

Opinion & Analysis

Diarmaid Ferriter



Latest population milestone brings its own challenges

Sixty years ago this month, US president John F Kennedy arrived in Ireland for an emotional homecoming, framed around the narrative of the return of a great grandson of the "lost generation" of Irish emigrants and a final, triumphant chapter in the Irish famine story. The emigration theme was addressed directly by Kennedy as soon as he arrived: "No country in the world has suffered such a haemorrhage in the loss of its young people over the years.

The Irish who had gone abroad had become the best of citizens, but they have kept the memories of Ireland alive." Kennedy was also in Ireland to extol the achievement of Irish sovereignty and paid due homage at the graves of the executed 1916 leaders. The revolutionaries of a century ago saw themselves as in the business of restoration as well as creation; attempting to forge a republic that would not only break the link with the British Empire but, in taking control of economic

destiny, also restore the depleted population. Arthur Griffith, the founder of Sinn Féin, was a prolific writer on economic nationalism and maintained that an Ireland freed from Britain would be self-sufficient and economically strong enough to not just recover its pre-famine population of more than eight million, but even more: he insisted in 1917 that the country had "room and abundance" for another 16 million people.

Intense nationalism
The last census before that period of intense nationalism, in 1911, had recorded a population on the island of 4.4 million, with 3,139,688 of them in what became the 26 southern counties of the Free State. The first census of the Free State era, in 1926, recorded a population in the 26 counties of 2,971,992. By the 1920s, 43 per cent of Irish-born men and women were living abroad.

As is well known, the dream of economic self-sufficiency turned sour. Quite a stir was caused in 1953 with the publication of *The Vanishing Irish*: the enigma of the Modern world, a book of essays edited by Notre Dame Theology professor John A O'Brien. The title declared existential crisis because of the

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unbroken decline in the population figures since the 1840s and an unusually low marriage rate. O'Brien wrote: "Nothing in recent centuries is so puzzling or so challenging as the strange phenomenon being enacted before our eyes: the fading away of the once great and populous nation of Ireland. If the past century's rate of decline continues for another century, the Irish will virtually disappear as a nation and will be found only as an enervated remnant in a land occupied by foreigners." Even though JFK communicated a

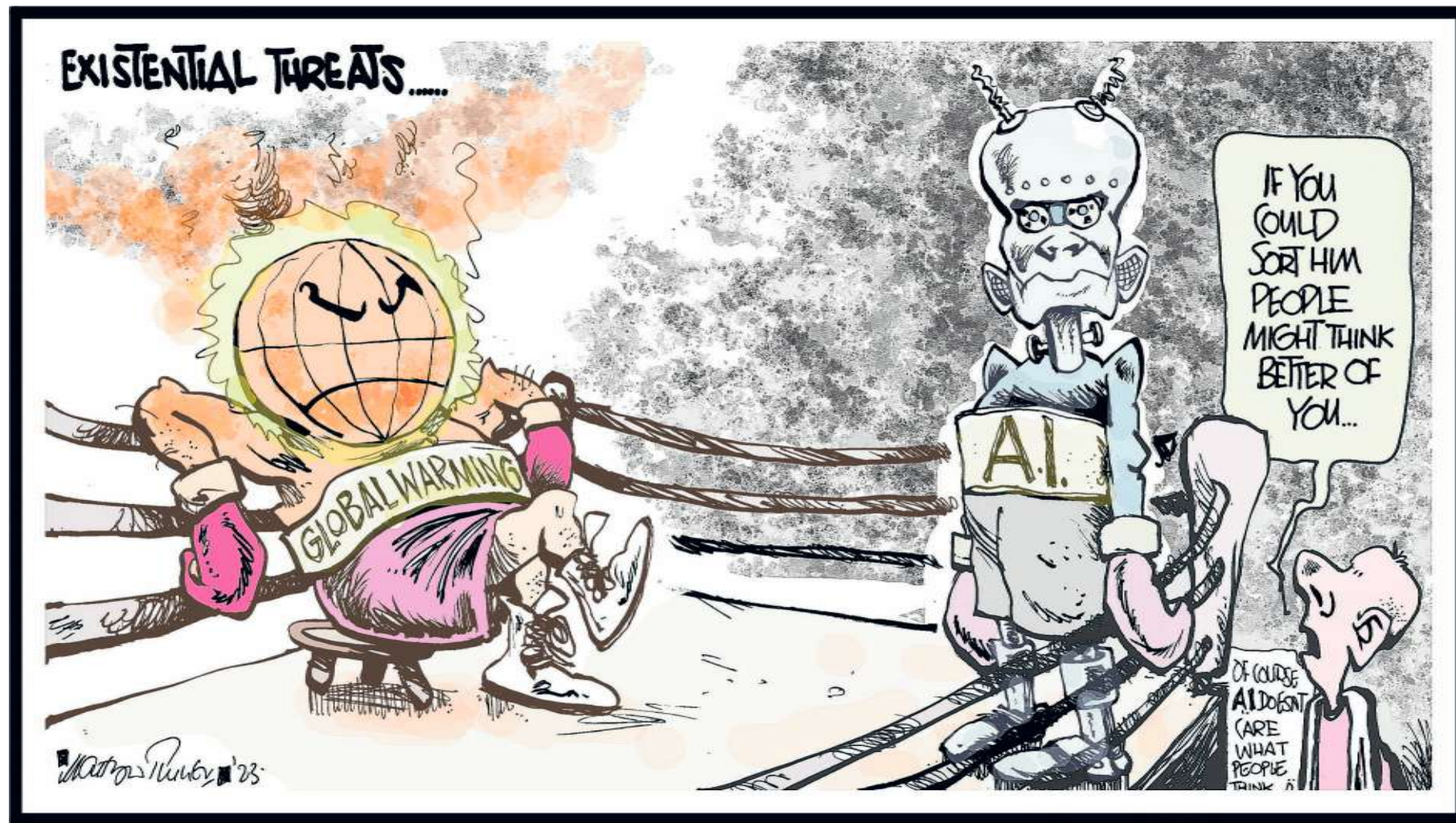
message of hope, progress and economic recovery during his visit in 1963 and things were improving, there was still a rawness about how sparsely populated the Republic was. The 1961 census recorded a population in the Republic of just 2,815,000, the smallest number ever enumerated on a census. Net emigration in the decade 1951 to 1961 was estimated at over 412,000. In reacting to this census, The Irish Times editorialised: "the drain upon this country's lifeblood is a tragedy that surpasses even the disaster of partition... Is Ireland to become another Puerto Rico?"

