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If Sinn Fein wants to be viewed seriously, end the double-talk

As its popularity rises and its leadership of Ireland’s next government becomes more likely, how should we view Sinn Fein and its legacy from the Troubles? Some argue the Provisional IRA came into being because of crass political errors made in the 1960s and 1970s by the Stormont administration and British government. This view holds that, now that things have settled down in Northern Ireland, Sinn Fein will, like Fianna Fail in the 1920s and 1930s, evolve into a normal political party.

Others argue that Sinn Fein is not a normal political party. In 2014 Bobby Storey, an IRA member, publicly proclaimed that “we [the IRA] haven’t gone away, you know”. As recently as 2020 Drew Harris, the garda commissioner, said the opinion of the force was in line with the PSNI view that the IRA Provisional Army Council oversaw both the IRA and Sinn Fein.

It has long been accepted that historically the Provisional IRA called the shots in Sinn Fein. More recently Peadar Kirby, the Aontu leader and a former Sinn Fein TD, said his former party was centrally controlled and its TDs had zero influence, with key decisions made by unelected party officials.

It is also generally accepted that the republican movement is committed to advancing its political goals by exclusively peaceful means. The Provisional IRA has been quiet for years. Martin McGuinness co-led a Stormont administration with the Rev Ian Paisley. Leading Sinn Fein members even attended the coronation of King Charles. A return to the outright conflict of the Troubles is hard to imagine.

But one feature of today’s Sinn Fein that gives little cause for comfort is its inability to be consistent as a political party. The Irish War of Independence lasted less than three years. The Troubles lasted three decades. The corrosive effect of war propaganda lasted far longer and has set bad habits much deeper than a century ago.

Consider three recent incidents. In the past fortnight Mary Lou McDonald, Sinn Fein’s leader, has made the understandable call that the Irish government should use all its diplomatic and political options to achieve a ceasefire in Gaza. The problem is that her party has also called for the Israeli ambassador Dana Erlich to be expelled. How could Ireland advance political options if its diplomatic relations with Israel were severed? What effect would Erlich’s expulsion have on the fates of the 40 Irish passport-holders in Gaza whose safe exit the Irish government is trying to organise?

Another example of mixed messages in Sinn Fein is its stance on housing. Policy in this area is the government’s greatest failure. It is a key factor drawing younger voters to Sinn Fein. But last week Michael Healy-Rae, the independent Kerry TD, branded the position of Aengus Ó Snodagh, a Sinn Fein TD, as “outrageous and hypocritical” for objecting to plans for more than 200 social and affordable homes as they could cast a shadow over neighbouring council houses. Healy-Rae said: “Send those houses down to Kerry ... We do not care whose house they shadow once there is a roof over people’s heads.”

Clause five of Sinn Fein’s Rights for All document proclaims that “there shall be freedom of the press and other media”. Yet last week Chris Andrews, a Sinn Fein TD, lodged defamation proceedings in the High Court against The Irish Times and one of its reporters over an article concerning the party’s response to the Hamas attack on Israel. Andrews like every citizen has the right to defend his good name, but his pursuit of the journalist personally and the failure to bring his complaint to the Press Council deserves the kind of criticism levelled by the taoiseach in the Dail last week, who described this approach as not just wrong but frightening.

Only an end to this kind of double-talk by Sinn Fein will allow it to become not just a normal political party but a credible one in this country.

Age concern as Biden does worse in polls than his party

As President Biden blows out the candles on his 81st birthday cake later this month, he can reflect on both good and bad news. The good news is the Democratic Party has done far better in off-year elections than might have been expected: it has seized control of the Virginia state legislature and its governor kept his seat in Kentucky. In Republican-controlled Ohio, meanwhile, there was a resounding vote in support of abortion rights, an issue on which the Democrats appear increasingly to own the public mood.

The bad news is more specific to him: Biden’s personal polling is terrible. A recent CNN poll put Donald Trump, the Republican frontrunner, ahead of Biden at 49 per cent to 45 per cent in a head-to-head contest. When judging who was “an effective world leader”, Biden trailed 12 points behind Trump. Most worryingly, support is ebbing from the very groups that helped to put him in the White House, in particular Latino voters, black male voters and those aged 18-34.

