that. So I grew up in a house where, well, anything's possible. The other bit, my mom organised this festival called Físt at a Column Kill, which was all about preserving the Irish language and culture and everything else.

So other nights, there'd be people having mad philosophical arguments about the merits and disdains of how much Seamus Heaney tried to replicate William Butler Yeats.

And maybe you should get his own gig together. So when I reflect upon it, you just go, what an extraordinary household and an extraordinary opportunity to grow up in.

What an extraordinary life they've led. And would you say you share the basic politics of your parents?

Oh, listen, without exception. I did. There's no way around that whatsoever.

And I still have this very simple belief that society has an obligation to protect the vulnerable.

And that's kind of my opening game and any game of politics whatsoever.

And so when did you leave Northern Ireland?

That was the early 1980s. I think 83, 84. It'll come as no surprise that the early undertones, we tried quite hard to kind of still live there. I think we were incredibly conscious that, oh, God, are we going to be that classic little band has a bit of a hit.

And that's it. You're out of there within five minutes. And the next people see of you, you're in some national newspaper surrounded by champagne bottles and lots of cash.

And we tried really hard to just be those kids back in Derry. But by the early 1980s, and particularly when I was clearly focusing on going out to try and make my own records, invariably, that was going to mean a move to London.

And just tell me a little bit. I'm fascinated in the way bands come together in the whole

[Transcript] Leading / 27: Feargal Sharkey: Teenage Kicks, Bobby Sands, and saving our rivers

the creative process. I mean, just give me a flavor of what being a young want to be professional musicians like at that time.

It was a completely random act of coming together where there was literally two brothers and a couple of their friends, 15, 16, 17. Oh, let's be in a band. Okay. But we've got no gear. And by the way, it doesn't matter because nobody can play anything anyway.

Oh, but we need somebody to can sing because we're not good any good at it. Oh, well, I know this bloke in school called Sharky. He's on all these fishes and all these Irish singing competitions. He wins loads of medals. I'll ask him and maybe he'll come and sing.

And the first time I turned up and met the other guys that were to become the undertones, little did I know that all the kit they had, the guitars, the amplifiers, the drums, they actually owned none of it. They completely borrowed every bit of it.

And as it turned out, nobody could play a thing. So what are the chances in the big universe we all live in that five random kids with no outward talent ability or background could just come together within two years of creating teenage kicks? How did that work? It was literally people just sitting around going, well, I've got this tune. I've got this idea for something. What do you think? And ironically enough, we were always driven curiously at the time by criticism and by people going, you can't do that. See, there's more Freudian. It's just occurred to me. At the time in Ireland and around where we grew up, there were kind of tribute bands. So there was a local band that could play the whole of Dark Side of the Moon by Pink Floyd. Absolutely no perfect. And that's what they would do every Friday night. We'd get up on a pub and they would play Dark Side

of the Moon by Pink Floyd. Absolutely no perfect. They looked at us and go, well, you can't play. Yeah, well, you're rubbish. And that would just kind of make us go and practice even more.

And then we realized, well, they can't play their own songs. So you know what? We're going to write songs. Now, we'd no idea what we were doing. So we just made it up as we went along. And it is just one of those random acts of creativity. You've been around it enough, Alistair. You can put five people from creative backgrounds in a room and nothing will happen. It'll be the most boring hour you've ever spent of your life. But you just put five different personalities in.

And for some unknown reason, the way they interact and relate to each other, suddenly this magic occurs. And suddenly we, the original idea was thanks to a guy in Belfast called Terry Hulley, who ran a little record shop, who let us borrow 100 quid to pay for 8-hour studio time. So one week we went and spent four hours in the studio recording.

We went back a week later and spent another four hours mixing it. Oh, by the way, we had no idea what we were doing. And I still to this day think I was standing there going, well, a bit more of the blue knob, please. But I have no idea what the blue knob actually bloody will do. And if you've ever seen the movie and if you haven't, good vibrations of movie. It's about Terry. Yes, that did happen. We're there in the studio and everybody else, we're just doing our thing. And everybody else in the studio sitting there listening to teenage kicks being recorded for the first time, just going, oh my God, we've never heard anything like this.