Experiences of the 1980s
Much improvement was to follow, though it was never uninterrupted, as the experiences of the 1980s attested. Understandably, considerable attention in recent years has been given to population milestones; that the population of the Republic, according to the 2022 Census, has now reached over five million and that the all-island population is just over seven million reflects an Ireland transformed. There is always an undercurrent of emotiveness in looking at such figures because of the famine being the defining event in

modern Irish history, and the awareness that the island was even more populous than now just two centuries ago.

One of the historic features of Irish emigration was that it acted as a sort of economic safety valve. American historian Kerby Miller, renowned for his expertise on the Irish exodus to America, and who did Trojan work to collect thousands of emigrant letters, quoted a Donegal parent of emigrant children who had sent money home: "Thank God, we were able to pay our debts and raise our heads." Cuttingly, historian Joe Lee suggested "few people anywhere in the world have been so prepared to scatter their children around the world in order to preserve their own living standards".

But population expansion, and an ageing population, bring different challenges and that is where the focus should now lie; on intelligent vision and policies tailored not to the electoral cycle, but to long-term societal welfare. As was recognised in this newspaper at the lowest population point in 1961, the essential dilemma for Ireland was how to preserve a sense of hope and purpose in light of the reality of her population numbers. Expansion creates a different version of that challenge.



Stephen Collins



Tax-cut row was just what Fine Gael needed. Now it has to deliver

Having generated a political controversy with their demand for tax cuts for middle-income workers, Fine Gael Ministers will have to deliver a significant package in the autumn budget or stand convicted of the charge of political play-acting levelled by Sinn Féin leader Mary Lou McDonald.

The demarche on tax by three Fine Gael ministers certainly got the attention of the political world. The ensuing row was just what the party needed to show the electorate that it is still in business, and in the process provide a morale boost for its weary supporters. However, if it can't deliver then the party's credibility will take a serious knock.

It is hardly surprising that after 12 gruelling years in office, Fine Gael TDs are feeling the pressure, with some of them succumbing to a mood of defeatism. That mood has been fuelled by the number of long-serving TDs who have announced they will not be running at the next election. The incessant onslaught from Sinn Féin, which has focused the mind of the electorate on the party's big failure – housing – and shifted the focus from the extraordinary economic achievements of the last decade, has taken its toll.

This has prompted some in the party to come to the conclusion that a spell in opposition is what it needs to regroup. There is a related assumption that, once in office, Sinn Féin will be exposed to the inevitable stresses and compromises of government and the party's popularity will slide as a result.

That complacent view is a dangerous delusion, as Sinn Féin is a very different political animal to the other parties in the Dáil. Once in power it will not prove easy to dislodge, regardless of its economic performance. Just look at the way its steadily increasing dominance of politics in Northern Ireland hasn't been hampered by its dire performance in actual governing.

Unemployment
The political challenge facing Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil as they enter the last phase of the Government's life is how they can translate their competent management of the economy, which, among other things, has brought unemployment to its lowest recorded level, into support at the ballot box come the next election.

The biggest weapon in their armoury is that the prudent management of the national finances by Paschal Donohoe and Michael McGrath has left the national finances in a position that most of its predecessors could not have imagined in their wildest dreams.

That has been achieved on the back of the sacrifices made by so many citizens in response to the financial crisis which almost bankrupted the country just over a decade ago. Income taxes were hiked dramatically, public servants took pay cuts and endured a long pay freeze, while many self-employed people lost their life savings and unemployment hit a record high.

Despite the severe belt-tightening, social welfare rates were maintained at their existing levels. This was in marked contrast to other EU bailout countries, where welfare rates were often the first item of Government spending to be cut. Here, the working population endured massive rises in income tax to ensure that social spending was maintained. That is why tax cuts for middle-income earners are justified, and are in no way comparable to the tax cuts for the wealthy introduced by Donald Trump in the US and advocated by right-wing Conservatives in the UK.

The Exchequer is awash with cash as we head into election year, and there is enough money in the kitty to do a range of things that can improve the lives of all. There is financial headroom to ease the burden of tax of working people, while also providing for a significant increase in social spending – and enacting long-overdue reforms like a major investment programme in the Defence Forces.