Central to voters’ concerns, it seems, is the question of Biden’s advanced age: only 25 per cent thought he had sufficient stamina to continue serving as president. Were he to win a second term, Mr Biden would be 82 upon taking office and 86 when his term ended. In a normally active 80-year-old, fleeting cognitive confusion may be unremarkable, nor does it necessarily preclude many forms of work. But the role of US president is extraordinarily demanding, physically and mentally, and is played out under a relentless global spotlight. Charting the progress of Biden’s physical stumbles and verbal slips is now an agonising media sport: in the past cou-

ple of years he has, variously, mixed up Ukrainian and Iranian, Cambodia and Colombia, and read out teleprompter instructions along with his speech.

The danger for Democrats is that Biden’s “viral moments” on the looming campaign trail may increasingly obscure his achievements in office, from his infrastructure bill to US backing for Ukraine. This seems partly unfair. Thanks to the ubiquity of social media, Biden is more heavily scrutinised than his 20th-century predecessors. There is also the puzzle of why Trump seems less vulnerable to judgments of incapacity: at 77 he is scarcely younger than Biden, is in the thick of a civil fraud trial, and has a long history of making bizarre and intemperate remarks. When in office, he too attracted speculation about his health when he walked haltingly down a ramp at the US Military Academy at West Point, and needed both hands to drink from a glass. He snubbed his party’s third primary debate in Miami, in which his rival Republican candidates for the presidency crossed swords: Vivek Ramaswamy dubbed President Zelensky of Ukraine a “Nazi”, while Nikki Haley called Ramaswamy “scum”. Little of it spoke well of the wider party culture.

In the months to come Democrats face a tough decision: whether to rally behind an unpopular Biden, or take a gamble on a younger, more energetic candidate. Either way, the stakes could not be higher. With war in Ukraine and the Middle East, and China eyeing Taiwan, the confident, coherent projection of US power has rarely been more vital. If that should falter, the consequences could reach far beyond the White House.

Drinking, pickling, plucking

Irish women are among the world’s worst binge-drinkers, according to a study published last week, with one in five reporting that they had consumed more than six units of alcohol at a single sitting within the past month. The results of the OECD study are once again being attributed to the “wine o’clock” culture that appears to affect only women, despite the fact that almost a third of Irish men also reported a binge-drinking bout in the same period.

However, there may be help at hand for those who fear they are regularly straying

into problem-drinking territory. Scientists in California have found that a smartphone app could measure sobriety by asking users to recite tongue-twisters. In future, they suggest, the app could be used in cars to shut down the vehicle if the driver cannot identify the locus of Peter Piper’s peck of pickled pepper.

In the meantime there may be many a punter grateful for an app that stops late-night texts to exes unless the user can clearly state when, exactly, the pheasant pluckers will come.

Brenda Power
Legal system prolongs
Murphy family’s pain



Lack of minimum sentences in murder cases adds to trauma for bereaved

It is difficult to recall a crime which agonised the country with such a pungent blend of shock, fear and anger as the murder of Ashling Murphy. In the immediate aftermath of the 23-year-old woman’s brutal slaying in January last year, social media was aflame with false rumours of a link between the young teacher and her killer.

He had known her from her position as a local school teacher, according to the most popular theory; she had made a complaint about him to the authorities; she might have cost him his home and his generous benefits, and so he had lain in wait as she set off for a run. None of it was true.

It is a natural human instinct to seek to make sense of something that is shockingly senseless. There had to be a motive, there had to be a grudge, there had to be a reason, because the alternative was unthinkable. Hence the fear. There was a certain amount of reassurance in the notion that Murphy was targeted for a reason, however deranged, because without a reason then no woman was safe.

As time passed, and more details emerged, the rumours of a connection lost credence and the only remaining motive was the most disturbing of all: there was none. She was stabbed to death just because she was a woman, out for a run, and a man decided to kill her. As the gender wars raged all last year, and “woke” commentators heaped scorn on the notion that women still need safe, single-sex spaces, it was difficult not to call to mind Margaret Atwood’s caustic observation of one immutable biological difference: “Men are afraid women will laugh at them. Women are afraid men will kill them.”

After Jozef Puska was arrested and charged, a palpable current of anger surged through the nation. Some of the more toxic, and unfair, comments on social media centred on his immigrant status, while some of the more understandable concerned the jobless father of five’s cushy circumstances.

Earlier this year, the government floated a controversial plan to review disability payments on the basis of capability assessment, and Puska certainly presents a strong argument for such a measure.

