

Blind indifference to human suffering

The man who would go on to kill once went on a rampage in a church in Co Louth.

Michael Connolly was smoking a lot of cannabis at the time. In the church, he did damage to religious iconography to the value of €3,000. Later, when he was staying at a B&B in Dundalk, he burned a good portion of the room. He said he did it because he believed the HSE and the government were run by "Zionists". He told psychiatrists that two cats in the guesthouse had informed him that he was staying in "Anne Frank's house in Amsterdam".

Quite obviously, Michael Connolly had very serious mental health issues. One medical report described him as displaying paranoid delusions of a religious homophobic, quasi-Nazi, and antisemitic nature. On the night he killed Mark Lawlor, Michael Connolly was 51. He was originally from Dublin, had moved to Louth and ended up of no fixed abode.

Mark Lawlor was 38 on the night his life was violently taken. He also had mental health difficulties, but not the kind that can explode into violence. A judge would describe him as "a good and decent person" about whom "nobody had a bad word to say". He did get in trouble with the law, minor stuff, theft, the kind of thing that may well be attributable to mental health issues or associated with alienation from society.

On the night of the killing, November 22, 2019, Connolly thought that Mark Lawlor had some kind of "exalted identity like a king" and may have been a "kingpin of Dublin". Connolly scalded Mr Lawlor with hot water from a boiling kettle. He then put a chair on Mark Lawlor's chest, sat on it and strangled Mr Lawlor. It was a savage attack, attributable to a large extent to a severe mental health deficiency that managed to displace normal human empathy and lash out against imagined threats and enemies.

Mark Lawlor was a vulnerable human being who should have received basic care from the state. Michael Connolly was, and possibly still is, a dangerous person, but his capacity for violence is attributable to a severe form of illness. Ironic then, in the bitterest sense, that the killing occurred not in a private residence or on a public street, but in State care. The institution in question was not, as might be expected in a developed society, a secure psychiatric facility, but actually a prison.

The killing of Mark Lawlor in Cloverhill Prison was an outrage. The two mentally ill prisoners were put together in a cell despite their respective illnesses. A court heard on October 27 that Michael Connolly's sister had attempted to have him committed to an appropriate institution in the days before the attack. She had contacted gardai by phone and email, warning them that there might be an incident if his mental health deteriorated further. He was being incarcerated for offences related to arson.

It would be standard procedure for the gardai to pass on such communication to the Irish Prison Service. It would be standard procedure, in theory at least, for the



Mark Lawlor, who was killed in his prison cell in Cloverhill Prison in November 2019.

do things in the future but there have been many before and the future looks no better than it ever did in this respect. As for the perpetrator, the sentence he received was a committal to prison. He will in all likelihood be assessed in prison as to whether he is still suffering from paranoid delusions and might be better served with a transfer to the Central Mental Hospital. Even if such a course is followed it could be months or years before a transfer can be effected. In the meantime, such a prisoner may be a further threat to others and himself in an environment totally unsuited to dealing with mental illness.

Beyond the prison, this really won't matter much. Unless there is a catastrophic violent incident the wider public doesn't know and doesn't want to know about it. There is a long tradition in this country of shoving behind high walls that which is inconvenient to society. The manner in which mentally ill people are dealt with by the criminal justice system carries on this tradition of blind indifference to human suffering.

prison service to examine a prisoner on the basis of such concerns and come to a decision as to whether or not he should be placed on a waiting list for the tiny number of beds available in the Central Mental Hospital. It would be standard procedure for the CMH to look at the list and the total dearth of availability and communicate that it will be a while yet before there's any chance of even thinking about transferring such a prisoner. In the meantime, things happen, a prisoner might assault another, a prisoner might self-harm, a prisoner might get killed due to being confined in a cell with another prisoner who is suffering from paranoid delusions.

Eight days ago, Michael Connolly was sentenced to 10 years in prison for the manslaughter of Mark Lawlor. According to the court report, Judge Siobhan Lankford said that a headline sentence of 15 years was appropriate but she reduced it by three years, taking into account Connolly's mental health history, his admissions, and expression of remorse. The judge said that Mark Lawlor "should have been safe from attack in his sleeping quarters".

Afterwards, Mark Lawlor's sister, Sharon Brennan, told the media that taking a life should mean a life sentence.

"The prison system has a lot to answer for, putting two mentally ill patients in a cell together," she said. "They said the prison was overcrowded that night but we found a report saying there was only 93% capacity in the prison that night. Mark never deserved what happened to him."

Ms Brennan is correct that the prison



service has a lot to answer for, but that agency is not alone. There have been no expressions of outrage from the body politic, no thundering editorials in the media. It is reasonable to assume that the lack of expression of basic human empathy in these power centres is attributable to a belief that society at large isn't that bothered. The dearth of reaction is completely different than what might be expected if, for instance, a young woman

lost her life through severe negligence in a hospital. Or a young man in a psychiatric institution. Or if an elderly person was severely attacked by another elderly person in a care home. In all of these instances, the public at large would draw deeply from a well of compassion. Prisons are different.

A 2020 study by the Council of Europe said Irish prisons "offer poor conditions and inadequate treatment" for mentally ill prisoners. "Another major concern is the rising number of homeless persons with severe mental health problems who are ending up in prison."

Last April, the Prison Officers Association conference was told that up to 70% of people in prison have mental health issues. Association president Tony Power told the gathering that officers are asked to deal with this 24/7 without any formal training.

"Our members are going above and beyond the level to which they have been trained and this is totally unacceptable and increases the risk for all involved," he said.

Mr Lawlor's violent death is likely to elicit recommendations on how better to



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