Pension time bomb
The budget surplus is so large – projected at €65 billion over the next four years – that there will still be an opportunity to put a considerable portion of it away to meet future needs, the pension time bomb being the prime concern. The Coalition parties are in the remarkable position of having more money than they know what to do with. The key to their future is to find a way of spending it that can capture the public imagination. Boldness will be required, along with the basic political instincts to spread the largesse in the most effective way. It is not simply a matter of splashing the cash around to appease every section of society, but coming up with an overarching narrative that can persuade people that the country's future is safest in their hands, and should not be trusted to people who have consistently opposed the very policies that have brought us to this happy position.

Ireland is no longer a poor country or the basket-case economy of a decade ago. The challenge ahead is to devise policies that see to it that some of the fruits of prosperity are shared as widely as possible now, while overdue investment is made in areas that will ensure that the astonishing upward trajectory of the Irish economy continues well into the future.

Young people have become the new frontier in hatred wars

Justine McCarthy



When did children become fair game in the hatred wars? Was it in March this year when some players on the Republic of Ireland under-15 boys football team were abused on social media for not being sufficiently pink-skinned and red-haired for the linking of subscribers to the barmy theory of the Great Replacement?

The weaponising of children certainly did not start last weekend when two or three Cork City fans jeered rival manager Stephen Bradley about his seriously ill nine-year-old son after his team, Shamrock Rovers, lost a match.

How can some hearts be so hardened that their companion brains think it is acceptable to taunt a father because his child is sick? After Bradley deplored the chants during media interviews, Cork City football club said it would ban the chanters for life from its home ground at Turner's Cross and a podcast by three of the club's supporters, called *The Other Three Amigos*, launched a fundraiser for two children's healthcare charities.

No such gesture of atonement has been made by Gemma O'Doherty for the torment she has caused parents of young people who have died. The far-right conspiracist, who seems to think that even the clouds in the sky are out to get us, harvested photographs of 42 young people from sources including their death notices and plastered them on the front page of a propaganda free sheet she produces, linking their tragic demise to Covid-19 vaccines. Her thesis was patently false. One of the 42 people she featured had drowned accidentally in a swimming pool. Another had suffered a fatal head injury during a camogie match. Yet another had died even before the vaccines became available.

Edel Campbell from Kingscourt in

Co Cavan has lodged a case in the High Court seeking an order directing O'Doherty to remove the photograph of her son, Diego Gilson, from the montage, which was still displayed on O'Doherty's website and social media this week. Diego was 18 when he died by suicide in August 2021. The solicitors' firm representing his bereft mother said she had no choice but to sue O'Doherty after pleading with her in vain over several months to take her child's picture down off the websites.

Last December, Campbell said in a RTÉ interview that O'Doherty had "ripped the heart clear out of me". That same month, O'Doherty – a former features and travel writer at the Irish Independent when I worked there in 1990s and into the 2000s, and who styles herself as "a multi-award-winning journalist" – posted the following contemptible diatribe. "Just because you're the parent of a dead person doesn't give you the right to tell lies, stalk and slander another. We understand some of the vaccinated cannot face what they've done to themselves and their children but please don't blame those who tried to save you."

O'Doherty using image
Diego was the eldest of four children. In this internet age, it is impossible to protect his siblings, who are aged 10, 11 and 13, from the knowledge that O'Doherty is using his image for her propaganda, compounding the trauma of having lost their big brother. In response to his mother's issuance of legal proceedings, O'Doherty, who has court convictions for breaching Covid-19 regulations by leaving her home in Dublin and travelling to Cork in December 2020 for an anti-lockdown protest and, separately, for resisting arrest and threatening and abusive behaviour to



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gardai, crowed that she has put her assets beyond reach. "I am untouchable. I'm not going near any court," the one-time aspiring president of Ireland said in a video posted last Friday. "I have secured my assets in such a way that the only people [sic] who will be losing money will be Edel Campbell."

This is not the first time O'Doherty has used images of young people to further her agenda. In 2019, she tweeted a photograph of 32 ethnically diverse schoolchildren, 11 of whom were white, in Longford, claiming that "Irish people are

becoming an ethnic minority". That same year, she targeted a mixed-race family living in Co Meath with a race in an advertisement for the Lidl supermarket chain. "Kidding no one!" she said. "Resist the Great Replacement wherever you can by giving this kip a wide berth. #ShopIrish #BuyIrish." Consequently, the Brazilian-born man, his Irish fiancée and their 22-month-old child packed up and left Ireland.

O'Doherty depicts herself as something of a children's champion, largely because of a campaign she ran about the disappearance of Mary Boyle, aged six, from the vicinity of her Co Donegal home in 1977, and articles she wrote about the sexual abuse of students by John McClean, a former teacher and rugby coach, at Terenure College. Given the insights she surely gleaned during those investigations, her heartless treatment of other young people and their parents is all the more shocking.

Reclaim the truth
How utterly devastating it must be for Edel Campbell to have to resort to a court of law to reclaim the truth about her departed firstborn. She has been left with no choice. As her solicitor has pointed out, there is no law prohibiting grotesque publication on Ireland's statute books.

When O'Doherty started her conspiracies crusades, journalists debated whether or not to report on her conduct. There was some justifiable trepidation that she would gain undue prominence from media exposure, but, frankly, there was also a seam of sympathy for the former journalist at the outset. Some former colleagues benignly deemed she had lost her way.

Perhaps if journalists had done what we are required to do and reported the news instead of filtering it in the misguided belief that it was for the common good, a public debate about torment by publication would have arisen before now and, just maybe, Ireland would have enacted legislation criminalising it.

