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# Fintan O'Toole: I don't miss the Ireland that required us to marry in secret

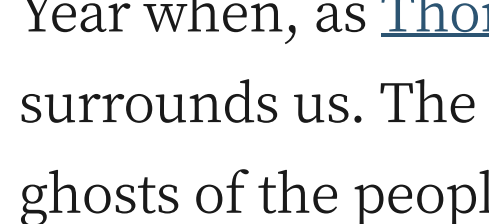
Ireland's present is not perfect but its past was grim, one of hypocrisy and economic failure

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Good riddance to the time of shaming, repression and the kleptocrat Charles Haughey. Photograph: Matt Kavanagh

**Fintan O'Toole**  
Tue Dec 27 2022 - 00:00



Nostalgia creeps over this slow stretch between Christmas and New Year when, as [Thomas Moore](#)'s song has it, the light of other days surrounds us. The repetition of familiar annual rituals summons the ghosts of the people, and the times, that are gone.

Yet I think it's fair to say that one of the things that distinguishes Ireland from many other post-industrial societies is that nostalgia has no great purchase on public memory. It's a private affair – once you try to generalise it, it becomes absurd.

If you are my age and from a similar working-class background in, say, large parts of Britain or the United States, there's a very good reason to look back to what seems to have been a better time. Secure jobs, the dignity and protection of strong trade unions, much cheaper, or even heavily subsidised, access to higher education, thriving communities – these things really did exist and really have been lost.

But when I look back, I can yearn for my head of luxuriant hair, for my youth, for my parents and my sister being still alive and so on. I find it impossible, though, to yearn for Ireland as it was then.

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Forty years ago, at the end of 1982, I was facing into the true beginning of my adult life. Within a few months, I would get married, turn 25, get my first full-time job and get a mortgage. All these milestones would rush by like landmarks glimpsed from a speeding express train.

I am aware as I write this that there will be readers in their twenties and thirties who will be thinking: lucky you. You could get a job and a mortgage.

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But, though I am grateful for that luck, it does not make me ache for that past in any collective sense.

*Any sane person would have to add to 'Things are not what they used to be', a relieved 'Thank goodness'.*

For a start, there's that marriage. It had to be a secret affair.

Neither of us was a practising Catholic, so we decided on principle to be married in a civil ceremony at the registry office that was then part of a solicitor's office not far up Kildare Street from the Dáil.

My wife was teaching in a convent school. [Eileen Flynn](#), who had a similar job in a school in New Ross, had just been fired by the nuns for living in sin.

The Church would not recognise our civil wedding as a marriage, so my wife was in that same category of the damned. We put the legally-required notice of our forthcoming nuptials in Irish in The Irish Times and hoped that nobody would read it. There were no wedding pictures to be shared with my wife's great friends at school.

How could you feel nostalgic for all that hypocrisy, for the systematic way in which we were all supposed to feel ashamed in one way or another for being ourselves?

Our experience was a minor token of a much wider culture of shaming and repression. Gay men were still being threatened with life imprisonment. Many of the Mother and Baby Homes were still in business. The last of the Magdalene laundries, right in the centre of Dublin, would still be in operation for another 13 years.

David Norris (left), chairman of the National Gay Federation, speaking at a press conference in 1980 after he had lost his High Court action challenging the constitutionality of the Republic's laws on homosexuality. Photograph: Pat Langan

At the end of 1982, moreover, it felt like all of this was going to get worse before it got better. Both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael had committed themselves to holding a referendum to insert a ban on abortion into the Constitution. There was no doubt that it would pass, enshrining hypocrisy as the national religion and silence as the national anthem.

This extravagant piety was compensation for economic failure. In 1983, ten years after we joined the EU, Ireland's GDP per capita was still only 70 per cent of the EU average. We had a trade balance that year of minus €537 million.

If I had been, in 1983, the age I am now, I would have had (as an average Irish man) just five more years left to live. Today, I can expect to live for another 19 years.