His trial heard that Puska, of Roma gypsy descent from a remote Slovakian village, has been on disability benefits since his arrival, with his wife and children, in 2013. He lived in a five-bed house in a pleasant cul-de-sac outside Tullamore, the rent largely funded by housing assistance payments. He has never done a day’s work while in Ireland, the court heard, because a slipped disc in his back has prevented him from seeking employment on building sites.

It did not, however, prevent him from cycling idly around the town of Tullamore on

● The American bully dog, according to a US breeders’ website, is available in sizes to suit all needs and pockets. The bully, a recent cross between pit bulls and Staffordshire terriers, comes in pocket, standard, classic and XL – much like firearms. Indeed the description of the dogs as “imposing”, “friendly”, “loyal” and “protective” is strikingly similar to language used on Deguns.net, “America’s largest gun store”, about an AK-47: “reliable”, “powerful”, “excellent” and “ideal for hunting”.

In Waterford last month two women had to go to hospital after an attack by an obviously friendly bully XL. Three days later a Wexford woman was attacked by a bully XL at a home in Enniscorthy, the same town where nine-year-old Alejandro Mizsan had his face ripped to pieces by a bully XL last year. After fatal attacks in the UK, the breed will be banned in Britain from February. While no dog breeds are banned in Ireland it was announced last week that bully XLs will be added to the list of restricted breeds in the new year.

Bullies are still being openly advertised for sale online here, however, and a litter of three bully XL pups was recently available for €2,000. Any restrictions are unlikely to bother those who acquire them. According to one unnamed breeder, “they have become a status symbol for thugs”.

Sinead Hughes, a “positive reinforcement trainer”, argues that the dogs have a negative reputation because their owners beat and maltreat them to make them aggressive. That though can be true of any dog, except a thug of a beast like a bully XL will do far more harm when it is deliberately made savage.

“Proper socialisation and training,” the dogs website cautions mildly, “are essential to ensure that American bullies grow up to be well behaved and well-adjusted pets.” And you can totally rely on the sort of people who buy dogs called bully XLs to make sure they are properly trained. Also guns don’t kill people, people kill people.

“Puska’s contempt for this country was evident at his trial

Hadley Freeman
Love Actually: one thing
we really should cancel



Richard Curtis’s nadir is turning 20. How has it become a festive classic?

By now, pretty much all pop culture from the (aptly named) Noughties has been retrospectively denounced: the sitcoms were too white, the female celebrities were treated awfully, and let’s not even get started on the TV presenters. But there is one relic that has remained impervious to cancel culture. *Love Actually* turns 20 this week, and it is the one product of that time whose reputation has grown with age.

Back when it was released, *Love Actually* was generally seen as fine, if not a patch on Richard Curtis and Hugh Grant’s earlier (much funnier) films, *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and *Notting Hill*. Since then it has become a bona fide Christmas film, overtaking other (far superior) ones such as *Die Hard*. It is now widely seen as up there with the heretofore unassailable king of Christmas films, *It’s a Wonderful Life*. When I was still living in the US a decade ago, I heard that one TV channel showed *Love Actually* on a loop for the entire Christmas week. Rumours that this is why America then went collectively insane and soon afterwards elected a reality TV star as president are still being investigated.

It shouldn’t be like this because, unlike the too-white sitcoms and dodgy TV presenters, *Love Actually* was, even to its unenlightened troglodytes in 2003, obviously a wrong ‘un. At The Times and The Sunday Times Cheltenham Literary Festival last month Curtis conceded some regrets, mainly that it suffered from a lack of diversity and that the frequent jokes about Martine McCutcheon – who plays a tea lady in 10 Downing Street – being fat “aren’t any longer funny”. Yet that isn’t because people are now more sensitive about fat jokes – although they are – but because McCutcheon wasn’t fat in the first place, so the jokes about her thighs were never funny, just weird.

But then, nothing in *Love Actually* ever made sense; after all, the film opens with Grant musing: “Whenever I feel gloomy about the state of the world, I think about the arrivals gate at Heathrow.” Record scratch! Sorry, I’m gonna have to stop you there, Hugh: to cheer yourself up, you think about people with long-haul-flight-induced bad breath searching in vain for their lost luggage and a minicab driver who went to the wrong terminal? Because that is what every sane person associates with that nightmarish hellhole. But Grant, ie Curtis, sees Heathrow as proof that “love actually is all around”. If, perhaps, not your luggage, which is now en route to Laos.