As a journalist, as a parent, and as someone who was once a child, I am sorry that I did not argue hard enough to expose the sort of behaviour that is now driving a grieving mother reluctantly into court in an effort to protect her surviving children.



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Events of 1922 had long-term implications for church power

Throughout the recent years of commemoration of Ireland's revolutionary decade, there has been little sustained attention given to the role of the Catholic Church during that period and its response to the turmoil and violence.

Historian Brian Heffernan's 2014 book, *Freedom and the Fifth Commandment*, was a notable exception, charting the reaction of Catholic priests to the War of Independence. There were certainly

denunciations of violence from the pulpit, but most clergy sought to avoid becoming publicly involved in controversy. While tensions between bishops and priests and between older, more conservative clerics and their younger, republican-minded counterparts were apparent, those clerics who supported Sinn Féin did not automatically support the IRA's campaign.

Archbishop of Tuam Thomas Gilmartin suggested a priest could have views about politics but should not "take an aggressive

part on either side, because we belong to you [the parishioners] and you are all belonging to us". The delicate balancing act crumbled during the Civil War. Heffernan's book ends before the Civil War but he observed that, "for the conservatives, the foundation of the Irish Free State in 1922 was equivalent to the reaching of dry ground again". It was an important turning point and the bishops embraced the opportunity to be more assertive, with consequences that were enduring and remain relevant to this day.

This week 100 years ago, the Catholic hierarchy issued a pastoral letter denouncing the anti-Treaty republican campaign during the Civil War and insisting on obedience to the authority of the State.

Individual bishops had been vocal in support of the Treaty and in April 1922 the hierarchy's standing committee decried those in the IRA who claimed the right to be independent of civil authority, accusing them of an "immoral usurpation" of the people's rights. But the timing and content of the October pastoral were even more significant given that, the previous month, an emergency powers act had been introduced by the government empowering military courts to impose the death penalty for a number of offences. Before it came into operation, the govern-

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For all the piety and obedience on display in subsequent decades, some republicans never forgave the bishops and harboured deep resentments

ment offered an amnesty for republicans if they laid down arms and the publication of the pastoral coincided with this. It condemned the republican campaign as "only a system of murder and assassination of the National Forces," and pointedly used the pro-Treaty propaganda term "irregular" to describe the republicans and their "demoralisation of the young whose minds are being poisoned by false principles". The pastoral also denied those Catholics involved in the republican campaign absolution in Confession or admission to Communion. The republicans, themselves no slouches when it came to claims of moral righteousness,

and too dismissive of public opinion, fumed. Eamon de Valera protested to the Vatican about the politicisation of the hierarchy. The protest words of Frank Gallagher, a devout, interned republican, scorched the pages of his open letter to Catholic archbishop of Dublin Edward Byrne: the bishops, he insisted, were exhibiting "partisan excess", using the sacraments "as a political weapon" and peddling "grotesque untruth". The pastoral emboldened the government and executions of republicans began the following month, to public muteness from the bishops.

For all the piety and obedience on display in subsequent decades, some republicans never forgave the bishops and harboured deep resentments towards them. More importantly, the events and temper of 1922 had long-term implications for church power and attitudes that we do not consider enough. The pastoral did not halt violence. The historian Deirdre McMahon has astutely observed that the depth of republican hostility "with its potential for anticlericalism shocked many in the clergy and the hierarchy. In the years after the Civil War the bishops' pastorals were full of gloomy, doom-laden pronouncements about the inherent sinfulness of the people and the need for

constant vigilance against threatening influences which might corrupt them."

We are long accustomed to the idea of a remarkably powerful and triumphant Catholic Church from the 1920s onwards, but what is also noteworthy, maintains McMahon, is that "the church was, in fact, deeply insecure about its role in a new state which had been born out of violence, a violence, moreover, which had revealed how volatile and unstable its flock could be".

Consequently, it doubled down, and expanded the sense of what constituted transgression, disobedience and sinfulness with ramifications for those, especially women, deemed to be responsible for the scourge of moral laxity. Its concerns, as revealed by the pastoral a century ago, were the "moral and religious issues at stake" during the Civil War, because "Ireland has become a humiliation... disgraceful". In seeking to react to that and bolster its authority in a new state racked by political division, it sought to build discipline, obedience and deference around what more than 90 per cent of the population of the new state shared: the Catholic faith. But in doing that so forcefully, it also created its own brands of humiliation, with profound and damaging consequences.



Stephen Collins



Salutary lesson for Ireland from Truss's economic debacle

The latest bout of jitters in the financial markets caused by the British government's plan for unfunded tax cuts has triggered another increase in interest rates and put the pound under renewed pressure. It is a salutary lesson about the damage over-confident ideologues can do if entrusted with a nation's fortunes.

Panic has now gripped Conservative Party MPs and there is even the prospect that prime minister Liz Truss could suffer the same fate as another hardline politician, Edmund Poots of the Democratic Unionist Party, who was removed as party leader after a month.

To be fair to Truss, and her chancellor, Kwasi Kwarteng, they are doing exactly what she promised during the Conservative Party leadership campaign. A majority of party members agreed with her tax-cutting programme, so nobody can claim to be surprised at the contents of the disastrous mini-budget that blew up in her face.

There is a lesson here for political parties all over the democratic world about how leaders should be selected, but that is another day's work. A striking feature of the Conservative leadership campaign was the cursory scrutiny the media gave to the Truss promises of unfunded lower taxes.