And we're just going, yeah, but we're five kids from Darien. This is what we do.

Brilliant. And you were on top of the pops on the night that Bobby Sands died.

Yeah. So what did your mum think of that? Talk about your life going in a different direction. I don't listen completely. And that's if you now go back and look at the footage,

[Transcript] Leading / 27: Feargal Sharkey: Teenage Kicks, Bobby Sands, and saving our rivers

you'll see that some of the band were wearing black armbands.

Ah. See, the way you say, ah. Were you? Were you? I wasn't, but some of the band did.

Right. Why did you not? This is one of the most iconic developments within the whole piece, while the whole troubles was this Bobby Sands hunger strike. Oh. He became a symbol.

Without question, unfortunately in Irish history, it was just repeating a game that had been played out any number of times before. So was it a monumental moment in Irish history? Yes, it was.

And that's invariably you get into those conversations of, well, we cannot do it.

And would that be a protest? That they'll just put somebody else on. And by the way, for a three minute slot on top of the pops, there'll be 50,000 other people out there will take that, in which case nobody even knows you've done it. Or do we do it? And without mentioning anything to

the BBC, a couple of the band turned up wearing black armbands and the BBC just filament and broadcasted. They had no idea what was going on until it was explained to them several days later.

All right, Fergal, lots more fascinating stuff in your life to come after a break.

How do you feel about the, about what's going on in Northern Ireland now? I mean, you know, just track back a bit. How have you seen Northern Ireland develop? How do you feel about it now? Well, you see, ironically enough, this Ireland's kind of an extraordinary place where the Republic of Ireland 30 years ago, 85% of the population of the Republic of Ireland would go to mass on a Sunday. And price we get up and puppets and tell 85% of the population what to do and we would all do it. So here's the thing, in 30 years, the Republic of Ireland became the first country in the world that a national referendum to pass a quality of marriage legislation has amended the constitution not once, but twice to legalise abortion and contraception.

And as we speak at this very moment in time, it's been governed by the openly gay son of an Indian immigrant and an atheist poet who was re-elected for a second term as president.

Well, what the hell were you people doing? I left you alone for five minutes and look what happened. So it's true. And it's part of where politics fails. And it brings us back to Westminster.

Is it divisive? And is it an affront to democracy in the modern world that there is not an assembly in Northern Ireland? Yes, there is. That is an outrageous situation. And it's one that needs to be resolved. And I will point the finger, both the politicians in Northern Ireland, but I might add Alistair, if you haven't seen it, and in fact, I think at this point, it should be compulsory viewing for every single politician, certainly Northern Ireland, if not most definitely in Whitehall. Once upon a time Northern Ireland, the first episode, there is a clear lesson and reminder that's where we've come from under no circumstances. Should we have any ambition to go back there? But equally, I'm afraid I have to say to Alistair, you end up tracing the world back to Whitehall in number 10 in the complete disregard and scant regard that number 10 and this government

has shown towards Northern Ireland and the people of Ireland and the future of Northern Ireland, whether it's part of United Ireland or not, but they have just shown little, if any, interest if not utter disdain and disregard. And again, a plague of locust in all of the houses for that. Northern Ireland's possibly on the edge of going through quite a few difficult years and I would be really resentful to see that happen. Yeah. So just give us a sense of what your life is like at the moment. When it seems to me every time I turn the radio or the telly on, they are talking about water. In reality, I actually had retired from life 10 years ago. And that, by the way,