There was, moreover, little sense that there were potent alternatives to the conservative consensus. The kleptocrat Charles Haughey loomed like a vulture over the domestic political scene.

People who were two or three years younger than me were beginning to plan their escape routes. By 1986, the slow demographic recovery of the 1960s and 1970s had gone into reverse. The population was falling as mass emigration returned.

And thumping along underneath it all was the drumbeat of horror from the North. The Troubles seemed quite capable of sustaining themselves forever.

Thus, even as I think back on an exciting time in my own life, I can't do the same for the life of Ireland. Any sane person would have to add to "Things are not what they used to be", a relieved "Thank goodness".

None of this is to suggest that we should be satisfied with the present because the past was so grim. It is merely to say that we are largely spared the temptation to "restore" a vanished idyll in which everything was better.

It wasn't. Ireland is not a paradise now but neither does it have a Paradise Lost to pine for.

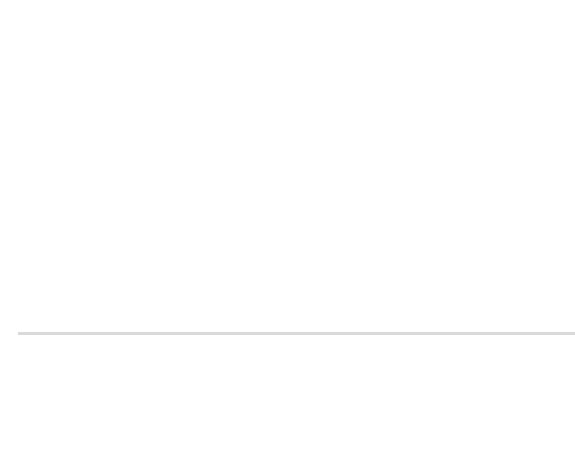
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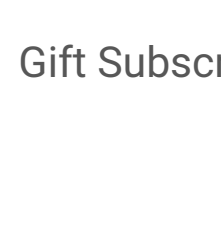
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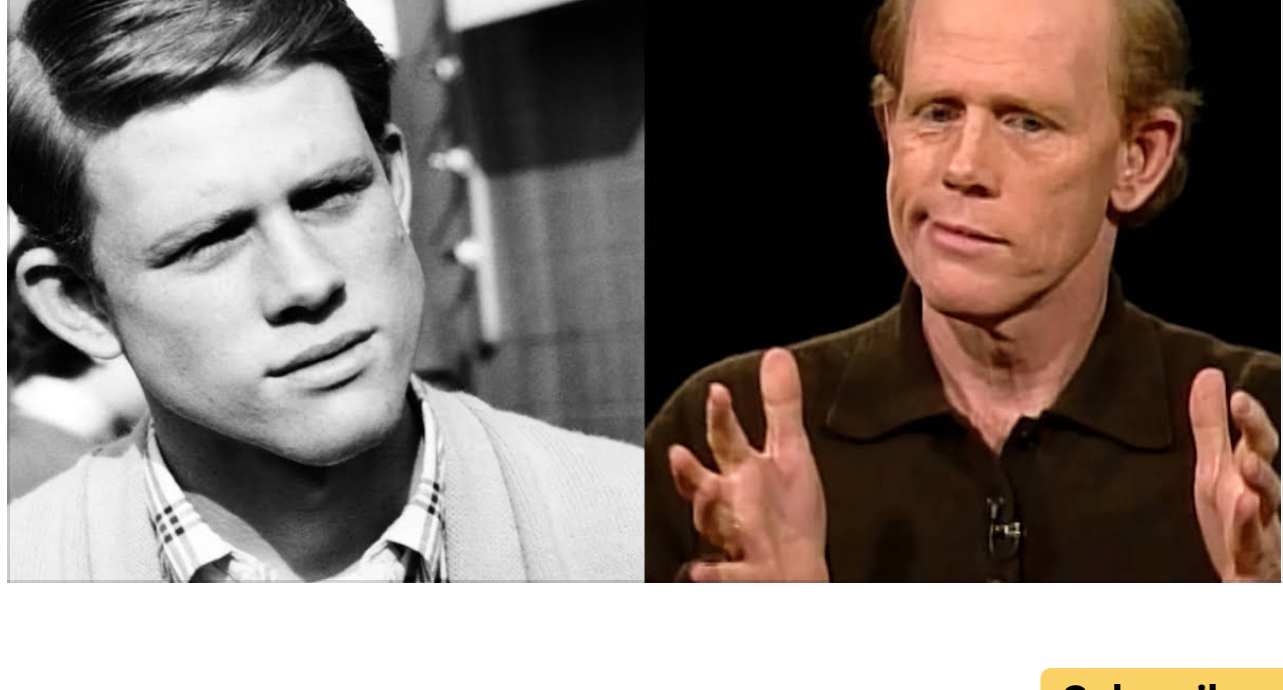
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# Fintan O'Toole: The full, unexpurgated version of Up the 'Ra