The suddenness with which the financial markets responded so negatively when Kwarteng did as she had promised should send shivers down the spines of people in this country who recall the suddenness with which those same markets reversed their assessment of Ireland from vibrant tiger economy to a basket case in the 2008-2010 period.

The Irish economy has recovered remarkably quickly from that traumatic financial crash thanks to the policy prescription set out by the terms of the EU/IMF bailout and the determination of the parties in power to implement them in the teeth of fierce opposition.

Thanks to the prudent policies pursued by Paschal Donohoe as Minister for Finance, the exchequer was in a position to provide the expensive set of supports devised to cope with the Covid pandemic and there is still enough money in the kitty to fund a substantial response to the energy crisis in the winter ahead.

Despite the expense involved, Ireland will still run a budget surplus this year and the forecast is for another surplus in 2023, although that forecast could change depending on the course of Vladimir Putin's military campaign in Ukraine and his energy war directed at the rest of Europe.

Ireland has been in a position to respond to unforeseen emergencies precisely because the economy has been so well managed over the past decade. It is worrying, though,

that far from getting any credit from the public, the parties in power have suffered a steady loss of support. By any objective measure, Donohoe has done a great job for the country. But he has received little or no thanks from Fine Gael TDs who are angry that he didn't do the political thing and splurge money for party advantage in advance of the 2020 general election.

National debt
It is even the prospect that the headline figures from Ireland and the UK. Irish national debt has been cut from a dangerously high 120 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2013 to 56 per cent last year. This was achieved at enormous hardship in the early phase but helped by rapid economic growth and rising tax revenues as the measures began to take effect.

By contrast, in the UK the level of public debt has grown from 56 per cent of GDP in 2012 to 95 per cent in 2021 and by March of this year was touching 100 per cent. The UK national debt is now at its highest level since the economic crisis-ridden 1960s. This level of debt is why the financial markets have been spooked by the plan to borrow

“There appears to be no political dividend for behaving responsibly”

further vast sums to fund tax cuts. Figures relating to national debt and growth may appear academic to people struggling to make a living but they ultimately translate into real consequences for real people.

An illustration of this was given during the week by a wise political figure, Gavin Barwell. In an Twitter exchange with leading Brexititeer Arron Banks, he pointed out that one of the reasons the tax burden was so high in the UK is that the economy is smaller than it would have been if the country stayed in the EU. "You need a bigger share of the smaller pie to pay for a given level of public services. Maybe you should have thought about that before campaigning to make us poorer."

The problem as far as this country is concerned is that there appears to be no political dividend for behaving responsibly but everything to gain from making wild spending promises, allied to tax cuts on the Truss model. Irish political history is littered with economic disasters that followed from ill-thought-out election-winning pledges.

The big question when the next election comes around is whether we are doomed to follow in the footsteps of Sisyphus and, having rolled the stone uphill at enormous cost, must watch it roll all the way down so that we have to start at the bottom again.

Catholic Church still has a special place in secular Ireland

Justine McCarthy



In these dark days of the soul when we struggle to speak of the unspeakable tragedy in Creeslough, churchmen have had no choice but to find the words.

For theirs is the requirement to be wise amid grief. Theirs is the task to be with the bereaved families; to gather the stories of those who have been loved and lost for retelling in their funeral homilies. Theirs is the duty to parishioners to stay strong.

Since a sonic boom reverberated through the Co Donegal village, killing 10 people, men, women and children, in the crucifixion hour of three o'clock last Friday, the parish priest has been a constant presence.

From distant, harried parts of Ireland, we have watched and heard Fr John Joe Duffy confess that he has no explanation for the sudden loss of so many lives and, in essence, could only offer love.

"I am part of you, part of this community, and it is together that we will make the journey," he told mourners at the first funeral Mass, for Jessica Gallagher, a vivacious young fashion designer who should be learning the ropes in her new job in Belfast this week.

St Paul told the Corinthians that faith, hope and love were the primary graces and, of these, he said, love was the greatest.

If any benefits can be gleaned from Creeslough's appalling suffering, one may be the reminder it has provided for post-Catholic Ireland that a loving church retains a special place in our communities. This past week, pictures of the devastated service station have been followed by the images of people flocking to the celestial-white church of St Michael to say the rosary together each evening, the 10 red candles flickering on the altar in memory of the dead, the prayer vigils held in various parts of the so-called Forgotten

County, the series of funeral processions to the final resting places. This was the tender-hearted church. The personal church that had been eclipsed from public conversation by the cruel institutional church of heartless diktats and child abuse cover-ups.

For many cradle Catholics, this is the church etched on the native DNA.

John McGahern, an agnostic and a censored novelist, said he had "nothing but gratitude" to the church for introducing him to rituals and the sense of the sacred.

When he was laid to rest beside his mother in the small graveyard at Aughawillan in Co Leitrim, there were no hymns or billowing incense or bishops splendidly arrayed upon the altar. There was only love, uninterrupted.

Alan McGuckian, the Bishop of Raphoe, said on RTE radio on Tuesday morning, before the harrowing funerals began, that people take comfort from "the words and the rituals".

Familiar ceremonies
These familiar ceremonies can be an anaesthetic when there simply are no plausible reasons why life is suddenly and violently snatched from a five-year-old child buying a birthday cake for her mother or from a man getting cash from an ATM to pay for his takeaway or from a schoolgirl bent over a fridge to buy an ice-cream.