is an extraordinary thing for a man to be able to say that at 55, I kind of just went, that's it, I'm happy to hang up my boots and I've made my contribution to life and I'm going to retire. And then by osmosis and accident, found myself engaged in something. I, if a huge passion for fly fishing, I became chairman of the oldest fly fishing club in England. You've now shed most of your listeners at this point. And I suddenly realized that here was two and a half miles of river in Hertfordshire that for 185 years, a group of men and women with an interest in fly fishing had looked after and preserved. And 185 years later, that river was about to die. It was suffering from eutrophication. It had become nothing more than a stagnant pond. And this is a chalk stream, one of the rarest ecosystems on the planet. I, like a lot of people thought, well, this is easy because there's a big regulator out there called the Environment Agency and Parliament set them up and give them all these powers and control. And I'll just tattle off and have a quick meet with the Environment Agency and go, this is dreadful, you need to do something about it. And I could then get on with my life. And I think it was about 10 minutes into that first meeting when my BS detector went off and went, oh my God. And then I realized that I was going to have to go and pick a big fight. And it was that specific stretch of water that triggered this whole thing, this whole campaign? Yes, to give you a little indication of this, Southern England is unique. There are about 225 chalk streams on the planet. They're a complete freak of geology. And think 50 to 75 million years ago, when London was sitting somewhere off the equator, and we were still joined in Northern France. And there are 225, 85% of them are here in Southern England. And most of them right now are tatering on the brink of extinction because of the way we've treated them, abused them and exploited them. And the one that the Amal Magna looks after, we have been in charge of for
yeah, 185 years. It is one of the last remaining places on the very age of London where you can still find a breeding sustainable population of wild brown trout. I know that seems like a silly thing to say, but let me put it this way. I suspect we might come on to it. There are within them 25 about 200 miles of river, all tributaries of the Thames. I have walked every single mile of every single one of those rivers. Not that long ago, there would have been full of hundreds of thousands of populations of trout salmon and sea trout. We've decimated all of them. We've killed them all off. We've brought them to the eggs of extinction, apart from one little two and a half mile stretch in Hertfordshire. And rather curiously, I thought that might be worth saving. Yeah. So why haven't you saved the rest, Vogel? Well, I'm doing my best right now, which is why, fully enough, I guess we're here where the short version is I ended up working with a charity taking the Environment Agency pretty much to the steps of the High Court. Simply to get them to do the right thing. Now, I will admit that at this point we've resolved our issues with the Environment Agency. There is more water and plentiful water going down that river than we've seen in decades. But that experience of having to put the very government agency charged
and given responsibility and the legal power to oversee and protect those rivers, having to take them to court, just to get them to do their job, that kind of pricked my curiosity. And as I sometimes explain it, that gave me an itch. And foolishly, stupidly, naively, I scratched that bloody itch. And every time I scratch that itch, I just end up with an even bigger itch. So what's the biggest itch at the moment? Oh, simple fact, at a national scale,

there is not a single river in England that is some good overall environmental health. Every single river in England is polluted. And it's our fault. And you scale that back, most of that, or at least a large deal of it, has been driven by the water industry. And this is an industry that is supposed to provide water, supposed to collect and dispense with an appropriate manner our sewage. But as we have now discovered, and I hope I may have made some small meager contribution to help the public understand, this is an industry that has made off with £72 billion worth of our money from our pockets, have left these companies and £60 billion worth of debt, now spent £7.5 million hours over the last three years dumping sewage into our rivers, decimating whole landscapes and ecologies, and has now created a situation where, believe it or not, I can't believe I'm saying it. London is now number nine on global cities, most likely to run out of drinking water. We're now on a list, along with the likes of Cape Town, San Paolo, Mexico City and Jakarta. I should say, by the way, back to my point about nobody cares how much you know, you're sitting here without a note, you kind of do seem to me to know this stuff inside out. What do you think it says about our politics, that it's taken, you know, false molestia aside, it has taken you in a way to bring this to the head? Oh well let's do the simple truth of the matter is, we have a regulatory system that is failed. And you're right, that makes me quite furious. Within the next 24 hours there will be yet another hearing and another select committee in Parliament calling in the chair and chief executive of the regulator, the leaders of Thames Water and holding another inquiry. My argument is, why are we calling in the chair and chief executive of Offwood? We need the board in there. They're the public appointees, they're the ones appointed by the Secretary of State to act on behalf of government and therefore Parliament and indeed to the end act on behalf of the general public. They're the ones that set the policy, they're the ones that set the strategy. Why are we not holding those people to account for the decisions they've made on our behalf and not some helpless chief executive? If you had to sort of, I hate the concept of apportioning blame, but if you had to apportion blame for the mess that we're in, just go through the various culprits. Well you have to listen, you have to start. For me there's a very simple thing and I'm very happy and I can pentamentalise things quite quickly and simply. Did the water companies make an awful lot of money and was an awful lot of corporate greed involved or as Jonathan Ford from the FT refers to as the water industry says the legalised rip off? Absolutely, but that's why the regulators were there and we've not got one but we've got two regulators overseeing the water industry, Offwatt and the environment agency and both of them and I say this is a former regulator, both of them have been the most catastrophic failure I can think of. The impact that we're now going to be faced as society is there is a catastrophic amount of money that now needs to be spent repairing the sewage system, securing London's water supply. I suspect we taxpayers and customers are going to end up picking up the tab for that incompetence and if we have any kind of will at all to ensure that you can, as I know as a passion of yours, walk into the nearest river and go swimming in it without being confronted with the ugly underbelly of our sewage system and I do mean wet wipes and sanitary products and contraceptives then we now have another even bigger amount of money to be spent and all of it is now probably directly and indirectly going to be picked up by the taxpayer and by the bill payer and all of it actually boils down to nothing more than utterly incompetent catastrophic failure of regulation. Okay so

