

# Why do we treat whistleblowers so horribly?

Caveat: A new book exposes rough treatment of whistleblowers in Irish financial services



AIB whistleblower Eugene McErlean, who exposed overcharging. Photograph: Eric Luke



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Throughout his career as an elected politician, Pat Rabbitte's greatest flaw was that he always seemed terribly pleased at how he had turned out.

The former Labour leader did indeed perform admirably as a minister and he was a pragmatic reformer, especially around the communications industry. But his former Labour colleague Kathleen Lynch hit the bullseye when she once scolded him for acting like "the smartest boy in the class".

Almost exactly 20 years on from his first attempt to introduce legal protections for whistleblowers, however, Rabbitte would be perfectly justified in feeling smug about his efforts. People often say vision is lacking in Irish politics, but Rabbitte's doomed Whistleblowers Protection Bill, first introduced in March of 1999, was genuinely visionary.



Irish Nationwide whistleblower Olivia Greene and her partner Brendan Beggan arriving at the Employment Appeals Tribunal in 2012. Photograph: Dara Mac Dónaill

Why did nobody listen to him, and what was the ultimate cost of our political system and our society's tin ear? We may never know.

But were his proposals to protect whistleblowers accepted back in 1999, our republic might have avoided some of the most grievous wounds that were inflicted on us all a decade later by our recalcitrant banking sector.

Don't buy the notion that what befell our State was inevitable. People within our financial institutions knew of the stupid risks being taken during the frothiest Tiger years.

## Under pressure

If they had had the protections envisaged in Rabbitte's Bill, which was eventually kicked to touch by Bertie Ahern under pressure from blinkered interests such as the employers group Ibec, perhaps more would have come forward. It mightn't have stopped the crisis, but it could have bought time. Eventually, in 2014, long after the horse had already bolted, the stable door was locked with the passing of the Protected Disclosures Act. Whistleblowers in this State who speak out against wrongdoing now have a wide range of sturdy protections against reprisals from their employers. Now they must only worry about reprisals from the rest of us. Whistleblowers are often revered as heroes in the press, but once the media pack moves on, the uncomfortable truth is that their lives are often left in pieces, they are sometimes shunned and even despised. It must be utterly soul-destroying for them.

Just ask people such as Jonathan Sugarman, who exposed liquidity risks at the Irish branch of Unicredit and later complained that it had ruined his career. Or loans supervisor Olivia Greene, who stood up to Michael Fingleton at Irish Nationwide Building Society (INBS), and was bullied so badly by many of her erstwhile colleagues that she frequently ended up in tears.

That is on us as a society. It always will be, and I know of no remedy for that deficiency in human behaviour. No Bill, no Act can change the Irish republican mindset, with its inherent suspicion of the motives of informers. Rabbitte recognised this 20 years ago. On the second reading of his Bill in June 1999, he noted in the Dáil: “Deciding whether or not to expose a suspected fraud or wrongdoing at work is difficult, and brings to light a slate of seemingly contradictory values.

“We don’t like cynical troublemakers and naysayers . . . We also have contempt for busybodies, squealers and tattletales.”

Two decades and one long-overdue set of legislative reforms later, the legal position has changed but society hasn’t really.

Later this month, academic Kate Kenny, a business professor at NUI Galway, will publish *Whistleblowing; Towards a New Theory*, a study of society's

treatment of whistleblowers in the financial industry in Ireland and across the globe.

## **Interviewees**