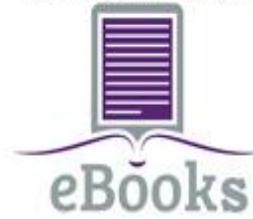


25 years

of Irish life through the columns of

Fintan O'Toole

THE IRISH TIMES



IRISH TIMES BOOKS

Published by: The Irish Times Limited (Irish Times Books)

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Watching from a window as we all stay the same

One of the most startling incidents in the Bible introduces the concept of the newspaper columnist. The young hero David enters Jerusalem in triumph as the new king of Israel, anointed by God and acclaimed by the people. He brings the sacred Ark of the Covenant, symbol of Jewish identity, back to the holy city. It is a moment of immense political and religious significance. David leads the Ark through the streets in a ritual dance.

But the narrator suddenly shifts our vision up to a high window and the watching figure of David's disaffected first wife Michal: "Michal looked out through the window and saw King David leaping and whirling before the Lord and she scorned him in her heart." She tells the hero that he is literally making a show of himself in the skimpy ritual loincloth that is all he is wearing: "How honoured today is the king of Israel who has exposed himself . . . as some scurrilous fellow would expose himself!"

Michal would have made a good op-ed columnist. The job is essentially about sitting at the window while the parade of power, the verities of church and state, goes by. It is about casting a cold eye on the "leaping and whirling" of public triumphs and seeing the parts that are exposed in all the gyrations. The columnist is, for the most part, a professional killjoy, a licensed sourpuss. When the powerful are intoxicated with their own rhetoric and society is pumped up on irrational exuberance, a dry voice pipes up: stop making a show of yourselves! To which those on the parade quite reasonably reply: who the hell are you up there in your high window with that curdled look on your face?

It is not an easy question to answer. I acquired my place at the window for no better reason than that, in the autumn of 1988, the then editor of *The Irish Times*, Conor Brady, offered me a contract to write columns and features. Having previously worked for Vincent Browne, who never hid his revulsion at opinion mongers and, I think, saw my apostasy as a form of early retirement from real journalism, I had my doubts. Would I not merely be exposing myself as some scurrilous fellow to be scorned for his small stock of left-wing views and narrow experiences?

I discovered, however, that *Irish Times* readers are disputatious and sceptical but also remarkably tolerant. If a column is food for thought, readers see the columnist as no more than a waiter in the great, loud banquet of Ireland's conversation. They don't expect you to do much more than provide something to chew on.

Beyond that, the job is mostly about stating the obvious. Occasionally, the pieces collected here – a rough cross-section of the last 25 years of serial opining – say something most readers didn't know at the time. Mostly, though, they say things that pretty much everyone did know but that significant numbers of people didn't want to know. I've written before about the Irish variation of Donald Rumsfeld's infamous ramblings about known knowns and unknown knowns and unknown unknowns: the unknown known. Irish culture has been very good at not knowing what it knows – that Charles Haughey was a kleptocrat, for example, or that the whole point of industrial schools was to be places of torment or that three-bedroomed suburban houses were not worth €1 million. Stating the obvious is a modest enough function but it is not, in this context, entirely pointless.

Which is not to say, on the other hand, that it changes much. In the preface to the second edition of *Gulliver's Travels*, Gulliver expresses his outrage that the first edition has failed to transform society: "For, instead of seeing a full stop put to all abuses and corruptions, at least

in this little island, as I had reason to expect; behold, after above six months' warning, I cannot learn that my book has produced one single effect according to my intentions." How would poor Gulliver feel if he knew that, after 25 years of fulminations, the abuses and corruptions of this little island have yet to reach a full stop?

The little island has, in some respects, changed immeasurably and in others not at all. Looking over these pieces what strikes me is that I could not have imagined in 1988 how seismic the shifts would be and yet how little they would alter the landscape. If someone had said that the institutional power of the Catholic church would be broken, that Fianna Fáil would lose its grip and that violent Irish nationalism would be so marginalised that even Sinn Féin would recognise Northern Ireland, I would not have been entirely surprised. Indeed, these columns contain intimations of precisely those reversals and transformations. But what I would not have been able to grasp is that these epic changes would mask so many continuities: mass emigration, mass unemployment, a largely unreformed political system, continuing impunity and lack of accountability, a culture of fatalism, a State that is often, for those at the bottom, a very cold house.

The hope behind all the arguments is always that Ireland will be a better place, one that makes the most of its tremendous resources of compassion and imagination, of humour and invention. In some ways, that has happened. This is a much more open and tolerant place, with a much better educated and more self-confident population, than it was in 1988. The daily drip-drip of cruelly spilt blood has been largely staunched. But it is still very far from the genuine republic of equals that it should and could be. Perhaps we've spent the last 25 years stripping away illusions and coming to accept that we're not the model country we pretended to be. And perhaps we may spend the next 25 years learning to believe that, even without grand illusions, we can create a place that looks more like our better selves.

-Fintan O'Toole

The great continuity of Irish emigration

In my own lifetime, mass emigration has “ended for good” twice: in the 1960s and the early 2000s. And it has returned twice: in the late 1980s and after 2008. This great personal discontinuity is our great national continuity.

Emigration- an Irish guarantor of continuity

November 17th, 1988

Like Oscar Wilde who said he could resist everything except temptation, we are, I think, a people who can adapt to anything except change. Reading the *Cork Evening Echo's* devastating survey of young people's attitudes to emigration reminds us again of the fatalism which impels us to accept anything, any amount of dislocation and disruption, rather than face up to real and fundamental change at home. Almost all of the young Corkonians see their future as bleak. But equally, most of them think of their way to avoid that bleakness in terms of escape, of emigration to a wide variety of places, from Austria to Australia.

Irish young people, it seems, are prepared to put up with any amount of personal discontinuity rather than contemplate a radically altered future in their own country. One of the things this should teach us is to stop using the word "conservative" about ourselves. We are not a conservative people; we are a fatalistic one. If conservatism means anything it is about holding on to traditional values, maintaining a way of life, keeping in touch with whatever you perceive to be your roots.

And in this sense we are not an overly-conservative people, but a feckless and profligate one. We will give up anything, adapt to any new circumstance, if only we are allowed to live in peace and comfort. We will tolerate anything short of the utterly intolerable. If Ireland was invaded by Martians tomorrow, it wouldn't be long before we started wearing antennae and telling each other that the Martians weren't such bad fellows, so long as you didn't get on the wrong side of them.

I was, for instance, in Ballyhaunis, Co Mayo, a few months ago. Ballyhaunis is the essence of what we would think of as conservative small-town Ireland, the usual huddle of buildings on the main street invaded and enclosed by the surrounding countryside. It is monumentally stable in its politics and overwhelmingly against abortion and divorce. And yet when you look at the way people live, not only is it not conservative, it is a positively surreal mixture of cultures and influences.

Most of the town's workforce spend their days in the Halal meat factory where mullahs (real live Middle Eastern Islamic mullahs) intone Koranic prayers over the beasts which are to be slaughtered. There is a mosque at one end of the town. In the Midas Nite Club on a Sunday night, the main entertainment is a live Ballyhaunis version of a British version of an American game show called "The Price is Right", compered by a man in a bow tie that lights up in pink and yellow.

For the Irish emigrant, New York probably seems by comparison a model of cultural orthodoxy and cohesion. What sustains this ability to adapt to almost anything is fatalism. Irish fatalism is peculiarly paradoxical. It is the element of continuity which allows us to accept almost any discontinuity. The continuity comes in accepting that things are rotten here and will always be rotten, and if you accept that then you put up with all the disruption that emigration brings. And even more ironically, emigration itself is a big factor in establishing that continuity. The thing which causes so much and such painful change in our individual lives at the same time convinces us that change itself is really impossible.

It does this because of its very persistence. While all has changed in Ireland over the last 150 years, emigration, except for a brief period in the Sixties, has remained the same.

Furthermore, this has been very useful politically. Fianna Fáil in particular is dedicated to great national goals, to the idea that there are aims, which, once accomplished, will constitute the party's final meeting with destiny.

Now in recent years these great aims - national unity, the revival of the Irish language, economic self-sufficiency - have become more and more nebulous and less and less useful as rallying cries to the faithful. What has taken their place is emigration. In 1967 Charles Haughey was able to announce that "emigration is gone". Ending emigration, he said, was Fianna Fáil's great achievement of the 1960s. But now, with the return of emigration, a great rhetorical device has returned. Fianna Fáil, says the Taoiseach, banished emigration in the 1960s and "to eliminate it again from Irish life will be our objective in the Eighties".

The Fianna Fáil of 1988 is the same as the Fianna Fáil of 1958. The party remains the same, its integrity of purpose is assured. National unity may be unattainable, the revival of Irish a bad joke, economic self-sufficiency jettisoned 30 years ago, but in emigration there is still one Great National Goal which has emotional and rhetorical power.

In Irish political life, emigration is a guarantor of continuity. We will never even begin to face up to emigration until we stop taking a certain surreptitious pleasure in it as the one thing which unifies us as a nation, which establishes our continuity with our ancestors and our history.

There is a fitting symbolism in the fact that last night the nation was momentarily unified in watching a soccer team composed for the most part of the sons and grandsons of the Micks and Paddies and Marys and Brigids who took the cattle boats to the Gorbals and Cricklewood and Coventry and Liverpool in the Thirties, Forties and Fifties. At some deep level we still see emigration as the badge of our identity at a time when we have lost so many of the other marks by which we identify ourselves. You can turn your wounds into special stigmata, but they are still, after all, wounds.

Completing a transaction called Ireland

September 19th, 1991

In the Tipperary Inn in Montauk, Long Island, there are three maps of Ireland on the walls. None of them gives you much of a guide to the present social or cultural geography of the place. One of them is a 50-year-old map of a place called Éire, a schoolroom diagram in pastel colours of the mountain ranges and rivers that we learned off by heart and carried around in our heads like irregular verbs from an obscure and half-forgotten language.

The second is a map of Literary Ireland. By definition, it is the map of a series of inventions, the places of writers, though if you know how to read it, it may reveal something, since a map of the birthplaces of historic writers is also a map of absences, of places left behind by the same writers.

The third map is yet more fictional, a Genealogical Map of Ireland, its territories defined by the homes of tribes that were broken centuries ago, its borders decorated with the absurd crests and coats-of-arms that they borrowed from their conquerors centuries later in order to convince themselves that they had not, after all, been broken. If none of these maps gives you much sense of direction, neither does the green street sign that hangs by the door: "Sraid Aonrai/Henry Street".

In this context, Henry Street, that place of Cheeky Charlies and wrapping paper, might be the name of a famous Irishman, or even a famous American. Hanging from the roof are three golden letters from what was once a banner: HAP (Happy Birthday? Happy Thanksgiving? Happy Barmitzvah? Happy St Patrick's Day?) The Ireland that is being celebrated here, in this beach resort outside New York, is a bit like that banner: the tattered remains of something that must have been wonderful if anyone could remember what it was.

The clock in the Tipperary Inn is entirely innocent of the right time, but it is getting very late. Shuffling around the dancefloor to the sound of a band playing Sixties hits are a few tanned American holiday-makers. They have spent the day pretending to be Ernest Hemingway, hunting striped bass or vast tuna fish from the charter fishing boats, and it is natural enough to want a few beers and a stretch on the floor.

Yet, if you're Irish, there is something surreal about the way Ireland, or a version of Ireland, can be a holiday destination even in New York State. You can visit a little bit of Ireland even without leaving America. What is even more surreal is that you visit America without ever really leaving Ireland. Every shop, every bar, every hotel in Montauk seems to be staffed by young Irish people.

You walk in feeling hip in your shades and your American-style beach gear, only to be asked in familiar tones "What's the weather like at home?" You have to think for a minute where "home" might be when a whole generation seems to be over here.

There are so many young Irish here that they have special acronyms. As well as Yuppies and Dinkies, there are Biffos - Big Ignorant Effers From Offaly. Anyway, it's getting very late and the main entertainment in the Tipperary Inn is watching the one remaining couple on the dancefloor, who are like something out of the movies, he all muscles and shapes, she twice his age, desperately done up to the ninetees, anxiously buying him drinks. It looks like it will soon be time to close. Except that, for the Irish, it is now time to open. Bit by bit, they

start to drift in, two or three at a time until the place is full of them. They are of an age - early to middle twenties - and they are of a mind to enjoy themselves.

You realise that whereas, for the tourists, this is the fag-end of the day, for the Irish it is the beginning, the time when work has ended and the fun can start. The shops they work in have closed, the night shift has come on in the hotels and the bars. Soon, the tourists will start to drift off home, leaving this place to the real natives, the people who work and make a life here, the Irish.

Not that this Irish life is settled. The tourist season is coming to a close and most of the Irish will have to move on, back to New York or Boston for a while, or out west to see what the far coast has to offer, or, if things get really bad, back to Mullingar and Dublin, Roscommon and Wexford. You meet the odd Irish person here who works year-round in the fishing boats or the restaurants, but most are migratory emigrants, doubly unsettled, following the work as the big fish follow the little fish. Tonight, some of the Irish have already had a barbecue on the beach as a farewell to each other. Their temporary communities resolve and dissolve themselves.

Yet, in the shifting, permanently temporary society of America, that is no big deal. The Irish still seem, in a place like Montauk, like a consistent presence around which everything revolves, like the natives who have things better sussed, who know the ins and outs, who can tell you which place is good and which is lousy, who know what's what.

These emigrants seem like the heart of the place. And some of them, the lucky ones who are legal and well qualified, who came over before the recession and have established themselves in decent jobs, will become more and more settled with time.

I was in America last week for a wedding, and it struck me how the wedding has replaced the wake as the symbol of the permanence of Irish emigration. Before, the American Wake was the recognition that the person who was going was gone forever. You still meet older Irish immigrants in America who talk about "the other side", meaning Ireland, as if emigration was the passage through a barrier between one state of existence and another. But, for the younger generation of emigrants, who mostly went over young, free and single, it is the act of marrying in America, often of marrying an American, that marks the real passage to the other side, the final decision that home is not a place you visit at Christmas time, but a place in which you will put up the Christmas tree for your own American children.

This, for those who can make it, is a positive transition. To settle down is also to settle accounts, to draw a line under the transaction called "Ireland", accept the losses and gains and begin to define yourself as American. It is preferable to the never-ending cycle of emigration and return, to the doom of having to shift your country with every boom and recession, which is becoming the reality for more and more of our emigrants.

On the dancefloor at the Tipperary Inn there is no such ambivalence of celebration and loss. Before long, the young Irish have taken over the floor and left the tourists to their beds. The night, like themselves, is young, and they are having a good time. But, as you watch the usual courtship rituals, you can't help thinking that the vague possibilities which always hover around a dancefloor, the possibilities of permanent relationships being formed, of eventual families arising out of this madcap enjoyment, of somebody, somewhere having a memory of being told that their grandparents met on this floor, are absent. Because some of them are illegal, because most of them will have to move around looking for work, because

their lives are cast upon the waters of a homeless uncertainty, how could a glimmer of the future ever break through these dancing eyes?

If this were Ireland, at this hour, the barman would long ago have asked “Have yis no homes to go to?” But it isn’t and they haven’t.

Rise and fall of Fianna Fáil

For 20 of the last 25 years, Fianna Fáil held power. Charles Haughey was Taoiseach when the column began. He resigned in 1992 and was replaced by Albert Reynolds, who resigned in 1994. There was a short interregnum under John Bruton until 1997, when Bertie Ahern began his 11 year reign. Brian Cowen then took over until March 2011. Such was its dominance that the party came to feel they could get away with anything.

In the land of wink and nod

April 5th, 1990

The Late Late Show devoted an entire programme to a celebration of the party veteran Brian Lenihan who had survived liver cancer. Seán Doherty was the former minister for justice who had become persona non grata because of accusations that he has interfered with the Garda.

When *does* roguery stop being roguery and become sleaze? When is a stroke a stroke and when is it an abuse of power? When is a politician “colourful” and when is he a national scandal?

Seán Doherty, looking at the “Late Late Show” tribute to Brian Lenihan last Friday night, must have shaken his head ruefully and wondered, “Why me?” Why was he pilloried for interfering with the Garda in the course of their duties, and why does the country canonise Brian Lenihan and laugh at the story Ronnie Drew told about Brian Lenihan, Charles Haughey and a district justice being caught by a rookie Dublin guard after-hours in Groome’s Hotel? “Would you like a large whiskey and a pint of stout, the guard in the story was asked, “or would you like a posting on an island somewhere between here and America?”

There were other stories, too. Tony Ó Dalaigh told the one about the time that Brian Lenihan was minister for education and a policy of not giving funding for school halls had been adopted. A delegation from a school in Sligo arrived, organised, Ó Dalaigh thought, by Ray MacSharry. They were given the hall and some years later when Ó Dalaigh was touring the country with a theatre company they played in the hall and he noticed that it was called the “Brian Lenihan Hall”.

He told a story about the minister drinking in Kilcock on Monday mornings instead of being at his desk. And John Healy brought us back to Groome’s Hotel, to an evening where various favours were being organised for various people, and Brian Lenihan was making notes on little pieces of paper. Later that night, the pieces of paper were allowed to blow into the Liffey.

Why is this funny and Seán Doherty’s dealings with the guards in Roscommon not? Is it because the guard who was being bullied was also offered a drink? Does that make it lovable? Is it because the stories refer to Groome’s Hotel, which is no longer there and thus ripe for nostalgia? Because those smoky backrooms are our version of Kennedy’s Camelot, the young princes in their first bloom of power, the sheen on their faces almost as bright as the sheen on their suits?

Is Mr Haughey Prince Hal in the tavern and Mr Lenihan his Falstaff, enjoying their days of carousal before emerging into the full responsibility of power? Is it because the comic punchline of the little bits of paper blowing into the Liffey softens the image of the favours being sought?