that says to me that you're basically saying the regulations failed, the companies agreed, what about the very the original decision back in 1989 privatisation? Could you see any merits in that at the time? Well listen to that personally speaking no but then as you know I come from a socialist background where here's the thing 30 years later England, so far as I'm aware, England is still unique in that we're the only country in the world that has an absolutely 100% privatised water system and what does that tell you that there's not a single country anywhere else in the planet that went for that model? Clearly there may be some kind of inherent flaw to the whole design and application of it, there's any amount of joint partnerships with local authorities, national governments, private sector that England is the only country 30 years later with a completely 100% private sector and clearly it's an experiment that has catastrophically failed. And even the Financial Times said that last weekend, this is an experiment that's failed. What would you make of the current, I'm assuming, Therese Coffey as the minister-in-charge? Give me your assessment there. Well listen to the best deception that I can give you is and I did it, it's a badge I wear with honour and pride if you go and do have a look at my Twitter profile you see I've actually quoted on there chunters on Twitter quote in quotation marks Therese Coffey's secondary state for the environment UK 2023 so that's clearly what Therese thinks of

me and my little efforts there. Have you had any meetings with her? No, no this night I had one brief meeting four or five years ago with Rebecca Pye and Alistair you'd ask about kind of my encyclopedic knowledge of these things I very quickly realised from my early interactions going back four maybe five years ago every time I spoke to somebody from government spoke to somebody from

the environment agency off what or the industry and I'm trying to say this as diplomatically as I should and maybe not as diplomatically as I really should I quickly realised that at best I was been given a half-truth if not a downright fabrication of what the reality of the event and situation was and that's why I had to go and spend hours digging this stuff out by instinct and just replicating the instinct you have as a journalist to many others

you just know there's something going on here and you're just going to have to keep pushing until you find it so whenever I sit down and people go oh well it's because we've got this Victorian sewage system uh I'm really sorry we may as well blame the bloody Romans for traffic jams on the M2

and the M25 they we don't have a Victorian system oh but government's going to spend 56 billion pound fixing this okay that's over 28 years that's amongst 11 water companies that works out at 181 million pounds per company per year to give your listeners a bit of context just before Christmas Thames Water declared 493.5 million pound profit in six months now compare the supposed government grand scheme investment of 181 million pounds a year against Thames Water's

half a billion pound profit in six months just to put it into context do you feel you're making headway or do you feel you're banging your head against the brick wall oh no and that's a I'm happy to admit it and I know some people in Whitehall find that I feel I'm being disruptive but I'm genuinely not I've lost control of this government's lost control of this the water industry's lost control of this if you're not aware three weeks ago yukov did a poll 69 percent of voters think that the water company should now be nationalized and if I remember correctly that's feasible by