## Up cutting the legs off young women shopping for wedding dresses. Up torturing kids with Black & Decker drills through their kneecaps

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Dead horses and wrecked cars at the scene of an IRA bomb attack in Hyde Park, London, in July 1982. Photograph: PA Wire

**Fintan O'Toole**  
Tue Oct 18 2022 - 05:00

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I am all in favour of people singing Up the 'Ra. So long as it's the full version intended by the artists rather than the radio-friendly edit.

The original version is quite a work of art:

Up cutting the legs off young women shopping for wedding dresses. Up torturing kids with Black & Decker drills through their kneecaps. Up 36 children under the age of 18 subjected to "punishment beatings" in the 1990s alone.

Up burying the body of a widow in a secret place and telling her 10 kids that their mother has run off with some man and left them.

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Up massacring those mourning the dead of two world wars. Up Gordon Wilson trapped in the rubble of Enniskillen with his daughter Marie, holding her hand and hearing her last words. Up "Daddy, I love you very much."

Up timing bombs in pubs precisely for the right hour on pay night when they'd be full of young working-class couples. Up incinerating the members of the Irish Collie Club so thoroughly that their bodies were beyond recognition because, well, those were Protestant dogs.

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Up hunting down the last of the Graham brothers after you'd got the other two, then driving through the town roaring "Yahoo! Yahoo!" Up putting bombs on school buses full of children.

*[ 'It shouldn't have happened' - Vera Pauw apologises for players' IRA chant ]*

Up killing Irish policemen and soldiers on duty. Up executing a young mother for the crime of delivering census forms.

Up setting fire to the Linen Hall Library, founded by some of those who also created the United Irishmen. Up systematically destroying the centre of Derry so that it looked to the city's natives as if it had been flattened by the Luftwaffe.

Up killing a man, then booby-trapping his corpse with a bomb to kill those who came to examine the body.

Up shooting elected politicians in the head because they were unionists. Up blowing the head off an 86-year-old man because he used to be a unionist politician years before.

*[ Una Mullally: What does it mean to say 'up the 'Ra'? And why does it keep happening? ]*

Up blowing up a young girl who was being collected from dancing lessons by her grandfather, so that her foot was found in a nearby field with the ballet shoe still neatly attached.

Up all the images of severed body parts that have first responders waking up screaming in the night decades later.

Up putting bombs in Mothercare on Oxford Street and a record shop on the Charing Cross Road. Up fire bombs, pipe bombs, nail bombs, fertiliser bombs, mortar bombs, car bombs, under-car bombs, van bombs, bus bombs, coach bombs, letter bombs, parcel bombs, book bombs, coffee jar bombs, proxy bombs, no-warning bombs.

Oh, and up human bombs. Up kidnapping the family and forcing the father (on pain of having his wife and children murdered) to drive a bomb into a checkpoint, killing himself and others.