As you might have gathered, I am not a fan of *Love Actually*, and not due to any intellectual snobbery. On the contrary, I am American (therefore a sucker for Curtis’s Oxbridge version of Englishness) and Jewish (Jews love Christmas movies, and that’s a scientific fact). *Love Actually* should be so far up my boulevard that I live in it. But I don’t, because it is a film in which none of the plotlines work, which is almost impressive, given there are eight. Plus, it’s a rom-com in which “love” is depicted as a powerful man (Grant playing the PM, Alan Rickman playing a boss of a generic trendy company, Colin Firth playing Colin Firth) sleazing over a woman who works for him

“In this film, sexual harassment and stalking pass for love

January 12, 2022, armed with a knife, stalking lone women, unburdened by an actual job. His bad back did not prevent him attacking a fit young woman taking exercise along a canal bank. It did not prevent him pinning her down, as she fought him with all her strength, and slashing her neck 11 times. One of his first well-aimed lunges severed his victim’s voice box so she was unable to cry for help when some passers-by came upon the attack. His bad back did not stop him twisting his spine, as he crouched over Murphy, holding her down as he turned to snarl at the women who tried to intervene, and ordering them, through “gritted teeth” to “get away”. He argued that he was simply crying out in pain after “pulling his leg” on briars while trying to help Murphy. I think we know whose leg was being pulled.

The fact that Puska never bothered to learn English in his ten years here – he couldn’t even utter the words “not guilty” at his arraignment without the aid of a state-funded interpreter – suggests that his sole intent was to be a parasite from the day he arrived. And his utter contempt for this country and its generosity, quite aside from his continued torture of the Murphy family, was evident in his approach to the murder trial.

Puska was, naturally, on free legal aid so the choice of pleading innocent, and putting his victim’s family through the ordeal of a trial, was a totally free gamble. Since judges have no discretion in a murder conviction, and Puska was facing a “life sentence” either way, it was well worth his while to run even that most ludicrous defence, described by the trial judge as “nonsense”. In the UK, judges can hand down whole-life tariffs, as imposed on the baby-killer Lucy Letby. And in Australia, new laws mean the murderer of Irish woman Jill Meagher may never be eligible for parole, or at least not before 2065.

In 2013, the Law Reform Commission recommended that judges should be able to set minimum terms in murder cases. Helen McEntee’s justice plan last year proposed discretionary minimum terms of 30 years or longer for the most “heinous” murders, but that appears to have slipped down her list of priorities behind hate-speech legislation. And so, when he is sentenced to the mandatory “life” term this week, Puska will still be entitled to apply for parole in 12 years’ time.

In the meantime, the taxpayer will fund his inevitable appeal, prolonging the anguish for the Murphy family for years. By the time that’s resolved, they’ll be hearing the first rumblings of his parole application. Yet a simple change in the law, when it was first promised, would have spared that unfortunate family more trauma. All the shock, all the fear but, especially, all that anger remains entirely justified. brenda.power@sunday-times.ie

(respectively, the tea lady, his secretary and his cleaning lady who doesn’t speak English).

Or perhaps you prefer the touching love story in which a man (Andrew Lincoln) secretly films his best friend’s wife (Keira Knightley), and when she finds out, he murders her, skins her and wears her as a costume – sorry, I mean, she thinks it’s sweet and kisses him. Incidentally, Knightley was 18 – 18! – when the film came out, while Lincoln was 30, just in case that storyline wasn’t sufficiently creepy.

As for Kris Marshall shacking up with three hot US women as “American girls seriously dig a cute British accent”, well, let’s just say wars have started over lesser insults, Curtis.

But arguing with *Love Actually* is like Grampa Simpson shaking his fist at the clouds. While plenty of other (better) films have been deemed “problematic”, *Love Actually* merrily sails on, even though it was agreed in the MeToo era that workplace sexual harassment and stalking are bad. And this causes a conflict for me, because while I think cancelling pop culture from the past for not adhering to today’s attitudes is stupid, on the other hand I wish *Love Actually* would be buried at sea.

Why has *Love Actually* avoided cancellation? Two reasons, I think: first, it’s such a deranged film that it evades any kind of criticism, like a hyperactive toddler in a school nativity play. No one’s going to complain about lack of acting talent there, are they? Second, the generation that generally does the cancelling (millennials) has such fond childhood memories of this film that it has given it a light pass. They’ll tut at the fat jokes but they won’t kill the film, just as they’ll tell off their parents for using dated terminology but won’t disown them.

Silly millennials, says this Gen X-er. Thank heavens I’m more mature and therefore prefer *The Muppet Christmas Carol*.