

Neutrality debate attracts obnoxious reactions

THERE is an obnoxious element to some of the debate on this country's future at a time of living dangerously. In the discussion about what form neutrality should take and — on the fringes so far — whether it should be retained at all, there is a tendency to dehumanise opponents. This emanates from some of those who wish to retain the status quo. Anybody who disagrees with them place a lesser value on human life, they infer, and are willing if not eager to send somebody else's children off to be killed in foreign wars.

Those who purvey this stuff are primarily focused with signalling their virtue. They want you to know that they cherish human life more than people who believe the country at large should, for the greater good, be organised in a different way. Others appear to be caught up in emotion and frankly should know better.

Tom Clonan should know better. He is an Independent senator, a man who displayed bravery in blowing the whistle on appalling behaviour when he served in the armed forces. He is also a passionate advocate for people with disabilities and it would be safe to say he has made a difference.

On Wednesday, he debated Fergus Finlay on RTE's *Drivetime*. The previous day Finlay wrote in his weekly *Irish Examiner* column under the headline 'Our precious neutrality is nothing but vanity ... we must join the fight'. Finlay has been a public figure for decades, having served as a Labour party adviser for two governments and latterly as head of the children's charity Barnardos. He is about as far as one can get from the caricature of a right-wing warmonger. His politics have always been of the left, not the strain of authoritarian left of social media, nor the left that has a sneaking regard for quasi-socialist strongmen, but the left of traditional values.

He posited in his column that, with freedom as known to democracies under attack, we can no longer remain on the sidelines. "We have to stand up now," he wrote. "Anything we can contribute to the security and defence of Europe is a contribution to freedom everywhere now."

You can agree or disagree, but his record suggests that such a shift in outlook didn't come easy to him and was the result of deep reflection.

Clonan doesn't agree and they batted back and forth on the radio. Then Tom said this: "What Fergus said in his article is we should join the fight and when he says we he doesn't mean himself, he means my children and your children and the children of people listening and potentially our grandchildren."

"We used to have a saying as junior officers when I was with the army, these old war horses, retired generals would come in and we used to say once a fighting cock, now a feather duster."



A Ukrainian soldier looks at the sky searching for Russian FPV drones as he gets ready to fire a M777 howitzer towards Russian positions at the frontline near Donetsk, Ukraine.

Finlay retorted that the statement was cheap and unworthy. "I would give my right arm at the drop of a hat to put myself in harm's way rather than any of my grandchildren, it (the comment) is way beneath you," he replied. Clonan said that Finlay had never served in the army, inferring that because he has seen the ravages of war he values life more precious.

By that token, old generals who say we need more war because it's good for humanity, based on their experience, should have an elevated role in debates like this. Claiming that as demonstrating some moral superiority on one's value for human life infers that unless you have seen the results of war up close you are more likely to send young people off to die. In that respect, Tom sounds as if he's talking about imperial and class-ridden Britain early in the 20th century, rather than a relatively intimate society and democracy in the 21st.

All of us are susceptible to a lapse in standards now and again and Clonan's record entitles him to a pass. But the cheap fare that informed his comments is purveyed far and wide, in the public square, and particularly on social media.

Did those who lived through fascism in the Second World War have less love or regard for their young folk who went out to fight Hitler? Do the Ukrainians need a lesson in familial love if they support the fight to defend their country from a murderous dictator? And what of the Finns who joined Nato


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in the wake of Putin's war in order to better protect themselves? Maybe they too don't value human life as much as the virtuous voices in this country who claim that any change in response to the new dispensation is tantamount to sacrificing somebody else's children on some foreign battlefield.

The most immediate issue has been the Government's plan to do away with

the requirement for a mandate from the UN to deploy peacekeeping Irish soldiers, the so-called 'triple lock'. This is being acted on because, as it stands, it requires the nod from Russia, a rogue state under a dictatorship, China, another dictatorship, and the USA, which has Donald Trump.

Those who oppose the move say it dilutes our neutrality. Maybe it does in theory, but that infers that without it our parliament would be more likely to deploy Irish troops not just for peacekeeping duties, but to fight some war. We might as well be told we need Putin to keep us honest and not land us in some violent frolic far from these shores. That might play well on X but has no relationship to the values that are widely espoused in this society.

The pressing issue is the one Finlay referenced in his column. Neutrality in this country was founded on de Valera's policy during the Second World War. At the time, it would have been anathema to allow the British reoccupy the south of the island as part of a war effort. The result was this State, albeit a poor, underdeveloped State, avoided the fight against fascism, which threatened freedom.



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