If so, it might be no harm to remember that all of these stories are about people in power, about government ministers and government policies, about the way we are supposed to see Irish public life. It seems to me that the difference between the attitude to Seán Doherty on the one hand and Brian Lenihan on the other is simply the difference between one television programme and another... one was on the “Late Late” and the other was on “Today Tonight”.

But imagine if the above stories about Brian Lenihan had been told on “Today Tonight”. Imagine if they had been preceded by Brian Farrell looking stony-faced into the camera and saying: “Tonight, we look at the career of one of Ireland’s most senior and respected politicians. We examine allegations that he may have interfered with the Garda in the course of their duties and that he may have winked at favours being done for individuals and institutions contrary to government policy.”

All hell would break loose. But because the context of these stories is one of congratulation and admiration for a man who is genuinely liked and genuinely brave, these revelations become tributes. In other words, we are so ambivalent about our politicians that we take our cue from the way they are presented. If certain incidents in their careers are presented as funny, warm, delightfully roguish, then that is what they are. If the same incidents are presented as scandalous and sulphurous, then that is what they are. Because we don’t know what to think, the message must lie in the medium.

It may be objected that the obvious difference between Brian Lenihan and Seán Doherty is that Mr Doherty is not liked while Mr Lenihan is immensely popular as a man, that we view the behaviour through what we know about the person and therefore are happy to applaud it in one case and decry it in the other.

But, on the other hand, Seán Doherty is as popular in Roscommon as Brian Lenihan was before him. Those who know him testify to his wit, intelligence and sense of humour. Jokes told by Seán Doherty circulate among politicians and journalists in the same way that Brian Lenihan stories do. Exactly the same sort of thing is said about him as is said about Brian Lenihan: that beneath the waffling, mock-stupid exterior, there lies a keen intelligence and a wry self-consciousness.

And the things that are most admired about both Charles Haughey and Brian Lenihan – their miraculous political and physical survivals – are just as true of Seán Doherty, who has come back from the political dead. The crucial difference between our attitudes to one set of stories and the other is rhetoric. Seán Doherty has become the nearest thing to a pariah in Irish politics because he is no good at rhetoric, because he comes from a generation that had lost touch with and interest in the abstract, flowery, flowing, almost religious language of old Fianna Fáil.

His strokes, deprived of the cloak of rhetoric, were left shivering and naked in the cold light of publicity. Brian Lenihan, on the other hand, has been rightly summed up by Joe Lee as “the amiable master of the shadow language”. The shadow language is shadowy because we are both amused by its verbal game-playing and, at some level, still touched by its emotions. On the one hand, we can laugh at it, on the other it still confers on those who use it a degree of sanctity which protects them from criticism.

In his role as John the Baptist to Charles Haughey’s Messiah, a role he will again perform in his warm-up to the leader’s speech at this weekend’s ardfheis, Brian Lenihan can be seen as both a mad ranter in the desert and a kind of saint. The last time I listened, the warm-up speech went like this: “This party represents the real Ireland. This great party of ours represents anything that is good in the Celtic attitude to life. We want to pass on the torch to a new generation. Fianna Fáil is out there in the vanguard like the Fenians of old . . . This man (Charles Haughey) epitomises everything that is best in this great party of ours.”

At one level, the stuff is funny, but at another its mixture of John F Kennedy, Eamon de Valera and St Columbanus is exactly right for the party faithful. And at both levels it works:

since the party is the real Ireland and Mr Haughey is the epitome of the party, then the Taoiseach and his warmer-upper are the epitome of the epitome of the country. What we like about Ireland is subsumed into Mr Lenihan and Mr Haughey, the “Celtic attitude to life” envelops the back room at Groome’s Hotel.

And this is why the stories on the “Late Late Show” were funny, warm and charming rather than shocking or sleazy. They were stories about the “Celtic attitude to life”, stories the effect of which is not “Isn’t this disgraceful?” but “Aren’t we a queer people altogether?”. Brian Lenihan has managed to take our whimsicality, our resigned sense of ourselves as a race of chancers, and to make it into a political weapon.

For other political parties to complain about the “Late Late Show” taking this and showing it in all its ambivalence is to miss the point. The ambivalence is in us and in our political culture, in our ability to be amused at our own follies, in the sense of ourselves as a nation of nod- and-winkers that makes it by no means unreasonable to present Brian Lenihan as the epitome of Irishness.

When you’re winking, you have one eye open and one closed, and we haven’t yet decided whether we want to look at the country with both eyes open. Until we do, the wink will remain our most eloquent political gesture.

Rhetoric, reality and the proper Charlie

July 12th, 1997

When Charles Haughey gave evidence to the McCracken tribunal, the edifice of denial constructed by himself and his fervent supporters finally crumbled. This piece previews the occasion.



Before he returned to power for his third stint as Taoiseach, Charles Haughey presented a programme called *My Ireland* for Channel 4. Full as it was of sentimental clichés dressed up in high-sounding abstractions, it nevertheless offered the odd glimpse of a deeper truth. One came in a sequence of the Great Helmsman at the wheel of his yacht, the Celtic Mist, metaphorically steering the ship of state through rough winds and high swells. In the voiceover, he spoke as if he were God: “When the storm sweeps in from the Atlantic and the sea rages with awesome power, one feels very close to the centre of creation.” He talked about the Ó Dalaigh brothers, the last inhabitants of what is now his private island of Inishvickillane, the wise old men who initiated him in the lore of the Gael and “taught us about island life”.

For a moment, the extraordinary fact that a career politician owned an island and a yacht, that he had become inexplicably wealthy, was obscured in a fog of folksy nostalgia and statesmanlike poses. And then his son Ciarán put his hand on the wheel of the boat. “Don’t touch my wheel,” barked the statesman, “Don’t you dare touch my wheel.”

The remark was meant, presumably, as self-mockery. But it came across as much less ironic and much more honest than everything that had gone before. For the two concerns expressed in those few words – power and possession – seemed much closer to the essence of Charles Haughey than all the posturing that had gone before.

A second sequence was, in retrospect, even more bizarrely eloquent. Again, Charles Haughey was flaunting his possessions. At a racecourse, he talked about his ownership of horses and the fun of seeing them run in his very own colours. Then a figure in a 10-gallon hat, the actor Larry Hagman, famous around the world for his portrayal of the flamboyantly corrupt businessman JR Ewing in *Dallas*, approached the Fianna Fáil leader and shook his

hand. After some banter, Hagman put his hand in his inside pocket and took out a piece of paper which he presented with a flourish and a leer to the once and future Taoiseach. As the camera zoomed in, we could see what the piece of paper was – a dud thousand dollar bill with the face of JR Ewing on it.

It was like a scene from some bad over-the-top satire, expressing in crude caricature a common perception of Charles Haughey as the kind of shady politician who would take money from an archetypal dodgy businessmen. Yet here it was, not an invention, but a piece of fly-on-the-wall documentary realism. And it was being presented, not by some scurrilous subversive, but by Haughey himself.

Watching Haughey exhibit his wealth so openly on the programme, you realised that the display itself was a critical aspect of his survival. For he had mastered over many years the difficult art of hiding in plain sight. Instead of seeking to conceal the scandalous truth that he had accumulated great wealth from what was supposedly a life of public service, he had made it so obvious that it became simply an accepted aspect of Irish reality.

And of course, he himself exercised a significant degree of control over that reality. Because of the libel laws, and his cultivation of a culture of secrecy, Haughey's wealth could only be spoken about in code, and serious attempts to examine its origins, such as Frank McDonald's book *The Destruction Of Dublin*, were effectively suppressed. Unlike his successor Albert Reynolds, Haughey always understood that power in an open society is dissipated by crude attempts to enforce it. He rarely threatened legal action. But his power was all the more effective for being restrained.

The limits of what could be said were never spelt out, but everyone knew that they existed. So his wealth became at the same time entirely open and utterly mysterious. It could be seen, but not spoken about, observed, but not explained. Like the weather or the internal combustion engine, we took it for granted without ever knowing how it really worked. It is a trick that can only be pulled off when it is not consciously a trick at all, when it arises from deep personal conviction.

And this is what is now most obvious about Charles Haughey's naked display of unexplained wealth. He flaunted it because, in his own eyes, he had a right to it. So deeply did he believe in his own greatness that it seemed simple justice that he should have whatever he wanted. He could act so shamelessly because in the world that he had constructed, he had nothing to be ashamed of.

Some indication of the depth of that conviction was given by his evidence at the beef tribunal, the first time he was forced to answer questions about his relations with a wealthy businessman, in this case Larry Goodman. Less than five years ago, Charles Haughey answered questions in the same place and before many of the same lawyers he will face next week. He had retired by then, but he was still, patently, The Boss. He swept into Dublin Castle like a potentate surrounded by his minions, and he made no real effort to disguise the disdain he felt for the petty people who imagined, in their folly, that they could hold him to account. Under cross-examination, he was, by turns, languidly contemptuous and thunderously indignant. He dismissed some central (and accurate) allegations as not amounting "to a row of beans".

"I wonder," he sneered, "what we're all doing here." He described other questions about his conduct of public policy as mere "details" which it would be "absurd" to expect a man of his stature to be concerned with. In response to one mildly critical question from Eoin

McGonigal SC (ironically his own barrister in the present proceedings), his eyes withdrew behind their hooded lids like stoats watching for the kill, and he spat out the words “I won’t have it. I won’t listen to it ...”

As his political epitaph he had chosen on his last day as Taoiseach a line from *Othello*: “I have done the State some service.” But he might more appropriately have chosen one from another Shakespearean tragedy, *Antony And Cleopatra*: “Comest thou smiling from the world’s great snare uncaught?”

For until very recently the answer to that question was an emphatic “yes”. He had passed through a forest of snares, if not quite smiling, then certainly uncaught. Irish society may just about have outgrown Charles Haughey by then, but it had not caught up with him, and it seemed that it never would.

Now that he has been snared, the gulf between his rhetoric and his reality is breathtaking. A man whose love of abstract grandiloquence did not preclude petty, self-serving and bare-faced lies. A man who almost wept when talking of his devotion to the institutions of the State and then thought little of treating a tribunal of inquiry established by both houses of the Oireachtas with contempt. A man of infinite pride without sufficient self-respect to keep him from becoming a kept man. A self-proclaimed patriot whose spiritual home was in the Cayman Islands.

A lover of his country who could treat it as a banana republic. A man who called for sacrifices from his people but was not prepared to sacrifice one tittle of the trimmings of wealth and luxury to the cause of preserving the dignity of the State he professed to love. A man who in his Channel 4 film could declare himself “perhaps a little sentimental, even romantic, in my loyalties to people” and then privately sneer at an “unstable” friend who had just given him a gift of £1 .3 million. That he was a vulgar, brazen hypocrite is undeniable.

The rise to becoming a beggar on horseback

February 26th, 1999

In April 1963, the up-market Irish women's magazine, *Creation*, ran a feature on the latest ideas for dinner parties. This was a time when a new Irish middle class was inventing itself. The First Programme For Economic Expansion was well under way. American money was pouring in. John F Kennedy was due to drop from the sky soon. Fridges and televisions were filling the forlorn alcoves of kitchens and sitting rooms.

Large chunks of dirty old Georgian Dublin were being demolished and replaced with such charming edifices as Hawkins House, O'Connell Bridge House and Liberty Hall. The ESB was planning to demolish much of the Georgian terrace on Fitzwilliam Street and replace it with an altogether more dignified building by the up-and coming Sam Stephenson. There were plans to fill in the manky old-fashioned Grand Canal with cement.

Dinner parties were, for many, an astonishing notion. Mostly, men met their mates in the pub and women had a cup of tea and a chat. If you had visitors to the house, they were entertained with beer and whiskey and tea and sandwiches and a sing-song. So what were you supposed to do at a dinner party? In the interests of its readers, *Creation* went to "the experts". The new minister for justice Charles Haughey and his lovely wife Maureen, daughter of the taoiseach, Seán Lemass, explained what would happen at a typical dinner party for six to eight people chez Haughey.

The glamorous couple would offer you, *Creation* informed the women of Ireland, "their special favourite, Steak Fondue. Small cubes of very tender raw steak, well seasoned, are placed on a platter. Then each guest, using a special two-pronged fork selects his pieces of steak and cooks them at the table exactly to his taste, in hot melted butter in the chafing dish. A variety of sauces and a tossed salad complement the dish." The lucky guests, added the magazine, "find Steak Fondue a very amusing novelty".

I imagine the average Fianna Fáil voter reading this in 1963, when the average Fianna Fáil voter still had a dinner of meat and spuds in the middle of the day, might have been like the man in the Bob Newhart comedy sketch to whom Sir Walter Raleigh has been explaining the use of tobacco. ("Tell me this again, Walt, you put the weed between your lips and set it on fire?") You wha', Charlie? People are waiting for their dinner and you give them raw meat? And they have to cook it themselves? And somebody's taken two prongs off the fork? What's a chafing dish and do you put the red sauce and the brown sauce and the Yorkshire Relish in it with the butter?

But then, the average Fianna Fáil voter probably wasn't reading *Creation* in 1963. Or if she was, she was reading it for a glimpse of an exotic new world, way out on the horizon of aspiration. The amusing novelties of our very own nouveaux riches were still far beyond the reach of most people, especially in Fianna Fáil's heartland.

This was, after all, a time when more than half of houses in the countryside had no fixed lavatory facilities of any kind, indoors or outdoors. In the county of Longford, with a population of 30,000, for example, there were 1,600 indoor toilets. When, later in 1963, the Haugheys advertised for a nanny (the pay was £5 a week), they stressed their house had both television and central heating. Clearly, these were still impressive possessions. And yet, in no time at all, fondue sets were what everyone dreaded getting for their wedding present from a

maiden aunt. Perfectly plebeian people had been through their fondue phase and come out the other side. The garages and garden sheds of suburbs and small towns all over Ireland were full of them.

Within a few years, producing a fondue set at a middle-class dinner party would be an appalling lapse of taste, like having flying ducks or the Crying Boy on your wall or Mantovani on your Bang and Olafson stereo. People like the Haugheys would be mortified if you produced a copy of *Creation* from April 1963. Snobbery, in other words, was getting harder.

Before the 1970s, you needed relatively little money to be a cut above the social norm. Because the plebs didn't have much, it didn't take much to be better than them. Simple things like having dinner parties, knowing a bit about food, drinking half decent wine, qualified you as a member of a social elite. If you were a minister, you could afford mohair suits rather than shiny nylon, tender steak instead of hairy bacon, melted butter rather than Stork margarine. You could send your kids to the Jesuits and the Sacred Heart sisters. You could maintain a status higher than what you came from. But as more money came into the State and the middle class got larger, a ministerial salary, though enough for a comfortable life, was not enough to place you at the top of the social hierarchy. The magazines no longer gushed about your fondues.

If you were a normal, well-adjusted person, this hardly mattered. You could get over it. You could get your kicks from the power and prestige of office. You could even flatter your own ego by believing some of your own rhetoric about public service and patriotism and the importance of fostering the national ideal. But if you were shallow and insecure enough to measure your worth by the enormity of your expenditure and the conspicuousness of your consumption, you had a real problem. The ordinary delights of the nouveaux riches were no longer enough. You had to look like Old Money.

It is a great historical joke that just as Catholic nationalist Ireland is coming into its own, it is haunted by Haughey's attempts to become an Ascendancy squire. It is the revenge of the landlord class. They lost their power. They lost the land. The IRA burned them out. But they left behind a particular image of wealth. The Big House. The horses. The exotic property in the West. How amusing it would have seemed to them that one day the State would be run primarily for the purpose of allowing the Taoiseach to ape the old gentry by becoming, literally, a beggar on horseback.

The problem was, of course, that all that stuff is fearfully expensive, too expensive, as it happens, for most of the old Ascendancy. There are self-made men who can afford it, but Haughey wasn't one of them. Yet how else could a man of destiny separate himself from the grubby consumers?

The rise of affluence in Ireland upped the ante on privilege from televisions and central heating to mansions, islands, racehorses, yachts and helicopters. If only steak fondue had remained an amusing novelty and mark of impossible sophistication, we wouldn't be pestered with tribunals now.

The real spiritual home of Fianna Fáil

July 2nd, 1999

The most important document for an understanding of politics in independent Ireland is not the 1916 Proclamation, the Anglo-Irish Treaty, the 1937 Constitution or even the First Programme of Economic Expansion. It was not, in fact, even written in Ireland, and it appeared two decades before the Irish State was established. It is called Plunkitt of Tammany Hall, and anyone who wants to understand Tribunal Ireland would do well to start within its covers.

The book is, as its subtitle *A Series of Very Plain Talks on Very Practical Politics* suggests, a verbatim record of the thoughts of George Washington Plunkitt, who is on no account to be confused with Joseph Mary Plunkett. This Plunkitt was the son of poor Irish emigrants to New York, who grew up in a shanty town in what is now Central Park in the 1840s and 1850s. He spent a lifetime in politics as leader of the 15th Assembly District, Sachem of the Tammany Society, holder at one point of four different public offices (for three of which he was in receipt of a salary) and stalwart of the greatest of all Irish political machines.

When he died in 1924, after this lifelong political career, Plunkitt was, according to the *New York Times* obituary, worth “considerably more than \$1,000,000”, about £5 million today. If that doesn’t remind you of anyone, you haven’t been paying much attention to events in and around Dublin Castle over the last five years.

Instead of marching to Bodenstown every year, Fianna Fáil ought to lay wreaths at the site of Tammany Hall. For the real inventors of the Irish political style are not Wolfe Tone or Charles Stewart Parnell but Boss Croker, “Honest” John Kelly and Charles Francis Murphy, who ran New York in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Fianna Fáil without the romantic rhetoric (which is to say, Fianna Fáil after the 1930s) is Tammany Hall. People knew what they were doing when they called Charles Haughey “the Boss”.