"God's will" is not an explanation. If it was, he would be a hard God to love.

Ireland has been a more comfortable country since it shook off the stranglehold of the institutional Catholic Church - what McGahern called "the fortress church".

Women and gay people are freed by it. Children are safer. Public policy has moved out from its shadow and politicians no longer quake at the sight of a crozier.

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Without appearing to set out to, Fr John Joe Duffy has done more to restore faith in the power of the personal church than any pope could hope to achieve



But did some of us throw out the baby with the bathwater?

"I'd like to go to Mass. I miss going," says Joe Rutledge in McGahern's *That They May Face the Rising Sun*. To which Jamesie replies that non-belief is "no bar" to church attendance. In his world, going to Mass is as integral to life as going to the mart and the post office.

In the new Ireland of ever-declining Mass attendance among ever-increasing urbanites, the priest has become a ghost in society.

Some priests even fear wearing their clerical garb in public because of its associations with the organisation's intolerance and its history of self-preserv-

ing deceitfulness; the cardinal sins that set this State on the fast-track to secularism.

It is harder to conceal oneself in a village. Harder, too, to remain outside the loop of affection and to be unaffected by the joys and sorrows that transpire within it.

Despite remaining largely rural and despite its physical isolation in a village, harder, too, to remain outside the loop of affection and to be unaffected by the joys and sorrows that transpire within it.

It is telling that three of the people who were killed in Creeslough were not born in Ireland. Martin McGill moved there from Scotland and was known in his adopted place as Scotch Martin, James O'Flaherty was originally from Australia and Robert Garwe came from Zimbabwe.

The old Ireland
Yet Donegal has a reputation for being among the last parts to cling to the old Ireland, having recorded proportionately low votes in favour of abortion, marriage equality and children's rights in referendums this century.

Various theories have been posited to explain this trend, most predicated on the county's remoteness, but, in the past week, another explanation has crystallised.

When lives are intimately entwined, the personal supersedes the institutional. It is the personal that reaches below the 10 commandments and the seven deadly sins to the heart of a community, weaving the church into its fabric.

Without appearing to set out to, Fr Duffy has done more to restore faith in the power of the personal church than any pope could hope to achieve.

He has done it with candour and care, displacing the image of a cold, authoritarian institution with the face of humanity.

For all the many times these past seven days that you and I have thought, "there but for the Grace of God go I" since the explosion this day last week, Creeslough, in its sorrowing, has demonstrated something enviable.

It has a pillar of its community whose role is to serve the people. Then he goes home, shuts the door behind him and is alone with his own tears. God, isn't that love?

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Echoes of 1974 in today's cost-of-living squeeze

Such is the level of apprehension about the coming winter and the cost of living that it brings to mind the Ireland of almost 50 years ago. The consequences of the oil crisis prompted by the Arab-Israeli war in October 1973 were profound and diluted the optimism that existed about Ireland's economic prospects as a new member of the EEC. In December 1973, the Minister for Finance Richie Ryan spoke gravely when addressing the Seanad: "Our entire

future is threatened by a combination of the oil crisis, inflation and soaring interest rates". There was talk of petrol rationing books and blackouts. Ireland was dependent on oil for 75 per cent of its energy needs and the price of oil quickly quadrupled while the cost of food and basics also spiralled.

The Fine Gael/Labour coalition government in power from 1973-77 was inevitably in crisis mode as a result; national wage agreements, subsidies and

welfare increases to counter and stay ahead of inflation were part of the response. Ryan fought with his colleagues about spending plans while the governor of the Central Bank T.K. Whitaker wrote increasingly urgent letters to Ryan telling him in 1974 that he was "appalled" by the information given to him in confidence by Charles Murray, the secretary of the Department of Finance, about the scale of borrowing to finance additional current expenditure: "I wrote in dismay last March to Mr Murray that effective management of our financial affairs seemed to be slipping out of our hands... I am most disheartened by the prospect ahead".

'Vastly beyond our means'

Whitaker declined to serve a second term, his decision largely a result of the refusal to heed his warnings; interestingly, he also used a phrase, a version of which later became infamous when used by Charles Haughey in January 1980 shortly after he took over the leadership of Fianna Fáil: "as a community we are at present living vastly beyond our means".

The cost-of-living ache also worked its way in to popular culture, notably through the character The Minister for Hardship on the satirical show *Hall's Pictorial*

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The same political reality about state intervention and cost of living defining the political narrative and shaping political preferences holds true

Weekly, played by Eamon Morrissey, mitten clad, in darkness save for a candle as he spoke of the reopening of the workhouses: "I want to convince you how well off you are no matter what the other crowd tells you... my government is the best government you have at the moment, so make the best of it". It's a line that some in power might utter today in responding to the populism of "the other crowd" — Sinn Féin — and its constant demand for more and more state spending.

Of course the context now is different

with a large budget surplus, and tax cuts mooted, but the same political reality about state intervention and cost of living defining the political narrative and shaping political preferences holds true.

The cost of living sank the 1973-77 government's prospects of re-election even though the Irish 1970s was by no means a linear tale of economic woe and some stabilisation was apparent by the end of that government's term. But what was striking was the gap between those prospering and those crushed by inflation, which an EEC report in November 1976 estimated was at 18.9 per cent, the highest in the Community.

