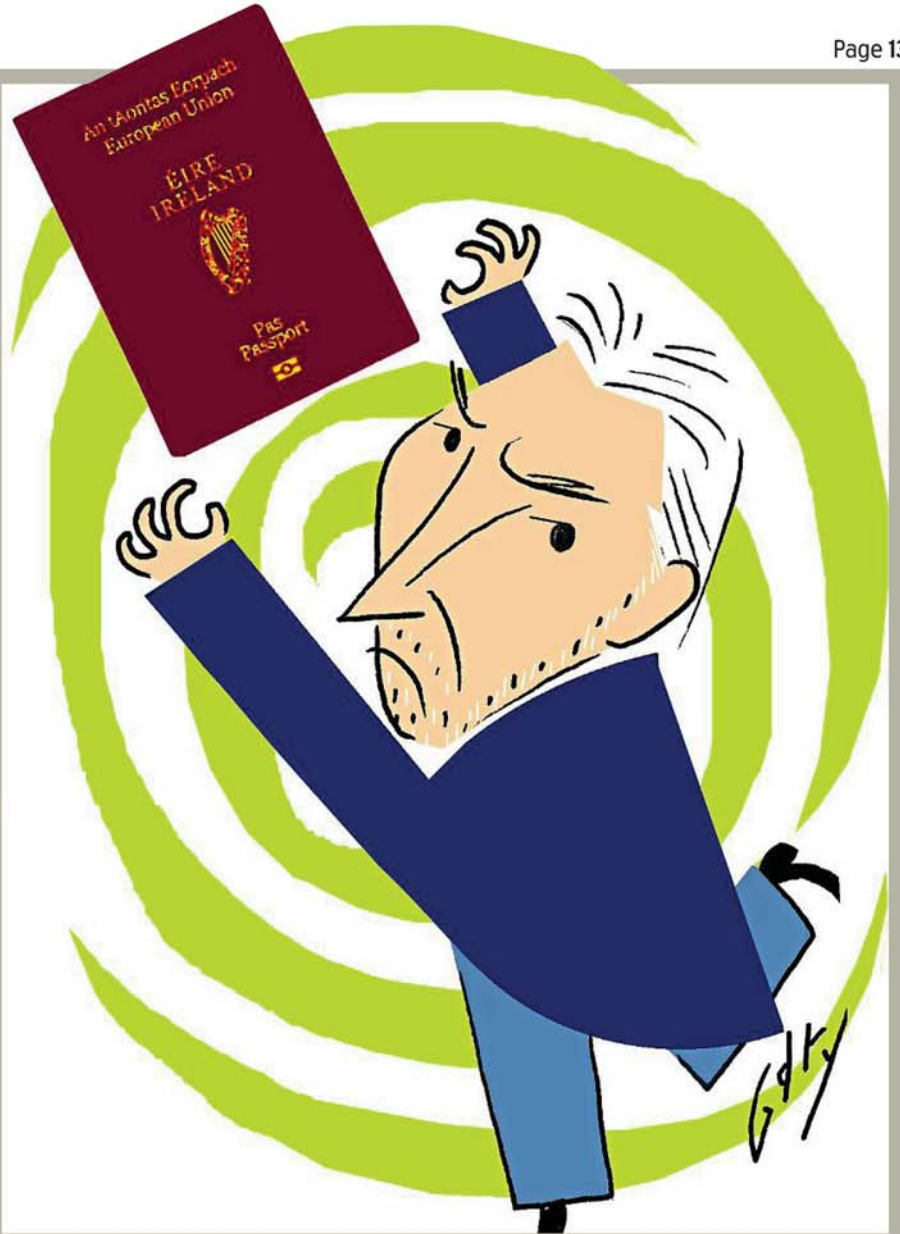


by Peter
Cunningham

Renewing a passport? Welcome to Homeland...

When one writer decided to book a flight, he had no idea of the clandestine mission that lay ahead...



AT noon one day last week, I approached the outskirts of Balbriggan as light snow fell. I was searching for the Fingal Bay Business Park. To the north, the white dusted Mountains of Mourne shone between snow flurries. Border country. Somewhere here, in an anonymous campus, a deep cover operation of the DFA, the Department of Foreign Affairs, had its base. This was North Co. Dublin's answer to Langley, the small town in Virginia that fans of Homeland will know as the location of the CIA.

My journey had begun over two weeks before, in rural Co. Kildare, when I took the decision to renew my passport. My local post office, on behalf of the DFA, offered a Passport Express service for €80 with a ten-day turnaround timeframe.

The DFA website recommended users to take this route. I paid my money and handed over my new pictures, signed by a garda, my completed form, and, fatally, my old (still in date) passport.