The Tammany men didn’t have much time for flowery speech-making. The marvellous chronicler of Irish New York, Peter Quinn, tells the story of the taciturn Charles Francis Murphy, last of the great bosses. When his habit of keeping his mouth shut during the singing of the national anthem was remarked upon, one of his side-kicks explained that the Boss just didn’t like to commit himself in public.

So Plunkitt of Tammany Hall, written down by the journalist William Riordon while Plunkitt held forth from his favourite rostrum, the shoeshine stand outside the New York County Courthouse, is the only real record we have of the political philosophy that has really animated this great nation of ours.

Plunkitt is fascinating on many subjects, but by far the most important of his talks for our purposes is one called “Honest Graft and Dishonest Graft”. If you can grasp this admittedly mind-boggling distinction, you are well on the way to knowing where Charles Haughey came from. If you can begin to see how Plunkitt could engage in blatant corruption and still declare that “the Irish was born to rule and they’re the honestest people in the world”, there is not much that any tribunal can tell you.

Plunkitt in the book makes no secret of the fact that he has lined his pockets with the profits of politics. But he considers himself an honest man: “I’ve made a big fortune out of

the game, and I'm gettin' richer every day, but I've not gone in for dishonest graft – blackmailin' gamblers, saloon-keepers, disorderly people etc, and neither has any of the men who have made big fortunes in politics.”

“Just let me,” he says, “explain by examples. My party's in power in the city, and it's goin' to undertake a lot of public improvements. Well, I'm tipped off, say, that they're going to lay out a new park at a certain place. I see my opportunity and I take it. I go to that place and I buy up all the land I can in the neighbourhood. Then the board of this or that makes its plan public, and there is a rush to get my land, which nobody cared particular for before.”

Sound familiar?

To Plunkitt, this is all self-evidently reasonable. “Ain't it perfectly honest to charge a good price and make a profit on my investment and foresight? I seen my opportunity and I took it.” He insists that because he had made his fortune merely by using inside information to anticipate the market, “I don't own a dishonest dollar”.

Plunkitt is, in fact, genuinely horrified by politicians who actually steal public money. “The politician who steals is worse than a thief. He is a fool. With the opportunities all around for the man with a political pull, there's no excuse for stealin' a cent.”

Plunkitt also makes a general distinction between Irish graft and American graft. The Americans, he suggests, would take the roof off a poorhouse and sell it. But, he asks indignantly: “Show me the Irishman who would steal a roof off an almshouse! He don't exist. Of course, if an Irishman had the political pull and the roof was worn, he might get the city authorities to put on a new one and get the contract for it himself, and buy the old roof at a bargain, but that's honest graft. It's goin' about the thing like a gentleman, and there's more money in it than tearin' down an old roof and cartin' it to the junkman's, more money and no penal code.”

Nor was Plunkitt coy about the ethics of party funding. To him, taking money from rich corporations is almost a religious duty. The party, he says, “does missionary work like a church and it's got big expenses and it's got to be supported by the faithful.

If a corporation sends in a cheque to help the good work of the Tammany Society, why shouldn't we take it like other missionary societies? Of course, the day may come when we'll reject the money of the rich as tainted, but it hadn't come when I left Tammany Hall at 11.25 a.m. today.”

If you cut away the rhetoric and make allowances for the effects of a changed political climate in which such direct speech has become impossible, Plunkitt of Tammany Hall and Haughey of Abbeville are mirror images. In the wider culture from which Haughey sprang, there is the same rough and ready distinction between honest graft and dishonest graft.

Putting tax revenues into your own bank account would be wrong. Using the knowledge gained from the privileged access of office to supplement your entrepreneurial “foresight” is just fine. And the whole operation is wrapped up in a sense of missionary zeal. Without money, there would be no good works and the heathens would be left in their benighted ignorance.

If Plunkitt's directness was still possible, the epitaph on that era of Irish politics would not be “I have done the State some service”. It would be that suggested for himself by the Tammany man: “If my worst enemy was given the job of writin' my epitaph when I'm gone,

he couldn't do more than write 'George W Plunkitt. He Seen His Opportunities and He Took'
Em'."

Electorate gives ethics the cold shoulders

May 21st, 2002

After the 2002 election triumphantly returned Bertie Ahern's Fianna Fáil to power, there was a sense that Ahern no longer felt the need to distance himself from his the party's ethically dubious past.

The boys are back in town. Among the revellers celebrating the Fianna Fáil successes at the RDS on Saturday was the builder Michael Bailey. The same Michael Bailey who was helping Fianna Fáil with its inquiries into Ray Burke after the last election. Whose letter offering to “procure” planning permission for 700 acres of land in north Dublin sparked the formation of the Flood tribunal. Who admitted at that tribunal that he had given an “under-the-table” payment of £50,000 to James Gogarty, who in turn, was giving a large sum to Burke.

The same Michael Bailey whose financial records were unfortunately destroyed in a fire on the very day that the Supreme Court was deciding the validity of a tribunal order to hand them over. Whose company, Bovale Developments, was putting far more money into its directors' personal bank accounts than were ever notified to the Revenue Commissioners. Who reached a settlement with the Revenue in December 2000, reported to be more than £5 million.

And why should his political friends be embarrassed to be seen with Michael Bailey at the election count centre? For the election itself has delivered a definitive judgment on the question of ethics in public life.

Shortly after the last election Mr Justice Brian McCracken published a tribunal report which noted, in relation to Michael Lowry, the damaging perception that “a member of the Cabinet was able to ignore, and indeed cynically evade, both the taxation and exchange control laws of the State with impunity . . . If such a person can behave in this way without serious sanctions being imposed, it becomes very difficult to condemn others who similarly flout the law.” Since then the Moriarty tribunal has unearthed even more damaging evidence against Michael Lowry. The sanction imposed by the electorate last week was to elect him comfortably on the first count with over a quarter of the entire vote in Tipperary North.

A jury of her peers found that Beverley Cooper-Flynn colluded in tax evasion when she was a banker. She was re-elected in Mayo as an official Fianna Fáil candidate.

John Ellis was given £12,000 in cash by Charles Haughey in 1989, public money drawn from the party leader's account, and £13,600 in the same circumstances the following year. The money was apparently drawn from AIB using cheques co-signed by Bertie Ahern. John Ellis was comfortably re-elected in Sligo-Leitrim.

Martin Ferris was caught in September 1984, trying to bring seven tonnes of arms and ammunition for the IRA into Ireland on the Marita Ann. In the previous nine months the IRA had killed 22 Irish Protestant members of the RUC and UDR, six British soldiers, one Catholic ex-UDR man, a magistrate's daughter, an assistant prison governor, two alleged informers and one alleged criminal. Martin Ferris topped the poll in North Kerry.

Dessie Ellis, who by his own admission was one of the IRA's leading bomb-makers, very nearly took a seat in Dublin North West.

Nicky Kehoe, who was arrested as part of an armed gang that was staking out the Wicklow home of Galen Weston, a businessman whom they were planning to kidnap, missed the fourth seat in Dublin Central by a handful of votes after a recount.

The message is very clear, even to those hopeless romantics who imagined that the revelation of the truth would make a difference. We Irish, on the whole, don't give a damn about ethics in public life. I have always thought and argued otherwise, but I'm obviously wrong.

The people have spoken and, where public morality is concerned, what they are saying is a silent shrug of the shoulders. If Ansbacher man Denis Foley hadn't retired, he would probably have held his seat. Even Liam Lawlor must be regretting his decision not to stand.

The public mood in this time of rapid change seems to be that the past, even the very recent past, is another country. They did things differently there. We are willing to forget everything and learn nothing. Our collective message to politicians is: never apologise, never explain, just move on to the next job.

So what is the point of carrying on with expensive and tedious tribunals and inquiries? Another five years of the Flood [planning] tribunal may fill in the details of how the development of a European capital city was purchased by a small group of developers, but we knew the big picture before the election and it made no difference. The Moriarty tribunal may have hard things to say about Michael Lowry and Charles Haughey when it finally reports, but who cares? The Ansbacher inquiry may produce another list of names, but Cayman Ireland is already a familiar, and it seems rather cosy, place.

Maybe, just maybe, if someone was caught with their hands in the till right now, we might get upset. But there is a natural time lag in these things. Whatever is going on at the moment will be revealed in five or 10 years' time.

And by then it will belong to that state of grace known as the past in which all sins are forgiven by an astonishingly tolerant electorate.

Corruption well known – and nothing was done

September 27th, 2002

For all the welcome forthrightness and clarity of Mr Justice Flood's interim report, it is easy to get the wrong impression. The scandal it reveals is not that one of the most senior figures in Irish politics over the last 30 years prostituted his local and national offices to greedy businessmen. Most societies throw up venal politicians from time to time and Ray Burke would be a recognisable figure in the US, France, the UK or Italy.

The real scandal is that Ray Burke was found out a long time before Mr Justice Flood's inquiry was ever established. Yet he was promoted, protected and defended by his party. The full detail of his financial relationships with wealthy business people was not known, but the smell of something fishy was overpowering. For a quarter of a century, his colleagues and superiors chose to hold their noses and look the other way.

The claim yesterday by the Taoiseach that Ray Burke looks corrupt only in hindsight is nonsense. On at least three occasions over three decades, journalists tried to set the alarm bells ringing. As long ago as 1974, when Ray Burke was a fledgling backbench TD, investigative reporter Joe McAnthony discovered a set of accounts for the builders Brennan and McGowan, who feature heavily in the Flood report as the largest contributors of corrupt payments. Listed as expenditure under the heading "Planning" was a payment to Ray Burke of £15,000 – then a very substantial sum.

The *Sunday Independent* splashed McAnthony's story all over its front page, pointing out that Burke had sponsored motions on Dublin County Council, rezoning lands owned by the builders. Burke subsequently acted as auctioneer for some of the houses built on these lands.

In 1981, Vincent Browne again drew attention to this entanglement in the *Magill Book of Irish Politics*, reminding readers that Burke had been interviewed extensively by the Fraud Squad and, in an exquisitely fashioned homage to the libel laws, suggesting that "the ethical aspects of the case were never explored."

Then, in 1993, *The Irish Times* ran a series of articles by Mark Brennock and Frank McDonald investigating the flagrant abuse of the planning process in Dublin. One front page headline read "Cash in brown paper bags for councillors". Libel laws prevented Burke from being named, but the detail was more than enough to make it clear that the scandal was still unfolding. The leadership of both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael knew damn well that these allegations were true. Michael Smith, the Fianna Fáil minister for the environment in 1993, openly stated that zoning in the Dublin County Council area was a "debased currency". In the same year, the Fine Gael leader, John Bruton, told his Dublin county councillors that they had become "a laughing stock" because of rezoning, and that it must stop. Yet both parties allowed their councillors to silence anyone who said these things in public.

When the Labour TD Joan Burton raised the issue in a forceful speech, she immediately received two sets of libel threats – one from a legal firm acting for all the Fine Gael councillors, the other from a firm acting for all the Fianna Fáil councillors. The letters demanded that Burton, and the *Irish Independent*, which had reported her speech, state publicly that there were "absolutely no grounds to suggest bribery or corruption in Dublin

County Council". Both parties thus allowed their councillors, acting in concert, to demand the publication of a statement they knew to be wildly inaccurate.

This is collusion of the highest order. It was massively reinforced, moreover, by Bertie Ahern's decision to resurrect Ray Burke's moribund political career in 1997, when he gave him one of the most prestigious offices of State, minister for foreign affairs.

It was a completely unnecessary appointment, made in the teeth of renewed allegations about Burke's receipt of a huge donation from [builders] JMSE. It is difficult, even without the element of hindsight provided by Mr Justice Flood's report, to see it as anything other than an explicit endorsement of the political culture which Burke had come to represent.

The Taoiseach's determination to protect Ray Burke extended all the way to the bitter end. When Bertie Ahern finally brought himself to use the word "sinister" it was not about Burke's activities but about the journalists and politicians whose attempts to expose him he described as "the persistent hounding of an honourable man."

With this kind of message coming from the top, is it any wonder that so many of those called to give evidence by Mr Justice Flood behaved with such brazen contempt for the inquiry, the law and the public? The interim report highlights the willingness of some witnesses to spin elaborate fabrications under oath.

Ray Burke invented cover stories. Tom Brennan and Joseph McGowan "colluded in their evidence" in concocting the claim that payments to Ray Burke were the proceeds of fundraising events. It is hard to believe that they would have taken this risk unless they felt themselves immune from the consequences.

That arrogance stems from long immersion in a culture of impunity. And we have to remember that it has been vindicated time and again. No senior figure was prosecuted as a result of the fraud and tax evasion disclosed by the beef tribunal. No one has suffered as a result of the McCracken tribunal. The massive Ansbacher and DIRT scandals have been revealed, but without any obvious attempt to bring those responsible to justice.

In spite of the forceful language employed by Mr Justice Flood, there is no compelling reason to believe that the political culture he is exposing is on its last legs.

The most serious finding in yesterday's report, for instance, is that the broadcasting legislation which Ray Burke introduced to limit RTÉ's advertising revenue to the benefit of Century Radio was "in response to demands made of him by the promoters of Century and was not serving the public interest".

This is the strongest political finding that any tribunal has made, proof in effect that the Government itself was acting not for the people as a whole but on behalf of a group of businessmen.

One member of that Cabinet remains in active politics: the Taoiseach. Is anyone holding their breath waiting for Mr Ahern to accept collective Cabinet responsibility for this corrupt legislation? The very idea is still laughable.

The report also makes interesting reading in relation to the former Government Press Secretary, PJ Mara. He was receiving substantial interest-free loans from Oliver Barry and Dermot Desmond while he held this sensitive public office. He failed to disclose to the tribunal the fact that he was the beneficial owner of a secret offshore account in the Isle of

Man. Yet he remains a very influential figure in Fianna Fáil, as the director of elections who has overseen two successive triumphs.

And is there any real reason to believe that even after the revelation of his long career in corruption, Ray Burke, were he brazen enough to stand, would not still be re-elected in North Dublin? Before dismissing the suggestion that he would still romp home near the head of the poll, sceptics should look at the recent results in Tipperary and Mayo and explain how neither Michael Lowry nor Beverly Cooper-Flynn has fallen from grace with the electorate.

Dynamics of terror

For the first decade of the column, a constant drumbeat of atrocity north of the border underlay events in the Republic. My fellow columnist, the late Mary Holland reflected on that reality with far more authority than anyone else and my own reflections were entirely marginal to hers. The only useful contribution was the suggestion that, in spite of justified revulsion, there was need to engage critically with the IRA and its apologists and to try to understand how atrocities came to seem acceptable to quite ordinary people.

Questions the IRA is happy to ignore

April 20th, 1989

Joanne Reilly was a 20 year-old woman killed by an IRA bomb aimed at the police station next door to the hardware shop where she worked. The paragraph in square brackets is added from a subsequent column of May 11th, responding to Sinn Féin's reaction to this piece.

Last week Joanne Reilly was murdered by the IRA in Warrenpoint, and a few hours later I found myself in UCD addressing the subject of “Nationalism and Republicanism in Irish Politics” in the company of three people who, in one degree or another, supported the IRA, among them Danny Morrison of Sinn Féin. I was in that position because a number of other people, mostly politicians and journalists, had refused to appear on a platform with Morrison lest by doing so they should be contributing to the idea that Sinn Féin and the IRA were a part of a rational, democratic debate conducted by the normal rules of argument and counter-argument.

I understand and to a certain degree share this position: only a pompous fool would believe that the power of his rhetoric is going to get the IRA to lay down its arms, and anyway Joanne Reilly and thousands of people before her weren't asked for their views before they were killed. They were in the wrong place at the wrong time and there, as far as Sinn Féin is concerned, matters must rest.

But it doesn't seem to me that the answer is to allow the Provos and their apologists a free run with an audience of young people. The reluctance to engage the Provos in debate – a reluctance that Section 31 turns into a necessity – has led to a myth, the myth that Danny Morrison and Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness are fiendishly intelligent, that they are such brilliant strategists and such personable people that they cannot be challenged on their own ground, that they will always score more points with an impressionable audience steeped in the assumptions of Irish nationalism.

The myth is very useful to the Provos, who are intellectually bankrupt to the degree that they understand neither the society they are trying to leave, the United Kingdom, nor the one they are trying to join, the Republic of Ireland. As usual in these matters, this myth is mixed up with a totally contradictory one – the myth that the Provos are unthinking, unfeeling psychopaths, the embodiment of pure evil.

This, of course, is nonsense. Danny Morrison is, I am sure, a nice guy. On the night in question he had just heard that his uncle Harry White had died and he was, as you or I would be, saddened, subdued, upset. I am sure that if Joanne Reilly had been a relation of his he would have been just as upset. The problem was that she wasn't, that she belonged to a different category of humanity, that of the inevitable casualty of war.

We all do this to some extent. We get angry when three Irish people are gunned down in Gibraltar, switch our minds off when three other Irish people are gunned down in Coagh. We all order death by our own system of priorities. The difference, and it is a crucial one, is that the Provos are causing these deaths, and therefore the least we have a right to expect from them is a rational explanation for the way they order death.

And this is precisely what they cannot give. The Provos' worst insult to their dead is their own intellectual shoddiness. They go on killing people and they haven't even bothered to work out an analysis of what is happening in these islands by which this killing makes sense. Their true philosophy isn't Catholic or nationalist or Marxist, it is merely Pavlovian. They believe with Pavlov in stimulus and response, that once the dinner bell is rung the dog will begin to salivate.

The violence, they say, is regrettable but inevitable – so long as certain conditions exist certain people will inevitably respond in certain ways. They insult themselves and their own people by putting them on the level of trained dogs. But people are not dogs – they are able to feel what other people feel, to assess their responses in terms of the suffering they cause and the gains they make. This is what the Provos fail to do.

