

FINLAY'S PR CASEBOOK

IS Fergus Finlay, former handler to ex-Tánaiste Dick Spring and regarded as one of the canniest spin-doctors in that murky milieu, really so naïve about Diageo's motivation in funding the Stop-Out-Of-Control-Drinking stunt?

In his apology for the campaign in this week's *Irish Times*, Fungus actually underlined Diageo's agenda with withering sarcasm about the company being depicted as an "evil empire". He went on to praise Diageo to the heavens as it had "a long and proud tradition. It runs the most famous brewery in the world and it's a Dublin institution". Is that the kind of rhetoric that will stop people drinking Guinness and lager to excess?

However, it is the slip Finlay made on Twitter when challenged by Senator Jillian Van Turnhout about the campaign's secretariat that really gave the game away. Finlay named Goddard Global as the entity providing the secretariat back up for the group. Goddard has a most interesting history in the area of propaganda and regulation of harmful substances and has acted for British American Tobacco (BAT) in the past.

Goddard, with offices in Washington, London, Brussels and Cairo, claims that "We mobilise countries, corporations, groups, voters and other individuals to get behind issues... we shape public opinion". Indeed.

Goddard has experience in providing secretarial assistance to lobbying groups. When the British House of Lords EU sub committee was reviewing the EU Tobacco Products Directive (TPD) in 2013, it received a submission from members of the intriguingly named Common Sense Alliance. The Alliance exists to combat what it calls "excessive regulation" and in this case it claimed the TPD would lead to the growth of illicit tobacco products and the promotion of terrorism. It then emerged that it was



Fergus Finlay

Goddard who presented the submission on behalf of the Alliance and that Goddard was engaged to manage its secretariat. It was also established by the British Department of Health that the Alliance is supported by British American Tobacco (BAT).

In 2013 the World Health Organisation (WHO) received a Statement of Concern from over 500 public health professionals, alcohol scientists and NGOs from 60 different countries about an initiative by the global drinks industry, which it claimed would reduce harmful alcohol use. This triggered a response from WHO's director general, Dr Margaret Chan, who stated, "the alcohol industry has no role in the formulation of alcohol policies which must be protected from distortion by commercial or vested interests".

The fundamental criticism – by health professionals – of alcohol sponsored partnerships is that they deliberately focus attention on less effective anti-abuse policies to the detriment of serious efforts to tackle abuse. Is Finlay, chairman of the Diageo sponsored anti-alcohol abuse campaign, really unaware of the scientifically researched attitudes of WHO and the above mentioned alcohol scientists? And given his experience in 'public affairs' – he was once in charge of Wilson Hartnell PR's account for the Irish Tobacco Manufacturers' Advisory Committee – surely Fungus is aware of all the tricks of the PR and lobbying trade in the purveying of harmful substances.

The informal Oireachtas Cross Party Group on Alcohol, made up of ten or so

TDs and senators from all parties and Independents, certainly is. Finlay recently received a rebuff from the group following his request to meet them on behalf of his campaign group. However, the terms of reference of the Oireachtas alcohol group forbid the group from meeting with those connected to the drinks industry, in this case, Diageo. However, Fungus was informed that he could meet members of the group individually if he wished.

A ST PATRICK'S project being backed by Dublin City Council is called St Paddy's Unlocked, which is an alcohol-free initiative promoted by 'social entrepreneur' Peter O'Brien. Presumably, this will not end up a costly experience for those involved, as was the case with a previous O'Brien adventure.

O'Brien established his "online social network for people interested in climate change" back in 2007 along with Ken Kinsella of Gaia Equity fame (who resigned in 2008) and David Hayes, with the trio investing just €20 for their shares (O'Brien held an initial 45% stake). A couple of weeks later, the boys raised €1/4m at €82 a share from two eager investors – publican-turned-property developer, Hugh O'Regan and millionaire Zoe Quinn, daughter of Senator Feargal.

Subsequently, another €95,000 was raised from investors, with Quinn the main player here, stumping up €50,000. Other names included telecoms consultant Niall Tallon and John Holland, a shareholder and director of former 10cc frontman Kevin Godley's much-hyped music app venture.

However, despite the investment flowing in, it turned out that running a green online social network "offering users a unique personal carbon calculator" was harder than expected and the company was struck off the Companies Register in 2012 for failing to file accounts. The last figures available showed accumulated losses of €320,000 at the end of 2009.

O'Brien's new project, St Paddy's Unlocked – which got a big plug in The Sunday Times last weekend – is an initiative of a promotion entity he established called Happenings (O'Brien is also involved with a company called Upstart Collaborative Ltd with Samuel Bishop). Hopefully this 'green' venture will not also end up in the red.