[Transcript] Leading / 27: Feargal Sharkey: Teenage Kicks, Bobby Sands, and saving our rivers

the way uh well it's not because we can't afford it you accept this oh yes no listen I I think we can assume right now um and since we probably share a number of acquaintances um I think that if there is a change of administration at the next election there's one certainty we can actually all depend upon the economy is just in such a catastrophic state that government will be utterly focused and just trying to maintain some basic public services and functions like education in the NHS and by the way that nurse that needs a pay rise are you really going to explain to that nurse that you've just given several more tens if not hundreds of billions of pounds of the public's money so where does your campaign go oh well for me it's very simple right now it's all about the campaign and right now we have the situation where Thames water is now teaching in the bank of bankruptcy there are four other companies to my certain knowledge are not that far behind

we now have the opportunity to now start dictating the shape and future of those companies and personally speaking I think the legislation's already there government already has the power the regulators already have the power we need now to sit down with these companies and the shareholders

and the bond managers and go here's how this works you're going to feel a lot of pain for the next five 10 15 years but if you agree to what we're going to suggest you will end up with successful debt-free companies facing a profitable future and it won't have cost the taxpayer a penny so you have government control without government ownership so I'm going to give you the wherewithal

for section 18 of the water industry act 1991 whoever drafted it predicted this very situation and it was a very insightful judgment Theresa Coffey the secretary of state could fix most of this this afternoon with nothing more than the stroke of a pen she's had that power since the day she took office the question actually becomes why hasn't she actually used that power in that authority okay well Theresa if you're listening you can come on and explain any point you like and we might even get Fergal back from there and they're showing now you mentioned earlier that you

had experience as a regulator so this is this is when you kind of went into the into the music industry as just describe what you did well ironically enough I did go off into the music industry I got to you about 30 I think and as I sometimes describe it I began to have this reoccurring nightmare of waking up one day to discover I was the wrong side of 50 with receding hairline and a ponytail yeah it's good and still deluding myself that I might be back in top of the pups this week and thinking it's not a good look Sharky it's really not um grateful that I'd had the career I had the undertones a thing with Vince Clark and the assembly my solo career there's three careers more than most people ever get close to so I thought again naively stupidly

arrangantly at 30 that I could make a whole career path choice jump and still end up doing something reasonably productive and interesting in life so I went to work for record companies along the way because of my fly-facing thing I managed to contract Wiles disease where it's nearly killed me but not quite that left me quite kind of a debilitated in mid 1990s and again I'm not blowing smoke in your direction allister but as it turned out while I was recuperating from all of that incapable of going back to work full time just physically not capable of it and at the time there was a Labour government who had

introduced and was beginning to implement a set of recommendations by a man called Lord Noland around the whole idea of propriety in public life and who tore apart and reexamined the whole issue of public appointees and it was the then Labour government that actually advertised openly competitive

application process for board positions on the radio authority. Now would this also be a government you would exempt from some of the criticisms of the commitment to Northern Ireland?

Yes. Thank you.

I know this and I can get into that one in another occasion.

So you then became?

I became the one of the people that were responsible for regulating the commercial radio industry in the United Kingdom so as it turns out and I kind of it's a bit late now early in my little challenges my little approach to the water industry and stuff I clearly made quite a lot of effort to make sure that nobody actually vaguely knew I might actually know something about regulation that I had worked but it's not out there. So I would like to think that when I openly and furiously criticise the likes of off what and the environment agency I would like to think that I can do it from a position of some strength knowledge and experience having done that kind of job myself in the past. And then you also CEO of British Music, right?

UK Music. So how does that work? Is that about getting them the money they deserve from all the different? Yeah that actually again it goes back to the Labour government and this is not a kind of love in for the Labour government by the way. It's a great great government though.