After 20 years, you would think that they would have come up with a coherent analysis of the forces with which they are dealing, of Protestant nationalism in the North, of the nature of the United Kingdom, a State that is in many respects unique in the developed world, of the Republic and how it works. You would think, for instance, that an organisation whose aim is the break-up of the United Kingdom would have assessed what the last 10 years of Thatcherism have done to the UK as a State.

You would think that they would look at the fact that the British government in the last decade has been prepared to lay waste to Manchester and Liverpool and Newcastle and Glasgow and reassess their own theory that that same government is prepared to pour massive human and financial resources into holding on to Belfast and Derry for economic reasons. But they don't – their simple, unmodified, unreconstructed theory of British imperialism still gets trotted out as the justification for the killing.

You would think, too, that they might look at the Republic again in terms of the theory of British imperialism, that they might have a look at where the money that goes through the "black hole" every year is going, that they might try telling someone in Castlebar who has just lost a job because of a decision taken in a boardroom in Denver or Detroit that British imperialism is to blame and see what answer they get.

The Provos haven't bothered trying to understand the South, and if the price they pay is their complete failure to make any political headway here, then it's a price that in their terms is probably worth paying if it contributes to the simplicities on which their struggle is founded. The Provos' self-righteousness depends on their sense that the Catholic nationalist community in the North is uniquely aggrieved, that its suffering is so privileged that it has the right to take the lives of others.

A cursory glance south of the Border would shake that conviction. They talk of the entrenchment of privilege in the North while ignoring the fact that the South is the most class-privileged society in Western Europe, the one in which there is least social mobility, in which people born into a certain set of circumstances are most likely to stay in those circumstances.

They talk of job discrimination, of the fact that someone in west Belfast is less likely than anyone else to get a job – the same is true of someone in Tallaght or Darndale. On the Provos' own analysis, young kids from Tallaght should be putting bombs in O'Connell Street, yet the Provos themselves say that this kind of action for social objectives is unjustifiable.

In their refusal to confront all of the things that have changed since 1922 or since 1968, the Provos miss what might be one of their own better arguments. They might argue that, whereas in 1922 the Northern Protestants, integrated as they were into the international imperial economy, had good reason not to want to join with the rural, underdeveloped South, these reasons no longer apply. But, of course, to argue that would be to accept that at some time or other the Protestants had a good case, that they were not just dupes and fools misled by British imperialism.

The notion that the Protestants are merely dupes, however, is fundamental to the Provos' view of things (how else can they explain how peace and harmony will break out once the Brits leave?) and it prevents them from understanding or assessing, for instance, the impact on the Protestant community of the British government's withdrawal from Shorts and Harland and Wolff. These evasions, this lack of intellectual coherence, are probably necessary to an organisation which is so deeply involved in hypocrisy on a day-to-day basis.

[In their rationale, the slipperiest word is "war": "the war goes on. When Britain goes, so goes the war." It's war when you kill "inevitable casualties" or make mistakes. It's war when you shrug your shoulders and shake your head and say that yes, such things are regrettable, but that's what war is like. It's war when you kill building workers or census collectors for "collaboration", the analogy being with the French Resistance and the Nazis. It's war when you want your prisoners to be treated as POWs. But it's not war when you want a fair trial or the right to appear on television. It's not war when you complain of dirty tricks and shoot-to-kill policies. It's not war when the enemy starts to behave as you do and to shrug its shoulders at the inevitable casualties.]

Perhaps one should not expect coherent intelligence from a body which is outraged by failures to adhere to due legal process on the one hand and is quite happy to drag 16-year-olds out of flats and maim them for life because "everyone; knows they are guilty" on the other.

Perhaps we are wasting our time expecting a clear analysis from an organisation which condemns and at the same time carries out sectarian killings. But at least let's not give in to the argument that these people are very smart, that they know what they 're at, that they should not be challenged every time they open their mouths. The biggest favour we can do the Provos is not to argue with them.

Tightening the rope of terror and torment

November 23rd, 1993

On October 23rd 1993, the IRA exploded a bomb in Frizzell's fish shop on the Shankill Road in Belfast, killing nine innocent people and one of the bombers and injuring 57. I had spent much of the period before the bombing in West Belfast. This piece, written a month after the atrocity, was an attempt to describe the atmosphere in which it was perpetrated. The UFF, a front for the Ulster Defence Association, had been carrying on a campaign of sectarian assassinations against Catholics. The IPLO was a particularly anarchic "republican" splinter group.

In the days leading up to the Shankill massacre, the Catholic areas of working-class Belfast were living on their nerves. In the enclave of New Lodge, just north of the Shankill, at the heart of the area that has borne the worst of the violence for 25 years, Joe Austin, Sinn Féin councillor and a senior member of his party's leadership, was standing at the site of yet another loyalist assassination attempt, being interviewed by the BBC.

It was the middle of the morning, and the women, having left their children to school, were doing their day's shopping. Normal life was proceeding, but it was a strange kind of normality, overshadowed by fear and anger. As the women emerge from the shops, they notice Joe Austin being interviewed, and they start to gather around him. Within minutes, there are about 20 of them, ordinary women in ordinary clothes, their shopping baskets full of the ordinary staples of the poor.

And as he talks, they start to shout at him; to badger him. Why isn't the IRA doing something? Why aren't these bastards being taken out? When are they going to go into the Shankill and punish them? Joe Austin pleads and reasons. He knows they're angry, he knows they're scared. But it's the fear that's talking. Just imagine, he asks them, how they would feel if the IRA went up the Shankill Road and killed a load of innocent Protestants. They may say they want it, but wouldn't they feel ashamed and shocked, wouldn't they realise that it was just adding to the suffering and achieving nothing else? Eventually, the women disperse. It is hard to know whether they are convinced or not, since what is happening has little to do with abstract conviction and everything to do with a panic induced by the drip-drip terror of the UFF's murder campaign. As he moves around New Lodge and Ardoyne that morning on his rounds of council work, Joe Austin provides a focus for the complex set of emotions that surround politics and violence in a nationalist enclave of Belfast.

In neat, house-proud rooms, where the wallpaper always looks new and ornaments clutter the mantelpiece, the terrible question still hangs in the air. Nice decent people want to know when the IRA is going to "do something", just as they want to know when the Housing Executive is going to fix their floor. The mundane and the terrible mingle even in the way this thin, rapid man, full of wit and suppressed energy, moves around the estates, now kicking football with the kids on the road, now changing cars in a cul-de-sac in case the UFF is following him.

He gives the same response every time the awful question arises – that it would be very wrong, that the people who want it now because they are in a panic would hang their heads in shame and sorrow if it really happened. One middle-aged woman stands up to him. It worked before, she says, tit-for-tat worked in the 1970s. It was the only thing that ever stopped them. She is not a bloodthirsty woman, and it is clear that she believes that such an act of terrible

violence would stop the killing around her, would end the torment of regular awfulness, would, in the end, save lives.

All through those weeks before the massacre, in different parts of nationalist Belfast, Sinn Féin would say the same things if you asked about the rising panic that the Chinese torture of the assassinations was causing. Thank God, they would say, that the IPLO wasn't around anymore. Can you imagine, they would ask, what those lunatics would do in an atmosphere like this? It wouldn't be beyond them to go into the Shankill and wipe out a load of innocent people. The unmistakable feeling was that the IRA wasn't like that, that those crude days were over, that violence was a small and increasingly irrelevant part of a sophisticated, self-confident movement. There was quiet pride in the way they spoke, a conviction that without people like themselves, the people of the Shankill would be in the hands of madmen who would kill them indiscriminately.

In those weeks, too, moving around those areas, it was possible to observe something of the mechanism that creates the harsh terror of those women who wanted blood. To be in the company of a group of west Belfast nationalists when the word comes over the radio that another person has been shot is to witness a complex process of reaction. When a name is mentioned, the first reaction is relief it isn't a friend or family member. Then there is a process of consultation and recollection. Who do I know of that name? Would that be so-and-so's brother? The mind is searched for links, for details, for a way of making a connection with the victim so that he becomes real.

And in this intimate society, very often some connection is found. And then follows a mixture of shame and anger – shame at the first reaction of relief, anger that someone has made you go through all of this terrible calculation. Even at this small level of private reaction, almost everyone is made in some way complicit with violence.

If a place goes through this process time and again over 25 years, then these mixed and ambivalent reactions to violence become ingrained. And added to them is a kind of deep suspicion that can look paranoid from the outside but that looks like common sense from the inside.

A few days before the Shankill massacre, I arrived at the corner of Whiterock Road and Springfield Road, the edge of nationalist Ballymurphy, shortly after an attempt had been made to kill the driver of a black taxi waiting on the rank. A car had driven down from the direction of loyalist Springmartin, across the other side of the peace line, and from it a man had opened up with four shots. The car had driven past, turned back up the road, and the gunman had let off another five shots.

In the catalogue of terror, the incident was unimportant. Incredibly, no one was killed or wounded. It didn't make the evening news or the next day's papers. The taxi-man who had been the target was back in his taxi a few hours after. But it twisted the rope of terror another bit tighter. And, in the longer term, it reinforced basic political beliefs.

The corner is overlooked by one large army fort. The car would have driven past another. There is no objective evidence of any collusion between the would-be killers and the army. But to the people there, used to being watched, used to the idea that the army sees everything, the obvious question was how come the army hadn't seen the car? How come the would-be killers felt confident enough to turn and come back for a second go before escaping?

People see and interpret what is around them, not what people tell them. The very intensity of the presence of the army and RUC leads people to the conclusion that anything terrible that happens is their fault, either because they colluded in it or because they failed to stop it. And because, over 25 years, Catholic west Belfast has learned to distrust media images of itself, information from the outside is seldom allowed to disrupt this basic understanding of its own world.

Sinn Féin, in this climate, moves around inside a protective cocoon, as Joe Austin acknowledges. The very simplistic image of Sinn Fein and its supporters as mere bloodthirsty thugs protects it from the scrutiny which it deserves. “The media image of Sinn Féin which is put across, which is a hard-nosed terrorist entrepreneur, almost like an Arthur Daley with a gun, is fine for the media,” he says. “But the reality as seen by people in these areas is almost cocooned. We’re almost immune from whatever the media says, which has a good side and a bad side.”

The good side, from his point of view, is that people learn to disbelieve what they hear from outside and to trust the alternative versions generated by the republican movement. “That’s the positive side of the cocoonism within the nationalist community. The other side is more dangerous. Probably the best example of it would be in the immediate aftermath of the Enniskillen bomb, where any republican who had any sense of right and wrong, felt ashamed and had their heads down as far as their knees, but people were saying ‘Ah but, what about Bloody Sunday, what about that?’ This what-aboutism. I think you can end up pandering to that and you can become a victim of that.”

And yet, even knowing that, even understanding how wrong it is to pander to the blind desire for revenge, Joe Austin ended up, in the days after the massacre, at the home of his constituent Thomas Begley, who died planting the bomb, trying to cope with a disaster that he had told his people should not be allowed to happen. The women who had been warned by him that they would feel grief and shame if what they called for actually happened were now left to bear precisely those emotions.

Having emerged from violence, having constructed a political identity for itself, Sinn Féin could not escape the violence it had helped to sustain. This is what makes the role of violence in the republican hinterland so difficult to resolve. It is not a question simply of explaining morality to immoral people. The community out of which the Shankill atrocity came knew all about grief and shame, and had been told even by its republican leaders that such violence would be wrong.

The people I’d met who were calling for “action” were not inhuman or ignorant. They were decent people, afraid for their children, afraid for their neighbours, afraid for themselves. Unless that fear can be understood and held at bay, knowing what is right will not prevent what is wrong from happening again and again.

The moral monopoly

By far the most profound change in Ireland over the last 25 years is the end of what had been called “the moral monopoly” of the Catholic church. That process is often associated with the child abuse scandals that led to the Ryan and Murphy reports but, as these pieces show, it was under way much earlier

Sexuality and the reluctant emigrant

November 30th, 1989

It was another of those phone calls that have become all too familiar, another contemporary of mine bailing out of Ireland, another set of farewell drinks in another Dublin hotel, another set of frantic reminiscences to hide the fact that the one who's leaving feels like a traitor and the ones who are staying feel betrayed, telling jokes to suppress the questions that they know are stupid but that won't go away. So we're not good enough for you anymore? What's wrong with us? Who do you think you are, anyway, off to the Continent?

This one, though, was that bit more puzzling. Frank, the guy who was leaving, was the most profoundly and self-consciously Irish person I knew. He wasn't a bigot or a Provo or a mountainy man with tweed knickerbockers and a little shamrock farm in the wesht. He was from the same Dublin suburb that I was and had a Dublin accent as thick as an EC butter mountain. He had grown up after Vatican II and the *Late Late Show* and the Rolling Stones, and he had most of the attitudes that went with that.

But he also spoke Irish as if the Battle of Kinsale and Cromwell and the Famine had never happened, as if this were the most natural thing in the world for a Dublin suburbanite do do. Neither of his parents had a word of the language, but somehow he imbibed it and shaped his thinking around it. He'd be nattering away in English to you – he had no hang-ups about which language you preferred to speak – and he'd suddenly stop and say “Ah, Jaysus, what's the word for that in English?” and give you the Irish expression. He thought in Irish. He also played a mean tin whistle and had spent a part of his working life in a Gaeltacht. If a passing UFO had nabbed him and taken him off to study him as a representative Irishman, the aliens would have concluded that the famed wound in the Irish historical consciousness was all guff, that the Irish were perfectly at ease with their past and their present.

It was a real shock to discover that he was leaving. He had a good job, one that he genuinely liked doing, not particularly well paid, but then he didn't have kids and a mortgage and all the impediments of the thirtysomethings. I watched him, so at ease in the flow of slagging and nudging in that hotel lounge, and wondered why. And then something struck me, something that seemed so obvious and natural to him, as natural certainly as his love of the Irish language, that I hadn't even thought of it. I waited until the hubbub of conversation had risen to become a seamless blanket of sound and then I asked him if he was leaving because he was gay. Was that it?

It was. This man, so at ease with all the contradictions of being Irish, so sure-footed in negotiating the divides between tradition and modernity, between country and city, between a Gaelic past and an Anglo-American present, had been trapped and ground down by something as simple and natural as a sexual preference. He had a boyfriend who was unemployed and from another working-class Dublin suburb. Neither of them belonged to the stereotyped world of the gay man; sophisticated, trendy, mercurial, glittering, creative. They didn't belong to a set, a clique, a scene, or any of the other things that heterosexual society imagines as going with being gay. Nor did they want to belong to any such thing. They wanted merely to be normal, to live in the same places, have the same friends, do the same things that they would do if they weren't gay. And it was this simplest of things that they found to be denied them.

Alone and discreet, they could get by and be tolerated. Living together they would be a challenge to the Family, an affront to normality as the Black Mass is an affront to the Mass. They would cease to be two ordinary people and become a symbol. And that they couldn't take. But what about Frank's job, the one he liked so much? "I would rather," he said to me, "do a menial job in a foreign city and be normal than have a good job in Dublin and be a freak."

Frank is well travelled and an accomplished linguist – his boyfriend will have to learn a new language and start life in a new city that he doesn't know – but anyone who knows him knows what the wrench from Ireland will cost him. Floating, along on an air of general liberalism, I had forgotten that that still might be the cost of normality in Ireland.

Frank and his friend, though, are still a lot better off than the kids that any social worker working with young people in London will tell you about: the kids from small towns in Ireland who get out as soon as they can because their sexuality doesn't fit in.

Used to being regarded as freaks, they dive in to the relative sexual freedom of London without knowing what they are doing, without taking care, without realising that being gay and being normal are not opposites, that there is such a thing as safe, normal gay sexuality.

Some of them are now dying of that ignorance, dying of not being brought up to understand and regulate their sexuality rather than be ashamed of it. Frank and his friend have only lost a home and a job; some of these kids are losing their lives.

The ignorance, of course, is not confined to young gays. The marginalisation of gays still means that there is an association in many minds between being gay and, for instance, child molestation.

The argument, of course, is one that would see heterosexual acts banned because of rape, child abuse and pornography ("I'd like to ask these fundamental citizens," says the American writer William Burroughs, "whether a 15-year-old boy or a 15-year-old girl is in more danger when hitchhiking. The answer is in the papers every day: for every dead boy they can put on the table, I can stack dead women up like cordwood.") but it is one that will stay around so long as the Irish criminal code continues to define gay sex as a crime on a par with rape and murder.

Ray Burke's recent decision to include gay people in the list of those protected under the Incitement to Hatred Act is an enlightened and imaginative one, but an air of absurdity will continue to hang around it until the Government acts in accordance with the ruling of the European Court and removes from the statute books the law which says that homosexual acts are subject to life imprisonment.

That law itself, whether it is enforced or not, is the greatest incitement to hatred imaginable, but the ludicrous prospect of the Government prosecuting itself shouldn't be allowed to mask the nub of the issue: as it presently stands, the Government's position exactly mirrors that of the Catholic Church. It is a position of tolerance – homosexuals deserve our sympathy and should not be abused – rather than one of basic personal freedom being respected – homosexual sex is normal and it is a gross breach of civil rights to criminalise it. Repealing this grossly offensive law means breaking that unanimity in the positions of Church and State.

And for Fianna Fáil, having gone through so many contortions in this decade in order to make itself the one and only holy Catholic and apostolic party that the country has left, that is not an easy thing to do.

This is the reason for the vagueness about accepting the European judgment, the familiar evasions about the matter being under review. The fear of losing its hard-won place as the party of the moral majority is, for Fianna Fáil, a very real one.

In such a context, it is hard not to see the concession on the Incitement to Hatred Act as a substitute for, rather than an addition to, action on the decriminalisation of homosexuality. In the meantime, normality remains, for many Irish people, elsewhere.