*[ Just another chant? What 'Up the 'Ra' means to my generation ]*

Up "mistaken identity", used to explain 17 IRA assassinations in one nine-month period alone. Up "legitimate target", our flexible friend.

Up "collateral damage". Up "these things happen in war". Up "regrettable but unavoidable".

Up "we tried to give a warning but the phone wasn't working". Up planting a second bomb to catch the people running away from the first one - regrettably.

Up putting bombs beside primary schools, day care centres and kindergartens in Catholic communities. Up "the blessings of God no one was hurt".

Up kangaroo courts. Up making a girl who had been raped appear before her rapist in an IRA "trial". Up boys who were raped by an IRA man being ordered to say whether or not they would like him to be executed.

Up stopping a bus full of 11 workers, singling out the one Catholic and massacring the 10 Protestants. Up deliberately and cold-bloodedly executing a 15-year-old Irish boy for the crime of working on a boat belonging to a member of the British royal family.

Up using fraudulent fronts to claim atrocities so hideous even you did not want to acknowledge that you did them. Up Red Flag '74 for Birmingham and Guilford. Up South Armagh Republican Action Force for Kingsmills. Up brazenly lying that you had nothing to do with the Claudy massacre.

Up killing people to get rid of the Border but getting rich from smuggling fuel across it. Up poisoning drinking water by dumping the waste in the local reservoirs. Up evading taxes on a grand scale while demanding more government spending.

Up cutting a man's throat and gouging out his eye in a Belfast pub because he got into a row with an IRA bigwig. Up everyone else in the pub miraculously being in the toilets at the time and seeing nothing. Up warning the man's sisters to "be careful" about their campaign for justice.

*[ Pat Leahy: Tackling the housing crisis is the surest way to placate 'up the Ra' chanters ]*

Up whataboutery. Up what about the Famine, the Brits, the Loyalists, 800 years of oppression? Up everything you did being the fault of history.

Up "no alternative". Up all these things being simultaneously sadly regrettable and fully justified. Up demanding justice for all victims except the ones you created.

Up the maimed and the bereaved, the broken and the bereft. Up those who died for Ireland even though they had no choice in the matter.

Up 'em all, up 'em all. You could sing that if you had the air to it.

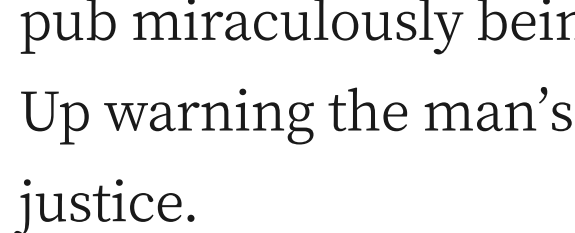
Irish Republican Army Women's World Cup Vera Pauw Fintan O'Toole