I mean we already says this all the time you know Labour government has been making overtures for the music industry for a number of years going you know what we obviously think the creative industry is awfully fantastic and we want to do everything we can to try and help them out because when it comes to music, film, fashion, design, writing, reading, the UK punches way above its own weight in the international stage and is gloriously recognised and admired for the contribution it makes. So as a government we want to try and do something to help support and make sure you're getting everything you need from a government. At the time the music industry was full of its own warring parties and I very loosely describe it as traditionally all of the recording artists hate the record companies and the record companies all hate the publishers and the publishers all hate the lawyers and the lawyers all hate the songwriters and the songwriters all hate the managers and everybody all hates their agents and on and on and on. And I was tasked by the industry to basically put the 12 warring sectors in a room to help them develop consensus to help them create an ambition and a vision for their own future and help them to bring that differentiation and the structure that was used to achieve that is UK music. I'm pleased to say that 12, 14 years, 15 years after I put the thing together it's still there still providing the heartbeat. I can still remember fawning a mutual friend of ours who I won't name who at the time was an advisor at number 10 and telling him what had just been done and the voice on the other end of the phone slightly more colourfully am I about to say it somebody went oh my god that's all the talent and all the money in the same room yes and by god does that give you strength and power enormous and I think it was a valuable lesson for the music industry and after that the British music industry there's any number of challenges I'm not going to mention the b-word but I will. Well I want you to actually I want to know what the impact of Brexit on you.

Well it's certainly devastated the live music industry. There are two teams in the Premier

[Transcript] Leading / 27: Feargal Sharkey: Teenage Kicks, Bobby Sands, and saving our rivers

League and the global music industry. There's the North Americans and the UK and it's no disrespect to the rest of the planet they're all playing Sunday League morning football and heckly marshes. It's nice you're there you're having fun but you're nowhere near the two big boys and that Anglo-American catalogue as we call it generically in the industry loosely would account until right quite recently would loosely account for about 80% of the market in Europe and now we've just gone made it massively more difficult for ourselves that when the government should be sitting with UK music on behalf of the industry and going we like this 80% stuff do you think we could make it 85 or maybe even 90 and can we come up with a plan and a strategy that'll deliver that and all the benefits that does to our GDP and income and joints and employment and VAT and everything else no we've actually made it more difficult if not downright impossible for British artists in now going work and tour in Europe and I've recently believed that this government actually was made several offers by the EU they try and find a resolution to this and flatly turned them all down to such an extent even the likes of Elton John who's just finishing off a global tour which according to the newspapers that one tour alone generated 700 million dollars worth of income and even Elton was complaining he was finding a difficulty deal with the bureaucracy the paperwork needed to go and actually do dates around the rest of Europe so I'm assuming your mum raised you to want to one day see United Ireland yeah do you still want to see that do you still think you will um well ironically enough I never thought in my lifetime I would ever use the words unified Ireland and remotely be taken seriously thanks to Brexit has clearly put that nine on the table I wasn't being particularly insightful about it but at the time I did try to make it clear to as many people as possible if Brexit happened that was going to force a border down the middle of the Irish sea and that invariably would make people in Northern Ireland socially culturally economically look more towards the Republic than England we're now in a situation where Sinn Féin is the largest party in Northern Ireland there's a distinct likelihood at the next election in the Republic of Ireland Sinn Féin will become the largest party in the Republic of Ireland so here's the thing thanks to Brexit that chess piece is now out on the table I think if everybody's been really clever thanks to that Susan Mackay book that Rory mentioned a couple of episodes back it provides a remarkable insight in that there's a community in Northern Ireland right now resigned to the fact that change is going to happen but feeling desperately insecure and unsupported and isolated and I think politicians on both sides of the border in the north and the Republic will want to be very sensitive about that point and that community and their future and let me remind you all thanks to the Good Friday Agreement the people of Ireland get to have another referendum so they get to have another decision and another bite and whether or not Northern Ireland wants to become part of United Ireland and by default rejoin the EU there's a lot to play for I mean it is amazing when you think about Fergal there's you as sort of you know punk rocker who had the foresight to see that Brexit might lead to the necessity for a border down the ROC but Boris Johnson didn't have that foresight um well isn't it the simple fact the matter is he didn't even go to eat him did you uh well fully enough I didn't I find myself in the clutches of the Christian brothers but if it if it helps Alistair I