Makeshift backdrop displaces the institution

August 5th, 1992

My parents' wedding photographs always remind me of a frontier town in an old Western. To prise open the mock mother-of-pearl covers of the wedding album is to enter a world of strange contrasts. There they are, elegant and radiant, wrapped in the proud formality of the 1950s, the elaborate dress and veil, the clean lines of my father's bespoke suit. They are emblems of a great continuity, of a seriousness and respectability forged over generations of struggle against squalor and dirt, against poverty and fecklessness. Their adamant dignity sparkles like a diamond hard-won from the dust and muck.

What gives the pictures their air of *High Noon* though, of a respectable wedding set against the dangers of a frontier town, is the setting. The church, which should be dark with Gothic curves or bright with Baroque tracery, is merely dull with the blank stare of unadorned concrete. It is not really a church at all, but a temporary building slapped up to serve a hastily-conceived new suburb while the real one is still being built. It has no elegance and no resonance. It may have been consecrated by the wave of a bishop's hand, but it is unconsecrated by those holier things, by the skill of craftsmen or by the hopes and dreams of generations.

Yet, for me, because of those photographs, it has to serve as one of those images of tradition and remembrance that we all carry around in our heads.

That ramshackle place, raw and temporary and forever unfinished, has to serve as the locus of an ordered and secure past. Strangely, though it still looks temporary after 40 years, it is still there, still an ugly shell of windowless breeze-block with a reinforced steel door at one side. And while the huge, windy church that replaced it now looks dated, ineffably of its time, the very blankness and ugliness of the temporary structure make it curiously timeless.

Monument to the permanently temporary Built without design or intention, it is not marked by the designs or intentions of any one decade. It could be the newest public building on the estate instead of the oldest. While families and lives come and go around it abides, a monument to the permanently temporary nature of the new Ireland whose frontier it once occupied.

With time, indeed, the building took on its own eerie importance. There was something strange about having this deconsecrated church down the road from the real one. It had the mysterious, ghostly presence of a wrecked ship at the mouth of a busy harbour, or a deserted village chanced upon in the quiet hills. And, indeed, it became a kind of alternative church, a site for a different sort of communion entered into by the disaffected young, the holy bread of sex and the heady wine of rock and roll.

When I was about 10, the modern world, in all its shocking glory, arrived at this now-secularised church. What happened was ordinary enough in its beginnings but deeply shocking in its repercussions. It began as a set of actions from the 1950s and ended as one from the 1980s.

On a Wednesday evening in 1968, at the youth club hop in that still-temporary building where my parents were married, a priest arrived to find the lights down low and the couples clinched in too-sinful embrace. The dance was broken up, the dancers sent home.

It was a small and cliched drama, a tired reprise of a scene played out in parish halls and at crossroads all over de Valera's Ireland. It was the shocking response to it that marked the death of that Ireland. Instead of burning with shame as the scandal was whispered around the parish, the dancers muttered together and let their anger fester.

At 10 o'clock Mass the next Sunday, they acted. They arrived early and en masse, and sat in the front two rows, facing the pulpit. As the parish priest rose for his sermon, they stood up and walked out, down the centre aisle, past gaping mothers and spluttering fathers, stilling the fingers that told the beads and silencing the lips that mouthed the pious murmurs.

They would come back a few weeks later, defeated and shunned, never realising that they had dragged a whole world behind them in their footsteps when they walked out that door.

It is said that Haile Selassie's reign as Emperor of Ethiopia ended, not when he was eventually overthrown by the army but when, a few years earlier, a disaffected young official whom he was removing from his post turned and walked out of the palace, not backwards and bowing, as custom demanded, but with his back to the emperor and his head held high. From that moment the empire was doomed. In the same way, and with the same inevitability, an empire of certainties was doomed in our parish that day. An authority had been lost and could never be regained.

Last week, my eye was drawn to a newspaper headline. "Priest shocked over rave drugs party held in parish bingo hall," it said. "A Dublin priest," went the first paragraph, "who hired out his parish hall for a 50th wedding anniversary at the weekend was shocked to discover it was used for a rave acid-house party instead, which was raided by gardai."

The hall, of course, was that same temporary building in which my parents were married and from which the beginning of the end of an old Ireland took, for us, its local habitation and its name. The incident was a wilder, more dramatic but somehow less significant replay of those events of 25 years ago.

The noise had woken people in the surrounding houses in the small hours of Sunday morning. The guards had been called. At 2 am the ravers locked the doors with 200 people inside and the ecstasy-driven dancing continued for three hours. Finally, after dawn, the police and the parish priest stormed the hall.

The priest took to the stage under the flashing lights and screamed at the dancers to stop. No one minded his distress very much. The police dismantled the sound equipment and the lighting rig and took it all away. The dancers yawned and went out into the early light that was washing the playing fields a new bright green and glinting off the aluminium window frames that have long since replaced the Corporation's handiwork. It was Sunday morning and time for bed.

The incident was good for a natter after Mass, a juicier morsel of gossip than your man's indiscretions in the pub, or your woman's operation for cancer. But there was no profound shock. A priest asked to comment shrugged and said: "These raves are happening all over the place now. It's very hard to stop them." And anyway, the whole thing, organised and confident as it was, seemed rather benign compared with the lonely, desperate deaths from heroin that scarred this parish a few years back.

A mould, once broken, cannot be broken again, and this one had split with a quieter but much more disquieting crack 25 years ago. The ravers, of course, would not be awake for Mass, even if they wanted to go. While the faithful gathered, they would be drifting into

psychedelic dreams, not to be woken till the rich smell of the Sunday roast had penetrated upstairs to lure them from sleep.

In the church, the front two rows would be safely filled with pious old ladies, not with protesters. The temporary hall had finally triumphed over the permanent church. The contingent, makeshift society was now more real than the illusions of permanence and tradition. The parish priest, not the young dancers in the hall, was now the lonely protester, the bewildered voice crying out in the flashing light. It is hard to suppress a twinge of pathos, but better to move on, knowing, at least, where we are now.

Unlikely link of GPA and Magdalen women

September 8th, 1993

One of the strange things about Ireland is that everything seems to be connected. You flip over a story about, a high-tech global economy and you find yourself in the 19th century. You scratch polished surfaces and they bleed. Two of last week's big media stories have this kind of strange underground connection between them. It is a link that may not in itself be very important, but that says much about the nature of history for us, the way the past keeps surfacing with a frantic gulp for air, before it disappears again beneath the waves.

One of the stories I have in mind is the replacement of Tony Ryan as chairman of Guinness Peat Aviation. It is the end of a piece of modern Irish history that lasted for barely a decade. It is a story from a world where things do not last, where empires rise and fall in the blinking of a historical eye. It is the kind of story that implies that, in the global economy, history really is bunk.

The other story, though, is a story of history literally disinterred. A few days ago, the historian Dr Mary Cullen was telling the Desmond Greaves Summer School "that women were beginning to rediscover their history, their lost group memory". While she spoke, the graves of the Magdalen women in the High Park convent in Drumcondra, Dublin, were being emptied and the remains of those who lay there cremated and shifted to two mass graves in Glasnevin. It was a haunting image of a history that remains largely unwritten, a history that in being disturbed still has the power to disturb.

What possible connection can there be between these two histories, between the fall of GPA and the digging up of graves in Drumcondra? The answer can be found on the GPA share register, itself a record of broken dreams. There, with the banks and the businessmen, with the great and the good, is listed "Sr Kathleen Hanly, Convent of Our Lady of Charity, High Park, Drumcondra, Dublin, (joint account holders). 5,200 shares."

This is the same convent that is disinterring the remains of 133 fallen and forgotten women, having sold the land in which they lay to a property developer. According to the Catholic Press and Information Office, the convent is short of money and needs to raise cash for further development at the convent. I'm not suggesting that the only reason the convent needs money is because it lost out on stock-market speculation. I'm sure it does need cash and that it will put the money to good use in its work for homeless women. But at least part of its need for cash must have something to do with losses on GPA shares.

The shares it held were purchased in 1991, when the price was very high. They cost about \$110,000 and are now all but worthless. That is a very substantial loss for a charitable institution to take. While it would be fanciful to suggest that the collapse of GPA caused the exhumation of the Magdalens, there is at least a thin thread linking these two events. There is about our relationship to history in Ireland a kind of equivalent to the uncertainty principle in physics, a sense that we cannot look simultaneously at the present and the past without disturbing the past itself.

The image of the Magdalen women being unable to rest in peace in the Ireland of global capital, stock markets and business heroes we are trying to construct is, or at least should be, a haunting one. The past is full of unfinished business. It will not be finished until it is acknowledged and given its due.

One of the worst things about what the nuns at High Park are doing is that, however unintentionally, it repeats the original insult which society offered to the women in that asylum and others like it. At least 23 such homes for “fallen women” were established in the 19th century, but High Park is important because it was the largest such asylum in Ireland or England. For that reason alone it is exemplary, an embodiment of an underground history that is still largely unacknowledged.

Historians like Catriona Clear and Maria Luddy, and the playwright Patricia Burke-Brogan in her fine play *Eclipsed*, have tried to rescue the Magdalen homes from amnesia. But it is significant that the last line of Maria Luddy’s essay on the subject in *Women Surviving* is that “these women, perhaps the most hidden group in Irish society, do have a history which deserves to be recorded”.

While that work of rescuing a memory is going on, the most basic memorial, the graveyard, is being obliterated. The repeated insult is precisely that, in life, these women who are part of a forgotten past were told again and again to forget the past. High Park’s own report for 1881 stressed: “Until the penitents forget the past, nothing solid can be done towards their permanent conversion.”

The women, ex-prostitutes, women who had children out of wedlock, orphaned girls, or even “women perceived to be in danger of losing their virginity”, were forcibly cut off from their own histories. Their children, if they had them, were taken from them, they were not allowed to write or receive letters, and they were hardly ever allowed visitors.

The past was the enemy to be defeated, personal history a history of shame. There is, of course, nothing that Irish society now can do for those dead women. Except, that is, let them rest in peace.

For our own sakes, though, we need to remember and understand the history of such women and such institutions. It is a history of what happens when a society chooses not to take responsibility for its own problems and to confine them, under a cloak of religiosity, to some place out of sight and out of mind. The history of the Magdalen homes, of the Borstal homes run by orders of brothers, of the orphanages and asylums, is a history of a chosen forgetfulness.

In other forms, that forgetfulness is still a constant danger. Forgetting the past helps us to forget the present, to keep out of mind today’s outcasts and aliens. To compound that forgetfulness, to give that shameful history the sanction of the present, is both dangerous and disgraceful.

This is not just a problem for the nuns at High Park or even for the Catholic Church as a whole. These were Catholic institutions and the church did create and sustain many of the social attitudes which made these women outcast in the first place.

But they had as much to do with Victorian England as with Rome, with the pathological connection between sexuality and madness which created the category of “moral insanity” into which such women were pushed. Many of the institutions existed before the nuns took them over, and the nuns probably ran them with more efficiency and, sometimes at least, charity than lay people had done.

And it was, after all, respectable society which literally sent its dirty linen to be washed by the Magdalens.

In these matters, to borrow a phrase, the church was no better than it should be. It is, however, reasonable to expect that it should be better now. And if it is objected that all of this is, after all, only about symbols and rituals, it can be replied that the church's field is, after all, symbol and ritual.

The honouring of the dead, the giving of a sense of significance to individual life, the establishment of a continuity between the generations – what is a church for if not for things like these?

The religious impulse itself has always been fundamentally connected to the honouring of the dead. To surrender that impulse to the world of the stock exchange and the property-developer is to make a statement about the incapacity of the religious impulse itself to survive in the modern world.

It was in the orphanages and asylums that the rotten heart of Ceausescu's Romania was eventually revealed behind the propaganda and megalomania. Perhaps it is always in the institutions for the weak and the shamed that the true nature of a society can be seen. When it is seen, the least that the living owe the dead is memory and respect.

The rest – the money, the business empires, the entrepreneurial heroes – come and go. The value of individual lives should not be allowed to go with them.

Some may want TV and radio to get quietly lost

June 21st, 1996

From 1993 onwards, I supported the Stay Safe programme, aimed at helping children protecting themselves from bullying and abuse, against a fierce campaign by right-wing Catholics who opposed its introduction to primary schools.

There seems to be a general consensus that there is too much talk on RTÉ and that Gay Byrne has had his day. Both of these perceptions may be accurate enough, in themselves, but something tells me that there is, behind them, a deeper disgruntlement. Both Gay Byrne and RTÉ have played critical roles in the opening up of discussion in Ireland. They have, over four decades, redefined what it is permissible to talk about.

And I get the feeling that, for many people, that process has gone far enough. A lot of what we have had to talk about has been very unpleasant indeed, and we are tired, of listening to it. We wonder if it would not be better if, after all, the worms were to crawl quietly back under the stones. A court report I read last month made me think again about this.

In September 1993, I went on the *Late Late Show*. I had been writing here about the Stay Safe programme in schools and the campaign against it by right-wing Catholic groups. The programme is aimed at giving children a language in which they can discuss bullying and abuse, and an idea of how to report it.

It is now being used successfully in virtually, every primary school in the Republic, but at the time there was a very strong and well-organised campaign to oppose it. Some of the opponents subsequently came to greater public prominence in the No Divorce campaign. Others are Catholic priests, concerned, as one of them put it, that “the claim that a child owns its own body is at odds with Christian tradition”.

When I was asked to debate the issue on the *Late Late* I wasn't sure how to respond. I know enough about television to know how crude it can be, how inadequately it deals with complex and sensitive questions, how it can not merely obscure the truth but actively distort it. I was worried about whether such a debate might merely serve to give a platform for the views of obscurantist cranks. I had also, to be honest, grown weary of a subject on which I had said a lot to little effect.

Black propaganda I decided, however, to do the show, largely because some of the black propaganda used against the Stay Safe programme had been so vile – claiming, for instance, that it was called the “Safe Sex” programme, and that it “prepared children for abuse” – that there was a real danger that some parents might have been genuinely frightened by it. But this consideration only just outweighed the misgivings. After the show, I was still very unsure about whether I had made the right decision. The debate was a typical televisual set-piece, more concerned with the drama of absolute oppositions than with establishing truths or imparting information.

After it, there was a feeling of utter pointlessness. Here was an issue which, to me at least, could not be more clear-cut: whether or not schools should help children to protect themselves from bullying and abuse. The discussion seemed, from the inside, merely to have taken that moral clarity and disguised it as yet another round in an endless cultural war between tradition and change in Ireland. That impression was subsequently strengthened by

the fact that the campaign against Stay Safe melted away when the divorce referendum appeared on the horizon and the right-wing Catholics moved on to what were, for them, bigger targets.

What I didn't know was that in a housing estate somewhere in Co Offaly, an 11-year-old boy was watching the *Late Late Show* that night with his mother and a neighbour, a man of 75, who usually watched it with them. When the item about the Stay Safe programme came on, the neighbour had become uncomfortable. After a few minutes, he made an excuse and left. The mother could feel a sense of expectation. Her son then asked her what sexual abuse was. When she told him, he asked her how she would react if one of her children had been abused. She said she would be supportive.

The boy said, "Mammy, I was abused." He then told his mother that the neighbour who had been watching the *Late Late* with them a few minutes earlier had raped him about 20 times in the previous four years. The boy had stayed in the neighbour's house to help look after him when he was ill. The man had sometimes plied the boy with vodka or whiskey until he fell asleep and then assaulted him. He also, according to the boy, told him "daft things, about men and religion and he told him men could have babies".

The mother contacted a solicitor shortly afterwards, and she and her son were put in touch with the Midland Health Board. Last September a complaint was made to the Garda, and last month the neighbour, having pleaded guilty to two sample charges of rape and two of sexual assault, was jailed for five years.

This story is, among other things, a tribute to Gay Byrne, whose broadcasting career is now apparently entering its home stretch. It is very hard to think of any other circumstances or any other place in which a 75-year-old man, an 11-year-old boy and a middle-aged woman would all be sitting down at 10 o'clock on a Friday night watching a debate about the prevention of child abuse between an obscure journalist and a barely less obscure academic.

And it is very hard to imagine that, after the *Late Late* is gone, any television programme will ever again have the kind of routine place in people's lives that allows for such a direct link between reality and the small screen. But the story is also a necessary reminder that there is still, in Ireland, a great deal to be said.

Those of us who work in the media become affected by a paradoxical mixture of weary futility and self-centred arrogance in which we both undervalue and overrate the work we do. We get tired of dealing with the same issues time and again, and often lose the conviction that there is any point in saying them. But we also assume that because we are weary of an issue, its importance has somehow diminished. We forget why it arose in the first place – because it touches the lives of the people we are supposed to serve.

Talking about things does, sometimes, change them, just as refusing to talk about them allows them to happen. The man convicted of rape in Offaly also admitted to gardaí that he had abused his grand-nephew years earlier. He got away with it.

That young man went to England where he subsequently suffered a nervous breakdown that halted a promising career. Fifteen years ago, what had been done to him was not a subject for public discussion in the newspapers or on television, and because it wasn't, we thought the place was much nicer than it really was. But if it had been, the abuser might not have been free to move on to another victim and damage another life.

It may be more pleasant to fill the silence with happy music, but there are very good reasons why the tongue set free by radio and television should never be tied again.

The ugly politics of the womb

August 5th, 2003

Twenty years ago, while the politics of the womb were dominating public debate in Ireland, Sheila Hodggers went into Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Drogheda. Sheila lived in Dundalk with her husband, Brendan. They had two daughters, aged eight and seven. They were considering trying for a third child when Sheila discovered a lump on her breast. After a mastectomy, however, she got better. With the help of cytotoxic drugs, her cancer was kept at bay.

Until, that is, she became pregnant. Her medication was stopped, for fear that it would harm the foetus in her womb. She developed severe lumbar pain, indicating a tumour on her back. But this could not be fully confirmed because the hospital would not take an X-ray.

Brendan Hodggers asked that a Caesarean section be performed on his wife, so that she could return to her cancer treatment immediately. The request was refused. She was admitted to Our Lady of Lourdes in agony. As Brendan Hodggers subsequently recalled: “She was literally screaming at this stage. I could hear her from the front door of the hospital, and she was in a ward on the fourth floor.”