Focus on energy conservation

Economist Patrick Lyons highlighted that 70 per cent of the wealth of the country was in the hands of 5 per cent of the population, a reminder, as noted by Magill magazine, of the polarisation between "those classes and sections of classes which are ahead of the inflationary game and those which are not", another assertion that resonates today.

There are other aspects of the global energy crisis of the 1970s that are relevant today; what happened from 1973-74 prompted not just a focus on energy conservation but an urgency about

alternative energy supplies and research in to renewable energy, reflected, for example in a new department of energy in the US and in Paris, the International Energy Agency, and a focus on expanding nuclear power and gas exploration. These efforts also generated increased concern about safety, natural resources and the environment, as was apparent with the rise of the ecology/Green movement.

One lesson of the current energy crisis is that alternative, sustainable sources of energy have to be the overwhelming priority. Cost-of-living headlines will always trump climate change headlines, but the reality is that current, painful inflation dilemmas are little when measured against the enormity of what we have yet again been reminded of this week by another climate crisis report. Co-ordinated by the World Meteorological Organisation, this report predicts "increasingly devastating" physical and socio-economic impacts of weather, climate and water-related disasters in the absence of more urgent action. A big part of the answer to that challenge must surely lie in wind energy, onshore and offshore, and the Irish approach to this, given our particular potential to harvest it, requires a lot more urgency.



Stephen Collins



Symbolic gesture could break the protocol deadlock

The respect shown in this country over recent days for the late Queen Elizabeth and the new King Charles III was hugely symbolic and provides a welcome reminder that what appear to be fundamental differences can be bridged by courageous and generous leadership.

On the resumption of the Dáil on Wednesday members stood for a minute's silence in honour of Queen Elizabeth. Ceann Comhairle Seán Ó Fearghail described the late queen as "a truly magnificent and inspirational head of our neighbouring state whose years of dedicated service is truly without parallel". Expressing his sympathy, Taoiseach Micheál Martin acknowledged that there were many people "on this island who looked upon Elizabeth as their queen" while Sinn Féin leader Mary Lou McDonald acknowledged the presence of the British Ambassador, Paul Johnston, in the distinguished visitor's gallery and extended her "profound sympathies" on the occasion.

A day earlier there was a dignified exchange at Hillsborough Castle between King Charles III and Sinn Féin leaders Michelle O'Neill and Alex Maskey. Given the bitter animosity of Irish republicans to the British crown for more than two centuries, the response of the party's leaders to the queen's death has been remarkable.

Exactly 100 years ago, this country was in the throes of a bitter civil war which was fought over the role of the British monarch in Irish political life. Contrary to widespread popular belief, it was the relationship of the new state to the Crown rather than the partition of the island which was at the root of that conflict.

Mountbatten

More recently, the assassination of British ambassador Christopher Ewart-Biggs in Dublin in 1976 and the murder of the late queen's uncle, Lord Louis Mountbatten, off the coast of Sligo in 1979 revealed the depth of bitterness and hate that continued to motivate some Irish republicans.

It was the personal connection between the queen and Mountbatten that gave such deep meaning to her extraordinary speech at Dublin Castle in 2011 which the eminent historian Simon Schama described last weekend in the *Financial Times* as "the most eloquently thoughtful of her entire reign".

That speech referred to the fact that violence had "touched us all, many of us personally", clearly referred to the Mountbatten episode, but it also contained a number of memorable lines including the observation that while we should "bow to the past but not be bound by it".

Sinn Féin boycotted that historic dinner in Dublin Castle in 2011, despite the entreaties of President McAleese, but a year later Martin McGuinness and the queen engaged in the famous handshake in Belfast that cemented the positive impact made by her State visit. Paying his first visit to the

North as king, Charles III told political leaders that his mother had felt deeply "the significance of the role she herself played in bringing together those whom history had separated and extending a hand to make possible the healing of long-held hurts", before going to pledge: "Now, with that shining example before me, and with God's help, I take up my new duties resolved to seek the welfare of all the inhabitants of Northern Ireland."

The new king had visited Northern Ireland on 40 previous occasions and made the first official visit of a British royal to the Republic in 1995, at a critical stage in the peace process. He has made a further seven official visits since then and has expressed a wish to visit every county in Ireland.

The big question now is whether the positive role the monarchy has played in relations between Ireland and Britain can have a spillover impact on the political arena, where real difficulties remain in relations between the two countries and between the communities in the North.

Both sides have something to learn from the actions of the late queen

The Taoiseach, who has been invited to attend the Queen's funeral on Monday, is expected while in London to hold talks with prime minister Liz Truss, with the contentious Northern Ireland protocol expected to be a topic of conversation. During her leadership election campaign, Truss continued with her tough line on the protocol and there were suggestions that on taking office she would immediately invoke Article 16 to modify its provisions.

Having won the leadership election, she backed away from an immediate confrontation. The death of the queen has provided further breathing space before the next chapter in the longrunning dispute between the UK and the EU over the application of the protocol.

Earlier this week, EU chief negotiator Maros Sefcovic promised that the trade border between Britain and Northern Ireland would be invisible provided that EU officials were given real-time data on trade movements. He said there was almost no difference between the UK demand for no checks and the EU offer of "minimum checks done in an invisible manner".

To date, the emollient approach of Sefcovic has not prevented the UK unilaterally extending the grace period, due to expire next week, for the introduction of trade checks. The EU has responded with legal action and the position remains deadlocked.

