

Michael O'Doherty: Kevin Sharkey's 'Ireland First' plan is so ironic



Kevin Sharkey
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The 2018 presidential campaign is hotting up. While many believe that Michael D Higgins will seek a second term, TV presenter-turned artist Kevin Sharkey has thrown his hat into the ring – a move that's not without irony.

First, I wrote in this column two years ago about what an extraordinary luxury the presidency was at the time that the homelessness crisis was just becoming news.

Indeed, it was revealed that Sharkey was himself homeless, at the exact time that the catering budget for the president was revealed to be an eye-watering €16,500 a week.

So, at first instance, how ironic it is that Sharkey should now be seeking that very post, which comes of course with the ultimate perk of the 95-room residence in the Phoenix Park.

Sharkey is a man who has lived a thousand lives, and as such could well present himself as an ideal president for the people, someone who has experienced first-hand the depths of despair that are unknown to most politicians.

As Ireland's first black president, he would understand the difficulties that minorities face and open up a new period of inclusiveness.

Well, actually, not quite.

Because the greatest irony in Sharkey's tilt for the presidency is that it seems to be founded on an anti-immigration policy.

Speaking to Ray D'Arcy on Saturday night, he gave his surprising views on the subject.

"We've shifted away from looking after the Irish first," said Sharkey.

"I've seen the good and bad sides of immigration, how it helps a country to grow, but also how it puts a strain on resources.

"We have a history of helping people, and sometimes word gets out."

In expressing his opinion that Ireland is a soft touch when it comes to welcoming foreigners, Sharkey points out the dangers of such a policy.

"You go to the UK, and you see what mass immigration has done to certain parts. And if you say that, people call you xenophobic and racist. I say OK." At that point, his argument trailed off.

This stance is nothing new for Sharkey, of course. Two years ago, he gave an interview to a newspaper in which he announced his policy in very straightforward terms.

“Ireland first. It’s my principle, but it should be a law,” he said.

It’s an unfortunate slogan, given its echoes of Britain First, the notorious far-right political organisation across the water, which preaches a staunchly anti-immigration ethos.

There’s an unavoidable irony in Sharkey, whose Nigerian father benefitted from our policy of welcoming immigrants.

When asked whether he’s calling for restrictions on immigration, he said: “We should have an honest and open dialogue about it without being called racist.”

This vague response, which fails to give a straight answer to a straight question, might seem to heap further criticism on Sharkey. It does, however, suggest one thing – he would make a very good politician.

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