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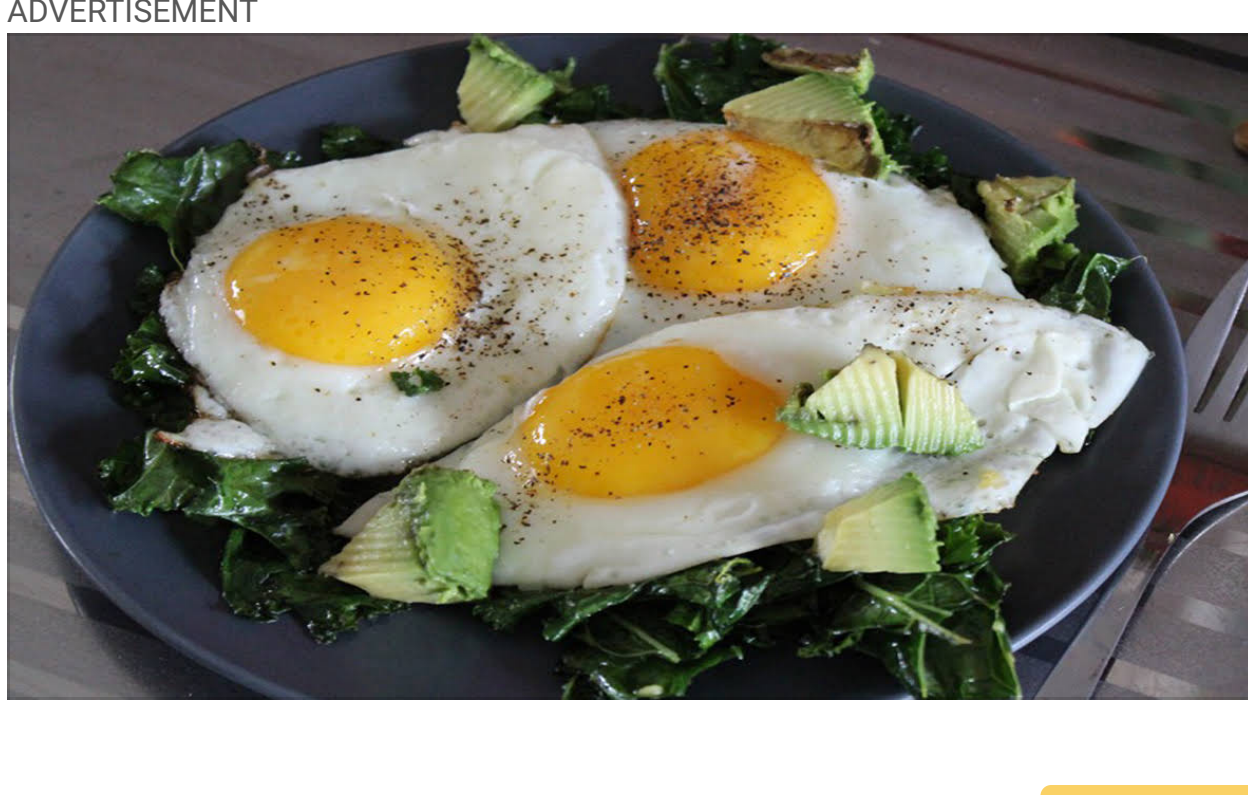
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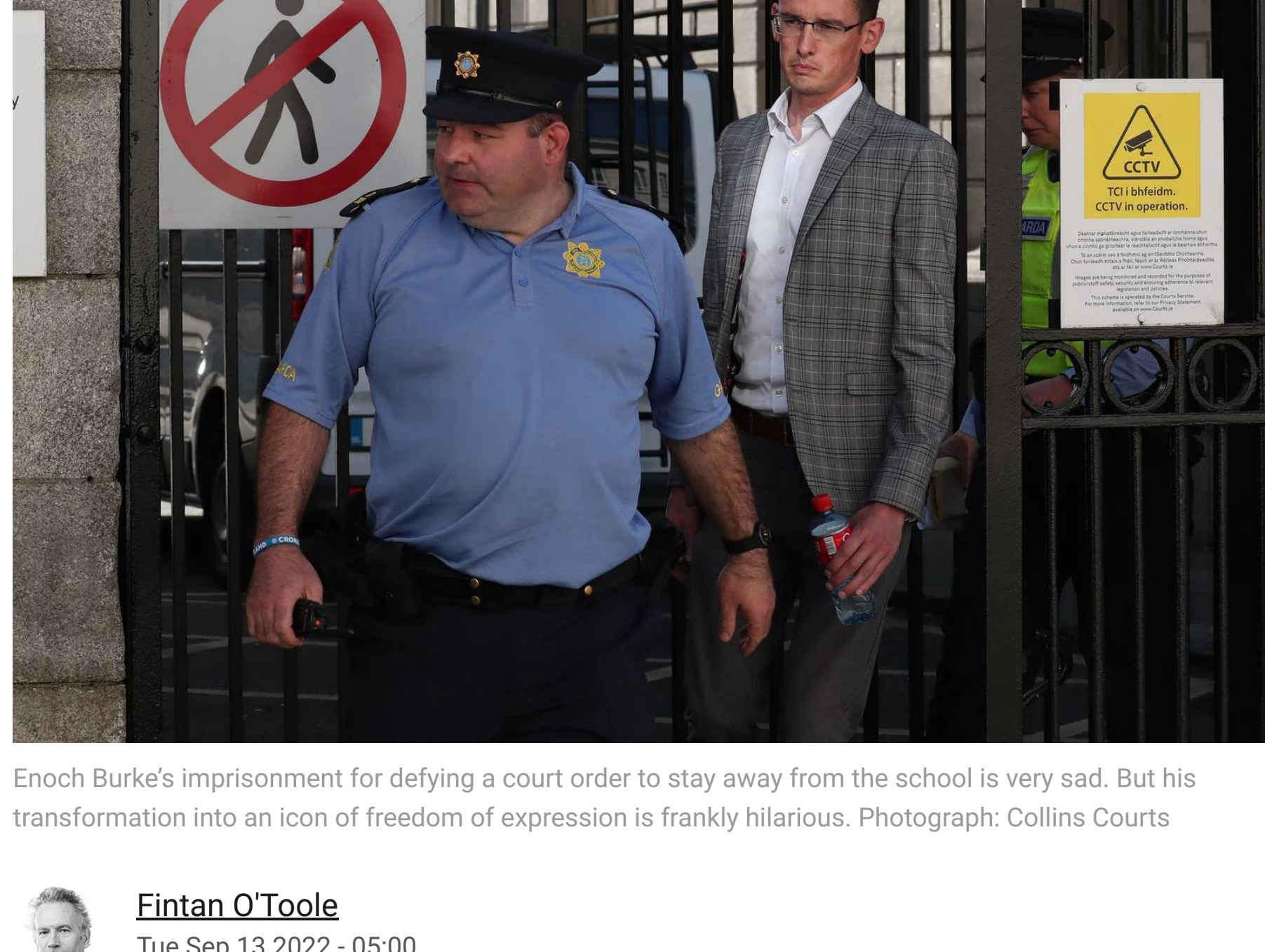
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Fintan O'Toole: Enoch Burke's transformation into an icon of freedom of expression is frankly hilarious