But nearly two weeks later, the day before my trip to Langley, no drop had taken place. Since I had travel plans, with flights booked and paid for, I went back to my post office. They looked at their computer and said, 'Oh, sorry, they're now saying there's like a two week-plus turnaround?'

I rushed home, logged on to the Passport Tracking service, using my barcode and cursing myself for my lack of vigilance.

The information popped up: my application had not been looked at since early February, the day after I had sent it in, and the 'target' date for completion was now after my intended travel date. I rang the Passport Office in Dublin.

A recorded voice said that due to the high volume of calls, they would be unable to speak to me. Or to take messages.

THEN I sent an email to the passport office, explaining my predicament. I also rang the DFA and was put through to a voicemail where I repeated my message and left my phone number. As the morning wore on, it dawned on me that I was getting nowhere.

What I really needed was my old passport back, so I sent two further emails. None of these emails, or phone calls, was ever acknowledged or answered.

I got into my car and drove to Dublin, to the new Passport Office in Lower Mount Street, where I entered a crowded waiting room, punched out a ticket and sat down for a two and a half hour wait.

We were a resigned if resilient group of over 50 people. As time wore on, we got to know each other and began to chat.

The common theme, understandably, was the passport serv-

ice, the absolute inability of this DFA outlier to communicate with anyone, except by physical confrontation, and the waste of a valuable day to achieve something that could so easily be done online.

Of course, we all understood that anger and frustration gets you nowhere. We were all ultimately powerless and at the mercy of the behemoth we had created, not to mention paid for.

Electronic digits flashed over the glass fronted booths until eventually, as in life, my number was called. With a smile pasted on my face, I spent a few minutes speaking to an extremely polite woman, who informed me, with regret, that my passport application form, and my old passport, were in... Balbriggan. This was the first time Balbriggan had been mentioned. I looked at her closely.

Had she let slip a vital clue? She seemed unconcerned as she typed an email on my behalf. My old passport would be posted back to me, she said. No, she could not say if it would arrive in time for my flight three days hence.

NO, they could not email me to say they had posted it, nor would anyone else. But, I blurted, I can go up to Balbriggan and collect it myself! She smiled kindly, as if to a child who does not yet understand. 'I'm sorry, no-one can go to Balbriggan,' she said. I went home. The next morning, no passport came in the post.

In Langley, meanwhile, as snow thinned to wind-borne sleet, I eventually found the Fingal Bay campus. It's a modern business park, built on a slightly elevated site. I drove up and down, past an assortment of businesses, all of them identified by signs outside. No building claimed to be a sleeper cell of the DFA. I parked my car.

The sleet gave way to a brief clearance as I trudged around, examining business plates, but nothing suggested a deep cover operation, or even a safe house. I made my way into the office of a firm of accountants, where a young woman sat at a computer.

I asked her straight out: did she know of a passport office in the vicinity. Her kind face broke into a knowing smile. 'Ah,' she said in a way that immediately spoke of secrets known.

'Follow me.' Outside, she pointed to a long, sleek, three-storey build-

ing at the bottom of the campus. 'The entrance is at the side,' she whispered. 'Good luck.'

The building could have been unoccupied, since there was zero indication of what, if anything, took place within it. I peered through two glass doors, both locked, into an empty reception area. A notice on the right hand door said, 'Use other door'. A notice on the other door directed visitors to an intercom.

BEFORE I had time to press the intercom button, a woman, presumably an undercover operative, appeared inside, took out cigarettes and opened the door.

I tried to step in. 'I'm sorry, you can't go in,' she said firmly. I wondered if I should try to enlist her to my cause, but she was now on her mobile as well as lighting up. I pressed the button.

A disembodied voice said, 'Yes?', and when I asked if this was the passport office, requested my barcode. I asked could I please come in, since it was minus 3 and beginning to snow again.

'Your barcode, please.'

Now reduced to a barcode, I took out my slip of paper and read the eleven digits into the intercom. I was told to wait. I stood, shivering. Several other agents came out to smoke, but avoided eye contact with me.

It's the same in Langley. Just look at Carrie Mathison. She never makes eye contact unless she's about to kill you.

The intercom crackled into life. 'Your old passport was posted out to you yesterday evening.'

I drove home.

With less than 20 hours before my flight, the handover took place. As in the old Berlin days of Checkpoint Charlie, the innocent little An Post van arrived in the spectral dawn and the drop was made. I'll now have to reapply and pay another €80, that's if I ever want to get off this island again. Meanwhile, on the DFA website, my original application still shows as pending, with its original delivery date unchanged. Maybe one among the many faces grinning down at us from the lampposts will improve this system, whenever they get into power, but I doubt it. In the meantime, I'm going undercover.

■ *Capital Sins* by Peter Cunningham is available on www.amazon.com