[Transcript] Leading / 27: Feargal Sharkey: Teenage Kicks, Bobby Sands, and saving our rivers

many many many many many years later you don't have to go to eat him because many decades later I found myself standing in the middle of Catania the capital city of Sicily looking at the Roman ruins thinking bloody hell I can still translate that damn Latin inscription so you don't have to go to eat him to do those things very good have you ever thought about going into politics no because well I know a lot of politicians they're nice people but I've no ambition in that direction none whatsoever Alistair it's kind of kind of somebody to offer you're not going to run out campaigning zeal though I can sense that um no this night I am being very honest about it I was quite happy minding my own business in my retirement I go and you must love it walking around Hampstead

Heath as you were the other day and bumping into me and Fiona and Fiona saying you're my you're my hero you must love it given Alistair here's here's the weird thing all of my adult life since I've been 20 years old I can go all kinds of weird places in the world and the people do that and they wouldn't want to talk about music and records and gigs and t-shirts and interviews and stuff they'd seen and heard and what a glorious glorious life to lead and want in existence that these random people who you've never met will never ever see again just want to talk to you and enthusiastically and engagingly about music even now they want you to change the world because

they want you to get the water clean well now they want me to talk about if I can say it now they want to talk to me about shaitan rivers well guess what I'm really looking forward to I can go back to talking about music again and stop talking about shaitan rivers I don't think you've got some time to go before you stop talking about shaitan rivers well I'm clearly depending on there being a change of administration in about 12 months time that then I can now go and hang out my sewage boots and my sewage gloves do you think that will be enough though uh oh yes no I was very

genuinely uh I was asked essentially asked this question by the chair of the EA about five years ago as to what was driving me motivated me and I guess it was back to that childhood and grown up in northern Ireland it's when I realized that this country is full of incredibly decent little community groups in full of incredibly decent committed local people they're not militant they're not campaigners they're not activists they're not entomologists or hydrologists they're just decent local people that have known for decades that their river is slowly dying they don't understand

why they will go and organize petitions outside the local supermarket they'll present it to the environment agency they presented to government they put their trust in the system and the bit that made me furious was the system took that trust and abused it and dismissed it and that was all the motivation I needed now part of the thing I don't like about the system per go yeah is the all of the system right and you took an OBE now where's this empire where is this empire of which you've now got the order uh what did your mum think of that uh well you see ironically enough here's

the weird thing I uh one of my earliest childhood memories I spent a lot of time thinking about this as you will can probably understand as it turned out my father actually worked part-time for the British government and when he retired he was offered the British Empire Service Medal and I can still remember I must have been 12 or 13 this massive row going on at home and it was the only time I really saw my parents fall out with each other and that's because your mum didn't want

[Transcript] Leading / 27: Feargal Sharkey: Teenage Kicks, Bobby Sands, and saving our rivers

them to take it there you go and it left me completely traumatized and my family are probably hearing this for the first time I was so traumatized by the whole thing I actually ran out of the house and went to your local telephone box and called one of my older sisters to go you have to come quick I think my dad mum and dad are about to start the phone out with each other they're going to get divorced you have to come quick come quick um listen ultimately I have my own family I have my own children I have my own creed and ambitions for them and I suddenly thought you know what might it provide some motivation to my own children to say you can go out in the world and you can take on incredible challenges and you can take on things that people will tell you are impossible and undoable and you can deliver it and you can have the recognition for it and I know it may sound like a bit of a cop out but I did sit there thinking what a valuable lesson for my 18 year old daughter to learn very good well I think you definitely deserve something for your company but whether you do it for the planet or the empire anyways we absolutely enjoy talking to Virgil no no listen I'm just you know I'm fascinated I'm delighted and pleased and flattered that you even asked me to come and do this and it's a huge privilege and thank you very much enjoyed every second of it