Teacher demands respect for his own right to be who he is yet affords none of that respect to those who differ from him

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Enoch Burke's imprisonment for defying a court order to stay away from the school is very sad. But his transformation into an icon of freedom of expression is frankly hilarious. Photograph: Collins Courts

Fintan O'Toole
Tue Sep 13 2022 - 05:00

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Enoch Burke heard a horror story from a "Christian couple" who visited a Christian bookshop in Northern Ireland. In what should have been a place of sanctity, they were confronted by a false idol.

A large poster hung on the door. On it was the face of evil: Daniel O'Donnell.

In his book, written in 2020, The Hedonism and Homosexuality of John Piper and Sam Allberry: The Truth of Scripture, Burke explains that not only is O'Donnell "a Roman Catholic", but "he has never professed to be a Christian, is married to a divorcee, and in recent years came out in support of both same-sex marriage and abortion rights".

According to Burke, "When the couple asked the shop manager why he was selling the music of such a singer in the shop, he was antagonistic in his response. The shop owner said he didn't know what Daniel believed and what his spiritual condition was and claimed that, if he wished to find out, he would have to meet him."

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Burke is having none of this flabby tolerance of the crooner of corruption. He denounces the shop manager as a hypocrite, every bit as bad as those Christian pastors who "shake hands with fornicators and infidels at the door of the church when the whole town is aware of their sins".

Burke has become a cause célèbre for right-wing culture warriors everywhere, a martyr, allegedly, for free speech and the tolerance of dissenting views. He was suspended on full pay because he publicly confronted the management of the school he taught in for allowing a gender-fluid pupil to be addressed as "they".