As spelt out by Sefcovic, the practical difference between the two sides is not all that great. The real problem is symbolism, and here both sides have something to learn from the actions of the late queen.

The young emigrate yet the golden circle endures

Justine McCarthy



Four men sat down to dinner at the salubrious In Lain Hotel nestling in the Swiss Alps. One was a billionaire Irish tax exile called Denis O'Brien. Another was his enduring friend and business associate, Paul Connolly. Also at the table was Niall McFadden, a corporate financier whom O'Brien had befriended when the pair became neighbours at the exclusive Mount Juliet golf estate in Co Kilkenny. The billionaire and the financier bonded as boot camp buddies, flying to Kenya and Greece for luxury activity holidays.

By the time of the dinner in Switzerland on January 29th, 2012, McFadden was in a spot of bother to the tune of €30 million worth of court judgments issued against him, after defaulting on debt repayments. With personal bank borrowings of €7 million, he was facing bankruptcy while Siteserv, a utilities company he cofounded in 2004, was insolvent, owing €150 million to the State-owned IBRC, formerly known as Anglo Irish Bank.

The company was up for sale. Six parties had bid for it in the first round of the sale process the previous month.

Robert Dix was the fourth man at the dinner table that night. Another business and boot camp buddy of McFadden, he was a non-executive director of Siteserv and chairman of the board's sale subcommittee. Before joining his three fellow ski-holidaymakers downstairs, Dix received a call in his hotel room from Siteserv's financial advisers informing him that the second round of offers had been pared down to just two bids. One of them was from O'Brien. The Commission of Investigation into the sale of Siteserv, chaired by judge Brian Cregan, states in its 1,500 page report, following a seven-year investigation costing the

public at least €30 million, that there was "no discussion, or reference, to Siteserv" over dinner that evening in the Swiss Alps.

Cregan also found no evidence of impropriety by O'Brien, whose company, Millington, went on to buy Siteserv for €45.4 million. Effectively, the Irish state was out of pocket by €118 million on the original debt, plus being landed with the colossal bill for Cregan's inquiry. That combined sum could power thousands of Irish homes with electricity and gas for the next year. Yet the monetary loss is not the only startling feature of the Siteserv saga. Most mortals failing to pay their mortgage, for instance, face the prospect of foreclosure and having their home sold without getting any say in the process. Yet here was a company on the rocks and owing €150 million that the bank allowed to manage its own sale. If ever there was proof of one rule for some and another for everybody else, this is it.

Forever bragging

Modern Ireland loves to laud itself for being tolerant and equal. The Government is forever bragging about the country's newly minted reputation as one of the most tax-equal states this side of Mars, a claim that deserves closer scrutiny. But what is becoming ever more apparent, as young people pack their emigrant suitcases again in search of somewhere they can afford to live, is that tax equity is merely a sop as long as Ireland's economic preferential culture of golden circles continues untrammelled. Groundhog Day in this land means the taxpayer forever stumping up for the bill as the golden circle waltzes off.

The Swiss dinner took place just 10 months after judge Michael Moriarty published his final report from the tribunal inquiring into payments to

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A year after the tribunal's findings were made public, the State's bank signed off on a deal with Denis O'Brien, leaving the people of Ireland out of pocket yet again



politicians. It contained stark and grave findings. One such was that Michael Lowry, the minister for communication in 1995, had "secured the winning" of a State mobile phone licence by O'Brien. Another was that O'Brien had enriched Lowry by more than €1 million. The High Court judge said these two findings were "demonstrably referable". The tribunal cost the public €65.5 million.

Lowry still sits in the Dáil, enjoying all the power and prestige of a Government-supporting TD. The Director of Public Prosecutions has decided not to charge anybody for obstructing the tribunal, despite a formal complaint by Moriarty. A year after the tribunal's findings were made public, the State's bank signed off on a deal with O'Brien, leaving the

people of Ireland, who had already paid €34 billion to bail out Anglo Irish Bank, out of pocket yet again. How is any of that fair or equal?

Last December, this newspaper revealed that the wealthy O'Flaherty family who distribute Mercedes-Benz cars in Ireland got €1.8 million in State pandemic subsidies and, at the same time, transferred virtually the same sum in the form of a dividend to an offshore account controlled by the family. They were not alone. Other business families were exposed as having done similar. Not a whisper about any of that since. These revelations coincided with the issuance of State letters to some individual recipients of the €208 weekly pandemic unemployment payment for workers informing them that they wrongly benefited and that the money owed would be automatically deducted from their earnings by Revenue.

Tracker mortgage scandal

Last year, the Davy stockbroker group was fined a measly €4.1 million by the Central Bank over a bond-trading deal involving 16 of its employees, including its former chairman and its chief executive, and a client who was kept oblivious to their involvement. No individual was charged with any wrongdoing, just as nobody in the banks was prosecuted in connection with the tracker mortgage scandal.

Every time a voluminous, expensive and long-overdue report of a State investigation is published, the government laments the cost, mumbles that there must be a better way of doing things and then shoves the report on to a shelf to gather dust. There is a better way.

Catherine Murphy, the Social Democrats' joint leader whose tenacious questioning in the Dáil helped uncover the torrid Siteserv details, and others are hoarse from advocating the creation of a permanent judicial office to investigate serious matters in the public interest. Not only would it be more efficient and nimble than the current system of commissions of inquiry but such an office would signal a narrowing of the chasm that exists between them and us in Ireland's economic culture. Should it ever come about, tax equity might be more appreciable.