Sheila Hodggers was eventually moved to the maternity ward. On March 16th, 1983, she went into labour two months prematurely and was delivered of a baby girl the next day. The child died almost immediately after birth. Mrs Hodggers died two days later. She had tumours on her neck, spine and legs.

Padraig Yeates wrote an account of her story in *The Irish Times* in September 1983. It didn't matter. A few days later the country voted, by a two-to-one majority, to make Ireland an abortion-free zone. The Bishop of Raphoe, Dr Seamus Hegarty, had claimed in August 1983: “A democratically taken decision to outlaw abortion in Ireland would be a shining example to the rest of the world”, and a majority of voters clearly agreed with him.

We now know that at the very time that Sheila Hodggers was being crucified on the cross of Ireland's exemplary protection of the unborn, the obstetrician Michael Neary, in the same department of the same hospital where she suffered and died, was deciding that the future children of many of the women entrusted to his care would remain forever unborn.

He was, without consent or proper reason, taking out their perfectly healthy wombs. We may never know why Michael Neary acted as he did or what dark obsessions made him such a danger to women. But such knowledge, in any event, would be largely useless. We can never predict or even fully understand such behaviour.

What we should be able to understand is why Neary was not stopped, why grievous bodily harm could be inflicted on so many women for so long. And in order to do that we have to acknowledge the extent to which a narrow obsession with abortion distorted medical ethics to the point where the real women disappeared.

Our Lady of Lourdes was, from 1939 until April 1997, a private Catholic hospital, run by the Medical Missionaries of Mary. Consultants employed there had to sign contracts agreeing to abide by Catholic ethics. These contracts were in the ultimate control of the local bishop, in this case the Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All-Ireland. The ethical standards were

largely concerned with the control of women's bodies: no abortion, no sterilisation, no support for artificial contraception.

Placing consultants in this God-like position had huge consequences for patients. Our Lady of Lourdes was in the forefront of Catholic obstetric practice, including the routine use of symphysiotomy, the permanent widening of the pelvis. This horrible operation, carried out for largely religious reasons (the fear that repeated Caesarean sections would lead women to use contraception), has left hundreds of women with back pain, incontinence and mobility problems.

In Our Lady of Lourdes the operation was performed 348 times between 1950 and 1983. Informed consent was seldom an issue. While mothers were suffering for the cause of making Ireland a shining example to the world, gross hypocrisy surrounded the veneer of ethics. Between 1971 and 1988 there were more than 50 complaints of sexual assault on boys and young men against a single consultant – not Michael Neary – at Our Lady of Lourdes.

And Michael Neary was removing the wombs of 5 per cent of his patients. The significance of this figure can be gauged by comparing it to a 10-year study of two hospitals in Canada. Neary's rate of Caesarean hysterectomy was 50 per thousand women. The Canadian hospitals had a combined rate of 0.4 per thousand. In all of this we see the consequences of deciding that women do not have a right to control their own bodies. So long as we hold up that control as a shining example to the world, so long will we remain in a State where, if grotesque hypocrisy were a tradable commodity, our Gross National Product would still be booming.

Bubble and the bust

After 2001, it was obvious to anyone who cared to look that the real Irish boom that began in 1995, was over. It was being replaced by a property and banking bubble, inflated by debt, whose main beneficiaries were bankers themselves and those who controlled development land. These pieces are a reminder of what was obvious even at the time: that there would be a price to be paid for giving unaccountable elites their head

Land price windfalls fuel housing crisis

May 20th, 2000

In *Poor People, Poor Places*, a book published last year by the Geographical Society of Ireland, the Maynooth-based town planner Brendan Bartley describes a place that attracts media attention only when its creators feature in tribunals or its inhabitants appear before the courts. “What one sees, if one ventures into north Clondalkin,” he writes, “are littered and unkempt approach roads, rundown neighbourhood centres, public buildings which are invariably surrounded by large palisade fencing and shuttering, poorly kept open spaces, a skyline dominated by large electricity pylons and housing estates which face inwards and turn their back on the public areas. The neighbourhood centres which were to be at the heart of each neighbourhood have failed.”

“In the meantime,” Bartley continues, “the villages of Lucan and Clondalkin, located at the edges of the proposed new town, have become thriving shopping and business centres, while north Clondalkin, which was intended to be at the heart of the new town, is effectively isolated from both villages and is almost devoid of facilities.”

From the late 1960s onwards, north Clondalkin was supposed to be one of three new towns in west Dublin and a site for its town centre was assembled by Dublin County Council. For reasons that are now becoming clear, however, that site was replaced with the most infamous development in Irish planning history, the Quarryvale shopping centre. North Clondalkin’s town centre was left to the weeds, the litter and the dogs. While the developers had money to spread around, the people who actually live in Quarryvale, one of the main estates in north Clondalkin, were among the poorest in Ireland. In the early 1990s, when Frank Dunlop was acting as an ATM machine for some county councillors, 60 per cent of the heads of household in Quarryvale were unemployed. While one councillor was allegedly receiving £40,000 in a single payment, the average gross income in Quarryvale was £131.72 a week, much less than half the average industrial earnings. The corruption of the planning process, in other words, both reflected and deepened the poverty of the local community.

Ironically, that corruption is also now reflected in a completely different kind of mirror – the problems of Ireland’s new wealth. The continuing rise in inflation which this week reached almost 5 per cent is fuelled, in part, by the rising cost of houses. No less than the blight of deprivation which is all too evident in north Clondalkin, the over-heating of the economy is significantly shaped by the exorbitant cost of building land. The massive profits to be made from land speculation are paid for in political corruption, appalling planning and inflationary pressures that threaten to derail the economy. Profits for the few The economics of rezoning are pretty obvious. An acre of agricultural land in Co Dublin sells for something between £30,000 and £60,000. The same acre with a residential zoning and planning permission for housing sells for between a million and £1.5 million. From figures published last December by the Construction Industry Federation, it seems likely that landowners in the Dublin area made close to £1 billion from the sale of land for new housing last year alone, most of it pure profit.

These profits, moreover, tend to go to a very small number of people. A study by Tom McEnaney in an issue of *Business and Finance* magazine last January reckoned that just eight property developers control “the vast majority of building land in Dublin”.

The largest, Gerry Gannon, is said to have a land bank of 800 acres, mostly around Malahide and Howth. The others include Michael Cotter of Park Homes; Mickey Whelan of Maplewood Homes; Michael and Tom Bailey, who have featured heavily at the Flood tribunal; Joe O'Reilly and Brian Wallace of Castlethorn Developments; David Daly, who owns up to a 1,000 acres around Swords; Joe Morari of Manor Park Homes; and the Zoe Developments group.

There is no suggestion, of course that any of these individuals or companies are involved in corrupt practices. What is clear, however, is that, at any one time, a small group of people is in a position to make enormous profits from speculation in building land. This profit is made at the direct expense of people buying houses. While builders, mortgage lenders and auctioneers are certainly doing very well, by far the most profitable and fast-rising input into housing costs is land itself.

For social, economic and political reasons, it seems obvious that the State should intervene to end a situation in which vast profits can be made merely because a piece of land has been rezoned by a public body. An end to rezoning windfalls would cut off the incentive to bribe councillors. It would make planning disasters like north Clondalkin less likely. And it would help to keep inflation in check by stabilising house prices.

This is so obvious that it has been urged at an official level for over a quarter of a century. In 1974, the government published the Kenny Report, which recommended that speculation in building land be ended by forcing owners to sell at current (ie agricultural) market prices. And in recent times, as the housing crisis has evolved, variants on the Kenny proposals have been put forward by bodies ranging from Siptu and the Labour Party to the top officials of the four Dublin councils to the Educational Building Society. Siptu's president Des Geraghty raised the issue again this week in discussions on the inflation figures.

A year ago, in a report to the Department of the Environment, the senior managers at the four Dublin local authorities asked the Government to dust off the Kenny Report and suggested that a system of levies be used to force the release of already serviced land for development. The head of lending at the EBS, Martin Walsh, in an interview with *Business and Finance* in January, proposed that the State should buy up all or most of the agricultural land in the Dublin area. "The Government," he said, "must give a strong signal to prospective house buyers that 20 per cent increases (in house prices) will not go on forever.

A substantial purchase of unzoned land – enough for 20 years' supply – beside all the main commuter routes out of the city, using compulsory purchase orders, would be such a signal."

When a policy seems so obviously necessary to a wide variety of interests, including an official inquiry whose report has been on the shelves for a quarter of a century, the public is bound to wonder why it has not been implemented. There is no good reason why a private individual should make huge amounts of money merely because a public body has changed the designated status of a certain field. The oft-cited constitutional difficulties are almost certainly chimerical, since the courts have consistently insisted that private property may be taken into public ownership where the common good demands it and where fair compensation (in this case the current value of the land) is paid to the owner.

The most obvious reason for doing nothing, then, is that a change of policy would be against the interests of a tiny number of very wealthy people. That may be an unfair

conclusion. But knowing what it now knows, the public may well be inclined to believe it unless and until the Government proves it wrong.

Huge rises for bankers rather than apology

March 31st, 2000

Last summer a young man was caught urinating on the street in front of an AIB cash dispenser in central Dublin. When he appeared in court, the judge ordered him to stand in front of the same bank machine with a sign admitting what he had done and apologising to the public for his bad behaviour.

A few months later the senior management of Allied Irish Banks itself was on the receiving end of one of the most stinging indictments ever of a respected Irish institution. The report of the Dáil's Public Accounts Committee investigation into the evasion of Dirt found, essentially, that the bank had performed on the public a similar act to the one that young man had performed in front of its cash dispenser. It might have been nice if the top management of the company had stood in O'Connell Street with big signs around their necks saying "I apologise".

Instead, as we learned on Tuesday, they awarded themselves pay increases of 10 per cent for 1999, with the total remuneration packages of the five executive directors rising from £3.05 million in 1998 to £3.35 million last year. We know from the Public Accounts Committee report that most of the senior management in AIB was aware through much of the 1980s and the 1990s that the bank had massive numbers of bogus non-resident accounts which were established for the sole purpose of illegally evading tax.

Many of those in charge at the bank during the critical years of this scam have since retired. It is fair to say that the present leadership of the bank did not actually create the mess. But it is equally obvious from the PAC report that the present bosses at the bank were extraordinarily slow to accept responsibility for what had happened and to take steps to put things right by paying what they owed. After 1998, by which time most of the present AIB management was in place, the bank's problems with Dirt were public knowledge. Articles had been published in the *Sunday Independent* and *Magill* magazine, the latter detailing the assessment of AIB's own internal auditor in 1990 that there was a contingent Dirt liability of £100 million. It was up to the present leadership, including the group chief executive Tom Mulcahy, and chairman Lochlann Quinn, to pay what they owed.

Late in 1998 and early last year, indeed, AIB undertook a "look-back exercise" to establish its potential Dirt liability. On the evidence of both Mr Mulcahy and Mr Quinn, they figured they might owe as much as £35 million. Yet the bank stressed that the purpose of this exercise was not to discover what was owed and pay up but to "rebut media reports of a potential liability of £ 100 million".

Spin control This was, in other words, an exercise not in corporate responsibility, but in spin control. Instead of approaching the Revenue and offering to pay even the £35 million, AIB, especially in the person of Tom Mulcahy, continued to insist that it had an informal amnesty deal with the Revenue. The PAC, of course, found that this claim was spurious. Yet Tom Mulcahy was rewarded by the bank in 1999 with a salary of £475,000, a company car and other benefits worth £31,000, pension contributions of £74,000 and, believe it or not, a bonus of £237,000. The total package amounted to £850,000, or about 50 times the earnings of a bus-driver.

Lochlann Quinn was asked at the PAC hearings what provision was put into the bank's financial statements for March 31st, 1999, in relation to what he himself thought could be a Dirt liability of £35 million. His reply: "Nothing." He was also asked: "What procedures have you personally put in place to ensure that all of the laws of this country are fully complied with in every respect by all of the management and staff at head office and branch level in AIB?" His reply: "None. I have put no procedure personally in place in the bank since I became chairman."

For his part-time role as chairman in 1999, Lochlann Quinn was paid £149,000, or about seven times what a bus-driver gets for working a 60-hour week.

Or consider Kevin Kelly, now head of retail banking at AIB. His involvement with the Dirt saga goes back to the early 1990s, when he was group finance director. He read the alarming internal audit reports. In April 1992, however, he told the Central Bank that "he was satisfied that the [Dirt]situation was now in order". Mr Kelly is also the chairman of the council of the Irish Bankers' Federation, a post he also held in 1996. Asked by Jim Mitchell at the PAC hearings whether the IBF had any equivalent to the codes of ethics that apply to the medical and legal professions, he replied "No".

Mr Mitchell: There are no ethical standards?

Mr Kelly: No.

Last year Mr Kelly received a salary of £219,000, benefits of £26,000 and a bonus of £113,000. His total package amounted to £425,000, or about 20 times that of a bus-driver. It doesn't seem to matter that AIB was exposed to justified public scorn at the PAC hearings, that crucial parts of its evidence were utterly disbelieved by the committee, or that it colluded in depriving the State of very significant revenue at a time when poverty, unemployment and squalor were visibly rampant. It doesn't seem to matter that enormous damage has been done to the bank's long-term reputation for corporate governance and social responsibility. It doesn't even seem to matter that the bank may end up owing well over £100 million in back taxes which will be very difficult to recoup from the holders of the bogus accounts.

As for wider considerations about the message sent to people like the striking bus drivers, the hopelessness of even mentioning them is all too obvious. If making a spectacular mess of the basic task of obeying the law results in massive bonuses all round, talk of setting a good example would be painfully naive. The one consolation is that we will be spared all that hypocrisy about being responsible and relating wages to performance. Won't we?

Swamped by the red tide of debt

July 19th, 2005

Life in Ireland now is surrounded by a constant, low-level awareness that things don't quite add up. There is a gap between the upbeat, boom-time atmosphere and the nagging feeling that the frantic, almost hysterical insistence on how rich we all are is a case of protesting too much. We see the evidence before our eyes – the houses, the cars, the Prada handbags, the designer clothes. But the great unspoken question of contemporary Ireland is “how can they afford that?” How can people with relatively ordinary jobs afford €1.5 million houses and two cars and creches and two foreign holidays and private schools? And the answer, the thing that fills the gap between appearance and reality, is a four-letter word: debt. We stuff the breach between the way we think we ought to be – cool, fabulous, on top of the world – and the way we really are with borrowed bank notes.

Debt is a measure of an insecurity that is psychological as well as financial. It is the monetary expression of the neuroses of a money-obsessed society, the rational, numerical articulation of a great absurdity. For almost without comment, our attitude to debt has changed in a fundamental and wildly paradoxical way. Before the boom, we understood debt as a mark of poverty. If you had to borrow to make ends meet, you were in a bad way. Now, we are faced with a peculiar irony: the richer we've become, the more money we owe.

In the 1980s, the State was in the red and the citizens were mostly in the black. Now, the State operates mostly at a surplus and the citizens have taken on the current budget deficit. Debt, like so much else, has been privatised. For the first time ever, total household debt now exceeds total disposable income in Ireland – by about 20 per cent. Ten years ago, debt was 48 per cent of disposable income, now it's 120 per cent. The red tide is turning into a tsunami. At the end of 2003, we had personal debts of €68.5 billion. At the end of 2004, the figure was €91 billion.

The obvious explanation for this is that the property price boom has saddled many people with huge mortgages, but in this case the obvious explanation is insufficient. The need to service big mortgages ought to mean a degree of frugality in other aspects of spending. But in fact mortgages accounted for less than half of the increase in private debt last year. Private non-mortgage debt grew twice as fast last year as it did in 2003. Most of this money is spent on keeping up appearances. In the recent ESRI/IIB survey of personal debt, 60 per cent of borrowers admitted that they needed the money for “financing my lifestyle”. It is not about the single mother in Gurranabraher or Darndale borrowing from the money lender for her daughter's communion dress. People with the most money are borrowing most: 51 per cent of those on incomes of more than €65,000 are in debt compared with 15 per cent of those on incomes under €15,500.

And a lot of the borrowing is completely irrational even in its own terms. The maddest way to borrow money is through credit cards, at effective interest rates of about 12 per cent. Yet, if you exclude short-term credit card transactions that don't involve interest payments, there was, according to the Central Bank, about €1.3 billion in personal credit card debt outstanding at the end of last November.

Things are actually much worse than all of this implies. There is one form of what is effectively debt that doesn't come into the Central Bank or ESRI figures: borrowing from one's own future. Of a workforce of nearly two million people, 900,000 have made no

personal pension provision. Essentially, they are taking money from their later years and spending it now. They will either have to repay this money in the form of very high pension contributions in their middle years or resign themselves to relative poverty in old age. If this enormous deficit is added to the mountain of personal debt, we are looking at something of Himalayan proportions.

Why are we behaving like this? The basic reason, surely, is because we believe the hype about ourselves. We have delusions of grandeur, created by the constant stream of assurances about how rich we are and fed by the insecurity of a consumer society that measures wealth by expensive display. We forget that our incomes are rendered somewhat illusory both by the very high cost of living here and by the fact that we pay through the nose for basic social provisions.

In the IIB/ESRI survey, for example, nearly 20 per cent of people cited childcare costs as one of the reasons for their burden of debt. The same survey also noted in deadpan tones that “Irish consumers’ financial situations have not improved as much as might be expected” from the big macro-economic picture. If politicians and commentators borrowed fewer hyped-up clichés about the Celtic Tiger, the rest of us might be less inclined to buy the hype with borrowed money.