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Burke's imprisonment for defying a court order to stay away from the school is very sad. But his transformation into an icon of freedom of expression is frankly hilarious. Genghis Khan would be a better poster boy for tolerance.

Burke's book argues that pretty much everything that is rotten in the state of the world is the fault of the gays. "The lawlessness of our day", he thunders, "has as one of its hallmarks the widespread normalisation of homosexuality."

The only things that appear to rival queer people as objects of Burke's righteous indignation are the fantasy novels of CS Lewis, JRR Tolkien and JK Rowling

He deplores laws banning so-called conversion therapies as "an aggressive homosexuality seek[ing] to limit the church's freedom". That's what he means by freedom.

He very much approves of God's punishment of the Sodomites: "the church does not have to repent of its 'homophobia' any more than the Lord Jesus Christ, who commended the destruction of Sodom". Likewise, he endorses God's chastisement of homosexuality by "the egregious medical afflictions which often accompany it, including the chronic scourge of HIV".

[Jennifer O'Connell: Jailed teacher Enoch Burke might have done us all a favour]

At a personal level, Burke makes a point of his particular disdain for the former minister Katherine Zappone for being a "childless homosexual". He seems to suggest that neither she nor Leo Varadkar should be allowed to be in government.

The only things that appear to rival queer people as objects of Burke's righteous indignation are the fantasy novels of CS Lewis, JRR Tolkien and JK Rowling. He seems to suggest they should be banned for the crime of "finding... spiritual powers in sources which God has forbidden".

Burke, then, is a rather familiar figure in today's culture wars: one who demands absolute respect for his own right to be who he is and say whatever he wants yet affords none of that respect to those who differ from him.

Interestingly, in his book, Burke tells us something about his work as a teacher: "On the wall of the classroom where I teach, I have affixed a poster in prominent view of both my students and I (sic). The poster reads: 'Watch your thoughts, for they become words...'"

He is open, then, about seeing himself as the thought police for his students. They must not think about, still less talk about, sexuality. For Burke, the evil of liberalism is that "Conversation is restarted around issues which ought not to be named: fornication, homosexuality and indecent material."

He repeats as the gold standard for obedience (itself the touchstone of his theology) Tennyson's praise for those who rode to their deaths in the infamously idiotic Charge of the Light Brigade: "Theirs not to make reply/ Theirs not to reason why/ Theirs but to do and die."

The rights and wrongs of Burke's suspension from his teaching job will undoubtedly be argued through several layers of the legal system. But let's just say that unthinking obedience is not current best practice in education.

What is instructive, though, is how Burke's alleged martyrdom illuminates the slipperiness of self-proclaimed free speech warriors: I have freedom of speech; you should shut up and obey. My opinion is God's will; yours "ought not to be named". I should be admitted everywhere; you should be shunned. Free expression is absolute - except for Daniel O'Donnell or Narnia, or anything else I declare anathema.

One good thing, though, is that the religious right now embraces freedom of conscience for Irish teachers. Thousands of them, throughout the history of the State, have had to hide their views and their sexuality or risk being fired, as Eileen Flynn was, with the approval of the courts. How heartening for them to know they now have Piers Morgan and Jordan Peterson on their side.

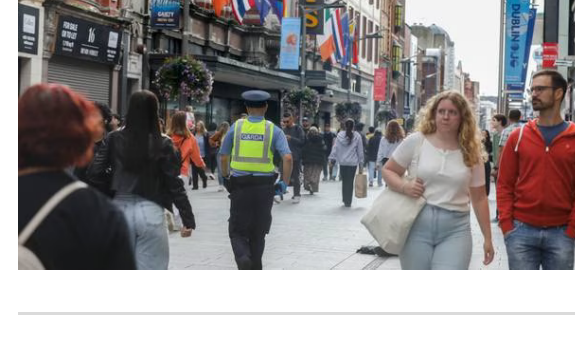
Enoch Burke

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