The smartest guys in Ireland

June 29th, 2013

“Slick and buccaneering”. In Patrick Honohan’s official report on the role of the Central Bank of Ireland in the implosion of the banking system, he explains that these were the terms regulators applied, privately, to the management of Anglo Irish Bank. After the release of recordings of internal phone calls between some of those executives, Irish citizens might have added a few more terms: arrogant, cynical, greedy, contemptuous, myopic, feckless, amoral – and a string of unprintable ones besides.

For all the extenuating pleas of gallows humour, it seems clear that the men in Anglo were confident that, whoever got hung out to twist in the wind, it was not going to be them. Listening to the tapes, it is hard to remember that David Drumm, John Bowe and Peter Fitzgerald are not crazy or delusional. They are not in denial. They know very well that they have destroyed their bank and threatened the jobs of those who work for them. They know, too, that they are about to cost the Irish people many, many billions of euro. They know that they have screwed up monumentally.

In this light, the only thing that is really shocking about the tapes is what we do not hear. There is not a single moment of embarrassment or regret, not the slightest undertone of shame. Nor is there even a sense of fear. These men are not worried about what is going to happen to them. A line of Peter Fitzgerald’s, referring in his boy’s-club manner to his boss, David Drumm, says it all: “As Drummer says to me, ‘Don’t worry: we’re going to be around a long time’.”

These are men who know that, whatever happens, they can play the system to their advantage. While Bowe singing “Deutschland, Deutschland über alles” mockingly to Drumm might be the moment that will be remembered around Europe, for Irish people the real anthem here is not *Der Deutschlandlied* but *Hakuna Matata*. The chorus is Drummer’s line to Bowe: “I’m relaxed about it, John.”

The only expression of anxiety is Bowe’s admission of a concern that the authorities “might say the cost to the taxpayers is too high”, but it’s a concern that has already been allayed. There is already a confident belief that this obvious truth will be avoided by sucking the Central Bank in for a relatively small sum of liquidity and then forcing it to throw good money after bad: “You pull them in, you get them to write a big cheque.”

The guardians of the public interest are literally not a problem. How do they deal with the knowledge that “the cost to the taxpayers” of their collective screw-up will probably be catastrophic? They wrap it in a language that distances themselves from any danger of moral responsibility. The bankers are acutely self-conscious about language. Drumm even makes the point that, in dealing with authority, Anglo must control the linguistic agenda “because, if we stay in their language, nothing happens”.

But they also use language to control their own understanding of what they are doing. We hear different kinds of language on the tapes; four verbal strategies for avoiding any acknowledgment of the human suffering that is the price of their idiocy.

The first, favoured especially by Fitzgerald and Drumm, is the tough-guy Americanised business cliché: “Skin in the game”; “What’s the playbook like?”; “The donkey in the room”.

The second is macho vulgarity. Bowe talks of €7 billion as a figure he picked out of his a**e; Drumm gives orders to “stick the fingers up” to the regulator’s concerns about the abuse of the bank guarantee and peppers his conversation with lines that seem to come straight from the hustlers in David Mamet’s play *Glengarry, Glen Ross*: “Do you want the f***ing keys now? I can give them to you.” (We can hear the others, in their sycophantic desire to emulate Drummer, echoing his style among themselves.)

The third verbal strategy is surreal understatement: “I don’t think we’re an easy sell to anybody.”

And lastly there is the big joke, especially at the expense of the hapless regulator, Patrick Neary. His hand-wringing – “It’s f***in’ awful what’s going on out there” – is, for them, a hoot. For the Anglo boys, regulation is almost literally a farce.

They play out their contempt in mocking mimicry of his ineffectual expressions of concern. At one point they knock some fun out of repeating, as a patent absurdity, the great cliché of reassurance that was fed again and again to the Irish public by politicians and officials as things fell apart: “We are monitoring the situation carefully.”

Karl Marx said that everything in history happens twice, the first time as tragedy and the second time as farce. But what we hear in the tapes is a tragedy being played out simultaneously as farce. For the Anglo boys, the whole thing is a breathless, madcap, often hilarious burlesque. On the streets it will play out as Shakespearean tragedy, with corpses all over the stage, but in here it’s a comedy of the absurd.

At one point Drumm calls the regulator “F***ing Freddy f***ing Fly”, a sardonic reference, presumably, to a character from the Dandy comic, Freddy the Fearless Fly. And what do you do to catch a fly? You spin a web. One of the most striking things about the recordings is how theatrical they are. Drumm, again rather acutely, notes that the key to the whole crisis is not reality but perception: “Everything is in the head.”

The reality may be that of a giant Ponzi scheme finally tumbling down, but the perception must be that Anglo is a systemically important institution that cannot be allowed to go under, at any cost. This is why the bankers talk not just like gangsters but like actors playing gangsters. The crisis, from their point of view, is one enormous role-playing exercise. They play out different characters, including the pathetic regulator and a very senior figure in their own bank. On a day when the bank has lost €1 billion in deposits Bowe imagines the blustering reaction of this famously bullish figure: “A great day. A great buzz in the dealing room. Everybody’s tail was up. Fantastic.”

But as well as playing characters the Anglo executives become characters in their own little plays. They think through what Drumm calls “the game plan” or “the playbook” for meetings with the Department of Finance. The interesting thing about this playbook is that it’s not about the kind of thing we might naively suppose to be central to the crisis: detailed figures for losses and liabilities, bonds and assets. It’s all about personal performance. The whole thing is an act. Drumm writes in advance the play that he and Bowe will perform for the Department of Finance. “Get into the f***ing simple speak: ‘We need the moolah, you have it, so you’re going to give it to us, and when would that be?’ We’ll start there.”

In the play they are devising they are not bankers but bank robbers, bursting through the doors of the State, waving shotguns in the faces of cringing civil servants and politicians. The

startling point, though, is that these demented little plays became our reality. We live in the grotesque farce they devised.

For just as it is clear from the tapes that the bankers were not in denial about the scale of the mess they had created, it is clear that they were not at all wrong to believe they could treat the State as one big joke.

Freddy the Fearless Fly was easily caught in their web. The taoiseach and the minister for finance did give them the moolah. Drummer's playbook became, within months, the language of the State: "systemic importance"; "national interest"; "austerity".

The hidden clauses in the Anglo game plan are national bankruptcy, Nama, the troika deal, the loss of national sovereignty, mass unemployment and mass emigration. Instead of seeing the Anglo boys as idiots clinging to illusions in the face of catastrophe, we have to face the truth that they were the ones who grasped the fundamental truths that Anglo could play the State like a Stradivarius and that Ireland would dance to its tune.

Justified contempt What comes across in the recordings as insufferable arrogance is in fact just a keen realism. The bankers, not just in Anglo but also in the more venerable but equally reckless Allied Irish Banks, knew that the real delusions were the ones that were spun for public consumption: that the State operated in the interest of citizens, that so-called regulation could stop bankers from doing anything they wanted to do. The bankers' contempt for the State and the regulators was entirely justified.

Which is more grotesquely absurd: the macho swaggering of the Anglo boys or a typical speech by the head of the regulatory authority in 2004, assuring the public that light-touch regulation was best because "the boards and top management of financial institutions" were "committing fully to a culture of integrity, competence and best practice"?

How the boys must have loved repeating that in a funny, namby-pamby voice. The bankers' verbal strutting is rooted in a simple truth: the Irish banking system had already got away with a monumental fraud on the State.

In 2001, as the property boom was really taking off, the Oireachtas Committee of Public Accounts published its devastating report on the Dirt scandal. It found that all of the major banks had been running a huge fraud since the 1980s, allowing their Irish-based customers to avoid deposit-interest retention taxes by pretending to be resident outside the State. The bankers must have feared that there would be consequences. But nothing happened: no one was prosecuted, no one was sacked, no one had to pay any price.

What the bankers discovered was that instead of facing punishment or even tighter regulation, they could see off even the mildest attempts to rein them in. A telling example is one recommendation in the Dirt report: that bank directors should have to sign individual statements that they were complying with their legal obligations. This was hardly a revolutionary idea, but the bankers didn't like it. They geared up their lobbying operation and made some threatening noises about how the horses at the IFSC might be frightened, and the idea was dropped. The same thing happened with another gentle movement towards some kind of ethical regime, a statutory code of corporate governance. It, too, was dropped in the face of bank lobbying.

From these experiences the bankers learned two important things: that they could get away with anything and that they could call the shots with both officials and governments. The Dirt inquiry criticised both the Department of Finance and the Central Bank for

excessive closeness to the banks. What happened? The new regulatory regime was characterised, as Patrick Honohan, the head of the Central Bank, put it in his report, by “deference and diffidence to the regulated entities”. The official attitude to the banks was, as Honohan pithily characterises it, “Walk softly and carry no stick.”

And if the officials were diffident and deferential, it might well have been because their political masters were openly in awe of the pink-shirted bluffers who could do no wrong – not least because, when they did do wrong, it was all right. The slick buccaneers at Anglo understood the real Ireland behind the facades of democracy, patriotism and the “national interest”. They saw with cold clarity that the rest of us lived in their world.

If they come across on the tapes as sickeningly supercilious, it is only because they do not bother with sentimental niceties such as respect for the State or concern for the welfare of their fellow citizens. If those niceties were necessary, they had people to do that sort of stuff for them, politicians to put a gloss of decency on the brutal truth. That truth was that a small financial elite could dictate terms to the rest of society. It still does.

Propping up of rotten banks is a huge con job

September 22nd, 2009

The purpose of Nama, we are repeatedly told, is to allow the banks to get back to lending money to the real Irish economy. This is unquestionably a vital aim. There is one glaring problem, however. Almost half of the toxic loans we're buying through Nama are held by banks who didn't lend much money to the real economy in the first place. Of the €77 billion in loans that Nama is to take on, €36 billion is held by Anglo Irish Bank and Irish Nationwide Building Society. These institutions have damn all to do with the small and medium Irish enterprises that are supposed to be saved by Nama.

This is the absurdity at the heart of the whole enterprise: we are putting up staggering amounts of money to encourage banks to get "back" to where they never were. The big lie in the entire Government response to the banking crisis is that we had to save Anglo Irish and Nationwide (which is to say, Seanie and Fingers) because they are of "systemic importance" to the Irish economy.

You only have to look at the documents released last week by the Department of Finance as part of the Nama proposal to know that this is patently untrue. In the case of Anglo Irish, just 11 per cent of its loan book is categorised as "business banking". Almost all of the rest relates to the property and construction sectors – which is to say to the bubble economy that was parasitic on the real one.

Irish Nationwide, as a mutual building society, was supposed to be in the business of giving mortgages to people to buy houses. In fact, just 22 per cent of its loan book relates to residential property. In September last year, the month in which the crisis came to a head, Irish Nationwide approved precisely zero home loans for first-time buyers. It is thus quite easy to "get back" to where Irish Nationwide was. Even without Nama, it could surely manage a return to zero.

There's a huge con job going on here. (I don't mean to suggest that members of the Government are deliberately misleading the public. Things are much worse than that – they actually believe this stuff.) We're doubling the national debt in large measure to prop up institutions that had no real and sustainable function in any economy except the Bermuda Triangle of Fianna Fáil, the developers and the banks.

What we're doing with Anglo Irish is particularly demented. We know that this was a systemically anarchic and amoral institution. We know that it engaged in reckless lending, that it manipulated its share price through the Golden Circle caper, that it cooked its books by playing games with Irish Nationwide and Irish Life, and that, as *The Irish Times* revealed yesterday, some of its current executives had huge loans from their own bank. We know that its overall contribution to the real economy was like that of the Huns to the Roman Empire.

And yet, knowing all of this, we are feeding vast amounts of public money into this thoroughly rotten institution. If we assume a 30 per cent discount on the €28 billion of Anglo Irish loans that Nama is to take over, that's the guts of €20 billion. Alongside the almost €4 billion we've already put in directly and the €6 billion plus we're being told we'll have to cough up as part of the Nama process, that's an astonishing €30 billion of public resources. To call this madness would be insulting to psychotics everywhere.

Let's put this €30 billion into context. The real economy in Ireland is being crippled by the appalling failure to create a proper broadband infrastructure. The cost of building a world class, high-speed national network was estimated at the height of the boom to be €4 billion. With the €25 billion or so left over, we could actually invest in all those "green economy" and "smart economy" companies we keep hearing about.

I find it simply incomprehensible that anyone intelligent enough to have joined the Green Party in the first place can believe that it is a better use of public resources to pump €30 billion into the corpse of a dead casino bank than to actually invest in tangible, and economically transformative, infrastructure.

In his speech last week, Brian Lenihan told us that "Nama will ensure that we avoid the Japanese outcome of 'zombie banks' that are just ticking over and not making a vibrant contribution to economic growth". But we already have, in Anglo Irish, an institution that's so zombie it should be renamed the Hiberno-Haitian Bank.

The proposition at the heart of Nama is that the way to get money to Irish businesses is to give it to a putrid, artificially animated corpse. Even at this late stage, is there any chance that someone in the Government might wake up in the middle of the night with a brilliant brainwave: the way to put money into the real economy is to put money into the real economy?

Ah, it could be worse – we could be Greece

April 17th, 2012

I was listening last week to RTÉ's economics correspondent, Seán Whelan, analysing his own very interesting interview with one of our rulers, Joerg Asmussen, the German member of the executive board of the European Central Bank. Whelan explained that the strategy of the powers-that-be in Ireland is not to tell the ECB that bank debts are crippling the economy. It is, rather, to suggest, in relation to easing the burden of the promissory notes, that "things are grand but if we had this as well they would be even grander".

After I'd stopped weeping at this perfect expression of an old, wheedling peasant mentality ("Ah sure, I'm right as rain but I'd be on the pig's back altogether if I had a sup of gruel now and then and a few bits of straw to stick in the hole in the wall to keep out the wind"), I tried to remember where I'd read a brilliant anatomy of this mentality.

Appropriately enough, it was in a book that Herr Asmussen, as an educated German, may well have read. It is the *Irish Journal* of the German novelist Heinrich Böll, published (in the English translation) in 1957. Böll, who spent a great deal of his time on Achill Island, saw something germane to Irish culture but visible only to an outsider: the profoundly fatalistic mentality of those who shrug off every misfortune with the consolation that they could be worse.

"Things are grand but they would be even grander" if we weren't shackled to debts contracted by private banks is a truly terrible pitch for debt relief – it makes us sound like we're lying by the pool in perfect sunshine wishing that the vintage champagne we're sipping were just a degree colder. But it makes complete sense as a variation on an old Irish theme: ah, sure, things could be worse.

"When something happens to you in Germany," Böll noted, "when you miss a train, break a leg, go bankrupt, we say: It couldn't have been any worse; whatever happens is always the worst. With the Irish it is almost the opposite: if you break a leg, miss a train, go bankrupt, they say: It could be worse; instead of a leg you might have broken your neck . . ."

"What happens is never the worst; on the contrary, what's worst never happens: if your revered and beloved grandmother dies, your revered and beloved grandfather might have died too; if the farm burns down but the chickens were saved, the chickens might have been burned up too, and if they do burn up, well, what's worse is that you might have died yourself and that didn't happen."

Böll was not engaging in colourful Paddywhackery. He realised that a culture in which people routinely answer the question "How's things?" with "Ah sure, they could be worse" is one that has learned to defend itself against real and persistent pain: " 'It could be worse' is one of the most common turns of speech, possibly because only too often things are pretty bad and what's worse offers the consolation of being relative."

Even more incisively, he suggested that this habit of mind is not mere passivity. On the contrary, it takes great creativity to sustain it: "With us [Germans] when something happens our sense of humour and imagination desert us; in Ireland, that is just when they come into play. To persuade someone who has broken his leg, is lying in pain or hobbling around in a plaster cast, that it might have been worse is not only comforting, it is an occupation requiring poetic talents."

Relative misery Böll was writing about the Ireland of half a century ago, but how much, in its mass psychology and deep culture, has the country really changed since? Were we not, in the boom years, still in the grip of a 19th-century land hunger? Do we not now revert to exactly the same defence mechanism we used in the 1950s: mass emigration? Don't we still say "ah, could be worse" when asked how we are?

In fact, all that's happened is that the same mentality has been shifted up a gear. "The consolation of being relative" is now our national strategy. We are devoting a great deal of our collective "poetic talents" and imagination to the construction of this consolatory defence mechanism. We've gone from "things could be worse" to "things are only a little less grand than they would be if we weren't stuck with the gambling debts of Seanie and Fingers".

The consolation of being relative explains a good deal of the Irish reluctance to protest: sure it could be worse, we could be Greece.

It also explains the way the consequences of atrocious decisions have been normalised; sure, imagine how much worse it might have been if we didn't write a blank cheque for Anglo – as if those consequences could in fact have been worse than what we're living with. How bad do they have to get before we realise that, if you keep thinking that things could be worse, they will be?

The follies of the State

One of the recurring ideas of the column is a rather simple rule: closed and unaccountable systems will produce, over time, no end of insanity. Irish democracy is little better now than it was 25 years ago at making people with power over others answer for what they do and why. The results range from petty bureaucratic oppressions to gigantic failures of governance – some of them, as in the case of the establishment of the HSE, entirely predictable

Bad form for those mad enough to vote

May 4th, 1989

This column is very unusual in that it seems to have actually had some effect. The law was subsequently changed.

Paddy Doyle is not mad. Most of us, including myself and, I have no doubt, Pádraig Flynn, would be loathe to make such a statement about ourselves with any degree of certainty. Paddy Doyle, however, can prove it. He can go to the Department of the Environment, presided over by Pádraig Flynn, and ask for form SV1. He can fill out part A of the form and then go to his doctor with part B. His doctor can sign the statement that: "The applicant is/is not of sound mind and understanding and capable of comprehending the act of voting."

Paddy has to do this not in order to become a test pilot or a brain surgeon or even the Minister for the Environment, but merely in order to vote in a democratic election. If and when Mr Haughey begins his dash to the country thousands of people all over Ireland will be getting their SV1 forms and heading for their doctors' surgeries. Unlike Mr Haughey, though, they won't be dashing.

Their crime, like Paddy Doyle's, is that they are disabled and therefore must be assumed to be mad until proven otherwise. Form SV1 (the SV, with a typically wry sense of humour, stands for "special voter") is one of the great triumphs of the Irish administrative system, the perfection, after long years of practice, of the art of bureaucratic cruelty. It is the State's considered response to years of campaigning by disabled people for some kind of rational provision to allow them to exercise their right to vote.

The campaign took on a new dimension when, in 1981, the late Nora Draper sought an injunction instructing Mr Haughey to delay that year's election until some such provision was made. She failed, but her constitutional case went on to the High Court and the Supreme Court. The main plank of the State's case in that action was that Nora Draper wasn't really disabled at all and therefore had nothing to complain about. True, she had multiple sclerosis, of which she subsequently died. True, the court had to take evidence from the Adelaide Hospital where she was being treated. But the State maintained that she was not really disabled. Nora Draper lost her case in the Supreme Court in 1983. But the Government felt sufficiently shamed by the fact that she had to fight that battle through illness and hardship to promise that something would be done.

Certificate of sanity In 1986, at last, came the Electoral Amendment Act. But the suspicions that disabled people might be malingerers or lunatics obviously stayed around and were triumphantly embodied in Form SV1, which not only asks for a certificate of sanity but also asks the doctor to certify every year that the applicant's disability is likely to continue, that the cerebral palsy hasn't just gone away, that the missing limbs haven't grown back, that the incurable multiple sclerosis hasn't been cured.

To be absolutely fair about this, it is possible that the sanity clause is a kind of deliberate Catch 22 whereby anyone daft enough to want to vote for the kind of geniuses we have running the country is clearly too daft to be allowed to vote. It is also possible that Pádraig Flynn as a good Mayoman has such blind faith in the healing properties of a visit to Knock that he believes that the lame, the bedridden and the wheelchair-bound will be able to take up

their beds, sticks and chairs and walk to the polling booths come election day. But something tells me that such humility and such simple belief are beyond even our Pádraig.

One way or the other, the Department of the Environment chooses to reinforce and systematise the worst prejudices held against disabled people. The idea that everyone in a wheelchair was a simpleton, the “does he take sugar?” mentality that causes so much grief and pain and humiliation to so many people, has begun to disappear in this decade.

It hasn't happened easily. It has taken the courage of Christy Brown and Christopher Nolan and Paddy Doyle, the fierce campaigning spirit of people like Liam Maguire and, more than any of these things, the unsung strength of thousands and thousands of disabled people and their carers, to begin to change things. And all of that can be lightly set at nought by the anonymous writers of forms and their political masters, by the framers of a single sentence on a single form that tells disabled people wanting to involve themselves in their society in the most basic way that they have to prove that our idiotic prejudices are wrong.

Not to be trusted All of this came about because the State felt that disabled people couldn't be trusted with a postal vote. It's not that the State doesn't approve of a postal voting system. Gardaí and soldiers and diplomats get postal votes at every election if they want them. I myself get a postal vote every time there's a Seanad election, as does every other graduate of the NUI or Trinity College. But then graduates are “people like us”, people who can be trusted not to make a mess of things, people who don't have to be watched just in case they're trying to get a postal vote for some obscure conspiratorial reasons.

The best way to deal with the disabled is the tried and trusted way of having a man come to the door, preferably a man in uniform. So every polling day every “special voter” gets a visit from a member of the Garda Síochána and a special presiding officer. People who understand Ireland well enough to get elected should know what a garda at your door means, but apparently they don't.

Paddy Doyle generally doesn't bother with Form SV1. The fact that he's just written a best-selling book, *The God Squad*, the fact that he spent last week in London giving interviews to the “quality” press, the fact that he's about to be published in America and Australia and New Zealand makes the idea of asking his doctor to certify that he's of sound mind and capable of understanding how to vote all the more absurd. But he prefers not to bother anyway.

He prefers to go to his local school with the rest of the voters, to bring the place to a halt while he's dragged up the steps by the gardaí on duty, to let people see what it's like for someone who's disabled to gain access to a normal public building, never mind to take part in the great democratic enterprise. He fills out his ballot paper and then lies in wait for the candidates. “It doesn't do the slightest harm,” he says, “to remind them that as they get older, their physical abilities will deteriorate, they won't be able to run as fast from an irate voter or a mad dog, their hearing and eyesight will become less good, their capacity to remember, if it ever existed, will become less.”

The only reason he might get his SV1 filled in is so that he could stand for election as the only candidate who could prove his sanity. Democracy, founded as it is on the idea that the rights of each person are the same, is indivisible. If some people have to submit themselves to a gratuitous insult in order to be free to vote, then the votes of all of the rest of us are devalued.

Scrapping SV1 Before we sink into the grip of election fever, we should think about that for a few minutes. And we should put it to Pádraig Flynn that this is his personal responsibility. We know that he can't make the smog go away or fill in the potholes on the Ennis road or house the homeless, or at least that he can't do these things quickly and easily. These things take time and money. Scrapping SV1 will save time and money. It will save the time of the doctors and the gardaí and the disabled people themselves. It will save the money which the State wastes in medical fees and Garda wages just to inflict a casual cruelty on people who already suffer enough cruelties from the system which they have to deal with. Pádraig Flynn has not a single reasonable excuse for not doing it and doing it before the next election.

Lindsay and the language of avoidance

September 10th, 2002

The scandals at the Blood Transfusion Service Board highlighted the profound problems of governance and accountability in the Irish system. This column is a critique of the Lindsay Tribunal of Inquiry into the infection of haemophiliacs with HIV and hepatitis C.

Years ago, there was an ad campaign aimed at improving safety in our homes and workplaces. The slogan, if I remember it accurately, was: “Accidents don’t happen. They are caused.” The aim, presumably, was to shake us out of our habit of using the passive voice to avoid responsibility. To judge from the truly dreadful report of the Lindsay inquiry into the infection of people suffering from haemophilia with Aids and hepatitis C, the campaign was a complete failure. The passive voice has a lot to answer for in Ireland. It is the language of avoidance, of irresponsibility, of impunity. People don’t corrupt the system, the system is corrupted. White collar crooks don’t commit fraud, funds are embezzled. Politicians don’t turn a blind eye, signs are missed.

People with responsibility for matters of life and death don’t betray the trust of those who depend on them, system failures occur. Accidents are not caused, they happen.

If there was ever going to be a set of events that might break this mentality once and for all, it must surely be the disasters at the Blood Transfusion Service Board (BTSB) in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. The infection of thousands of people with potentially fatal viruses – mothers needing anti-D injections, people with haemophilia, patients receiving transfusions – ought to be the kind of catastrophe that finally wakes us up to the unacceptable human cost of a State that speaks only in the passive tense. And yet, after 150 witnesses and 200 days of sittings, the Lindsay tribunal comes up with a report written largely in the passive voice.

It finds, in essence, that the infection of at least 104 people with HIV, at least 217 with hepatitis C and 69 people with both was not caused. It happened. So far 79 haemophiliacs have died. This is not the place to go into the details of this scandal. The facts, however, are clear. Aids was known about from 1981, and the first person with haemophilia in Ireland was diagnosed with the syndrome in November 1984. The existence of a third form of hepatitis (then called non A/non B) was known from 1974. By 1984 at the very latest, people dealing with blood products knew that they were handling very dangerous material. This wasn’t some kind of obscure, esoteric concern. It was public knowledge that these dangers existed and that the BTSB was not dealing with them.

On June 9th, 1986, Dr David Nowlan, medical correspondent of *The Irish Times*, published a news report that commenced: “Native Irish human blood products used in the treatment of certain cases of haemophilia may still carry the virus which causes Aids, a leading haematologist [Prof Ian Temperley] has warned.” No one would suggest that this was an easy issue to deal with or that even the best blood bank in the world would have been able to prevent a few tragic cases of infection. The reality, though, is that the Irish system made nearly all the wrong decisions, ignored new scientific developments, didn’t bother to recall products that were known to be potentially lethal, and treated the victims of these failures with mind-numbing callousness.

Both they and the rest of us who need to know we have a functioning State had a right to expect that an inquiry into such hideous failures would be clear and forthright. What we’ve

actually got is an exquisite exercise in the uses of the passive voice. The range of phrases in the report which indicate general culpability but no actual blame is impressive: “It might also be thought”; “An opportunity was, however, missed”; “Steps should have been taken”; “This was not done”; “A possibility which should have been explored”; “Could apparently have been attained”; “Should have been pursued with greater urgency”.

One question, an example which can stand for many, is this: Why were doctors treating people with haemophilia not told that the products they were giving their patients might be lethal? It is a simple question, crying out for some assignment of personal responsibility. What the report concludes, however, is that: “In the tribunal’s view steps should have been taken to draw the attention of such doctors to the risk of hepatitis attached to the use of commercial concentrates. It seems this was not done.” Uncomfortable implications This isn’t just a matter of language. The general reluctance to assign responsibility becomes a reluctance to deal with awkward possibilities. There is, for example, considerable evidence that the cutbacks in State health spending in the late 1980s were a real factor in the disaster. Tainted products were used because they were cheap. In 1987, the then chief executive officer of the BtSB wrote: “Finance is the board’s biggest problem, particularly its cash flow.”

In 1989, Prof Temperley wrote: “The board should understand that in the present period of financial stringency the hospitals could not be expected to meet a doubling of the cost of concentrates in 1989. Some balance will have to be struck between cost and the infection dangers associated with blood products.”

The report, however, blandly dismisses the notion that financial considerations had anything to do with the disaster. If they had, of course, the crucifixion of a vulnerable community wouldn’t have happened. It would have been caused.

No way to start a health revolution

December 14th, 2004

The way in which the Health Service Executive was established by the then health minister Mary Harney is now seen as a huge failure of political and bureaucratic management. But, as this column shows, the disaster was entirely predictable from the way the legislation was rushed through the Oireachtas.

Though you wouldn't know it from the amount of media attention given to the issue, the biggest single change in the governance of the State since Irish independence is currently taking place. In a little over a fortnight, the running of the health system will be handed over to the new Health Service Executive.

The delivery of the most important public service is being transformed. A quarter of all State spending – €11 billion – is at stake. The new body will become the largest employer in the State, with direct or indirect responsibility for almost 100,000 workers. And it is an astonishing mess. Mired in confusion, riddled with uncertainties and lacking any notion of democratic accountability, the process of establishing the HSE is a disgrace.

This ought to be a good news story. No rational analyst would disagree with the scrapping of the madly fragmented system of running the medical services through 10 health boards and one regional authority. The idea of establishing a single management body with the power to co-ordinate services and to insist on high standards and equal provision enjoys huge goodwill. All the main political parties support it in principle.

The unions representing the doctors, nurses, administrators and other health professionals, all think it's a great idea. There has also been plenty of time to get it right.

In those circumstances, the fumbling of this opportunity is the gravest possible indictment of governmental incompetence. Early last year, the Department of Health published a consultants report on the process of establishing the HSE. It emphasised a few obvious but vital aspects of the process.

One was the overwhelming need to secure and maintain the support of health service users and staff, professional groups, politicians and the general public. It particularly emphasised that "the engagement of staff and their representatives to support and participate in the implementation of successful organisational change is critical."

A second was that "the appointment of a CEO to lead the change must be a priority". A third was that "the first task" of the management team "will be developing a high-level project plan. The core programme team and workstream project managers will need to conduct detailed programme and workstream planning in advance of any implementation."

What have we ended up with? There is no CEO, just the interim appointment of Kevin Kelly, whose previous career at Allied Irish Bank does not inspire confidence in a culture of accountability. (AIB is in fact a big presence at the HEA, with Donal de Buitléir, who featured heavily at the Dirt inquiry on the board, and Hugh Cawley, a former general manager of the bank, heading the HSE's change management team.)

Threats of industrial action The failure to engage with health workers has led to threats of industrial action. GPs work on contracts with individual health boards which are going out of

business but have had virtually no contact with the HSE. Community welfare officers, who are employed by the health boards, were apparently forgotten in the drafting of the Health Bill which establishes the HSE. And not only is there no “detailed programme” of work drawn up by the HSE, there is not even a clear set of stated goals.

This kind of mess is the reason we have a parliament. With the legislation for the HSE being processed through the Oireachtas, the checks and balances of a healthy democracy would kick in.

In fact, the legislative process has been a charade. Representations from professional, voluntary and patient groups have been ignored in the stampede to get the legislation through before January 1st.

The word “patient” appeared once in the original text of the Health Bill, which has been pushed through so quickly and with so little opportunity for scrutiny that the TDs literally don’t know what they’re doing. In last week’s debate, the Fine Gael spokesman Liam Twomey confessed at one stage that “we have no clear idea as to whether our amendments have been taken on board... we have had insufficient time to read the amendments”.

The Labour spokeswoman Liz McManus said: “At this stage I am so befuddled I have no idea how the Bill will end up given all the changes. It is like a serial in a women’s magazine. Each month there is a new version and a new chapter.”

Even the Minister introducing the legislation, Mary Harney, seemed to be all at sea. In one crucial area – the accountability of the HSE to the Oireachtas – she accepted a Fine Gael amendment, incorporated it into the revised text of the Bill, then amended the revised Bill to take it out again.

The text now says that the CEO of the HSE can, if summoned by the Oireachtas Joint Health Committee, send any of his or her employees instead. Mary Harney assured the House that “the CEO will not nominate any old flunkey to come before an Oireachtas committee.”

Asked how she could say this when the Bill allows the CEO to do precisely that, she replied: “We do not have flunkeys working in the health service.”

This pathetic charade is the way the biggest change in public governance in the history of the State is being implemented. It is both dangerous and disgraceful and it should be stopped now.

Self-pity of the Irish ruling class

Those in positions of power and authority in Ireland seldom take responsibility for the state of its political institutions and corporate culture. One of the reasons for this failure is that, in Ireland, the Establishment is always someone else. All the insiders like to think of themselves as outsiders.

Quinn built his sense of victimhood on impunity

July 3rd, 2012

I liked to think I had the journalistic equivalent of gaydar. Having spent the best years of my life listening to powerful men spinning yarns, I imagined I'd developed a kind of lie-dar. But it let me down rather badly with Seán Quinn. I watched the former multibillionaire on RTÉ's Prime Time on June 3rd, 2010, when his empire was falling apart. His performance was not at all typical of the genre. His language was simple, apparently free of ambiguity, evasion and convolution.

Asked about the €3 billion he owes Irish taxpayers, he said: "We as a family don't want to owe anybody anything. We want to pay the taxpayer back 100 per cent of his money . . . The five kids own the company; and myself, my wife and the five kids, all we want to do is make sure [that for] the taxpayer there's no loss by the Quinn group or the Quinn family. We want to pay all our debts 100 per cent."

Asked what was the security for the debt he was again impressively straightforward: "It's secured on property throughout the world in nine countries and Quinn Direct." He was saying three things without apparent equivocation: that indeed he owed the money to the Irish taxpayer; that he would pay back every cent of it; and that, in part, he would pay it from the sale of foreign property assets.

And I pretty much believed him. Stupid, of course: he now denies owing the bulk of the money, has done everything possible to avoid paying it back and went to every length, including bogus transactions and contempt of court, to put those foreign property assets beyond reach. And yet, I still suspect that at that moment, in June 2010, Quinn wasn't lying. For one thing, Quinn is not a fool and it would have been utterly foolish to give those commitments so plainly if he did not intend to keep them. Moreover, there is a reason to think Quinn may actually have felt at that moment that he should pay the money back.

He is not like most of the Irish mega-rich, who made their money from opportunism, political connections and cuteness. Quinn's tragedy is that he is a throwback to the heroic age of 19th-century capitalism. He started with relatively little, made real things that people wanted (cement, glass, bricks) and sold them more cheaply than the opposition. He created thousands of real jobs, mostly in places that desperately needed them.

Heroic capitalists of this kind are individualists. Their individualism has unpleasant sides - egoism, obsession, a relentless need to accumulate. But its saving grace is a sense of personal responsibility. One side of "self-made" is "I made my own world"; the other side is "I take responsibility for what I've done". There's a basic pride, an old-fashioned manliness, in not owing anything to anyone - literally as well as figuratively.

So perhaps Seán Quinn really did recognise two years ago that his stupid gambling had left the Irish people with a breathtaking bill. And perhaps he did feel that his manly pride was invested in trying to pay back as much as he could. So why did this sense of honour melt away so quickly and completely? An old friend hoves into view: the allure of victimisation.

Inside every Irish master of the universe there is a whingeing little brat, his face awash with snot and tears, wailing "I didn't do anything, it was Them..."

When things go wrong the big, bold can-do entrepreneur almost invariably turns into a snivelling wimp, passing the blame on to Them: the banks, the media, the begrudgers, the crowd up in Dublin, the Brits or whichever of the many faces of Them happens to fit the moment. The manly Seán Quinn turned into a pathetic little boy whining “They made me do it. They took my money.” But he had help. Quinn’s adoption of victimhood, and thus of moral innocence, was made much easier by two factors.

One was the outpouring of support from his own workers, who reflected back to him his self-image as a deeply-wronged hero. It is perfectly understandable that people initially wanted to support the man who created their jobs. But after it became clear that Quinn had acted just like an old Ascendancy landlord, putting their jobs, their families and their futures on the roulette wheel, they continued to play along with his martyr act.

The other great reinforcer of the victim mentality is, of course, the law. Quinn believed he could literally hold the law in contempt. And this belief was perfectly rational. He belongs to a class that can cause immense harm to other people with almost complete impunity from criminal prosecution. One class of citizens knows if it ran a “blatant, dishonest and deceitful” operation to divert €4,550, the probability of prison would loom large. Another knows that doing the same thing in relation to €455 million is a matter for civil and civilised litigation. Until society categorises such people as criminals, they will continue to see themselves as innocent victims.