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ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

VOICES

Surrealing in the Years RTÉ's existential crisis has united the nation like little else

A sort of Italia '90 for poor corporate governance.

25.0k 49 Jul 1st 2023, 9:00 AM



WHEN IT COMES to wrapping up the news, Billy Joel's We Didn't Start The Fire is something of a benchmark.

Fall Out Boy released an **updated version** of Mr Joel's beloved track this week, featuring such eye-widening gems as "Shinzo Abe blown away," the juxtaposing of SpongeBob with the capture of the Golden State Killer, and the apparently rhetorical question "World Trade, second plane/ What else do I have to say?"

They also wanted so desperately to shoehorn in the mention of John Bobbitt – the man whose penis was cut off by his wife Lorena in 1993 – that they say his name backwards to make it fit the rhyme scheme.

Obviously the song is an abomination, but as a man who is also tasked weekly with cramming too much news into too tight a space while making pop culture references which are at best vaguely amusing and at worst deeply insensitive in the context of human tragedy, I can sympathise.

I can sympathise because a lot happened this week. More specifically, a lot of one particular thing happened.

In the wake of the RTÉ secret payment scandal, several of the national broadcaster's executives were brought before two separate Oireachtas committees to answer questions as to how and why Ryan Tubridy was paid a tremendous amount of money that was never disclosed.

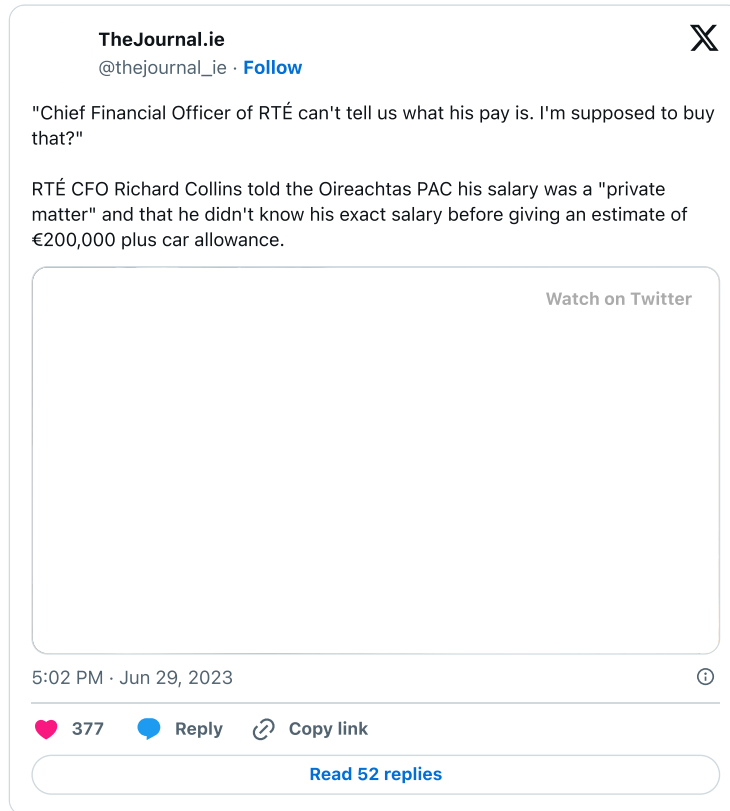
Quizzed over a combined eight hours on the culture that exists in RTÉ, it became apparent that nobody present would be taking responsibility for the scandal. The official RTÉ executive board line is that recently resigned Director General Dee Forbes is the only one who knew everything about the payments, and she did not attend the committees, citing health reasons.

Tubridy and his agent Noel Kelly may now be called before the Oireachtas committees, though it is possible that they will decline the invitation.

The committees have nevertheless been almost shockingly watchable, morbidly entertaining, and a grand unifying experience for almost all Irish people regardless of political persuasion. A sort of Italia '90, but for poor corporate governance.

One such example was the minute-long performance by Chief Financial Officer Richard Collins as he hesitated on giving his salary, before saying he didn't know it "off the top of his head". Eventually he gave an answer of "in-and-around €200,000" plus a car allowance of €25,000.

The Chief Financial Officer of RTÉ not knowing his exact salary is a beautiful new chapter in the long history of jaw-dropping things said by rich Irish people about their money.



It hearkened back to another wonderful Oireachtas committee moment when the treasurer of the FAI confusedly stated that there was just one FAI bank account (there were 24), and the well-known story of Finance Minister Bertie Ahern operating without a bank account. At this point such things are an Irish tradition, and it warms the heart to see it upheld among the upper echelons of the national broadcaster.

Director of Commercial Geraldine O'Leary was quizzed on her use of the barter account, which included a trip (with clients) to the 2019 Rugby World Cup in Japan. Economic correspondent and elected board member Robert Shortt painted a picture of a staff-at-large that sees no such benefits, joking that the "company car" for most employees was the "RTÉ Guide".

Referring to two €75,000 payments to NK Management which were labelled as "consultancy fees" on invoices, Collins admitted that: "My own opinion is, maybe, the taxpayer was defrauded".

Taoiseach Leo Varadkar has since said he **cannot rule out** that some of the payments made through the RTÉ barter account may have been "on the wrong side of the law". RTÉ have received legal advice saying that there was no fraud in relation to Tubridy's payment.

All this against a backdrop of regular staff protesting pay and working conditions at RTÉ, while the top earners – the so-called talent – revealed their pay on-air.

The incoming Late Late Show host Patrick Kielty magnanimously agreed to wave €50,000 expense account on top of his €250,000 base salary, and has asked RTÉ to "carbon offset" the 180 flights he will take between London and Dublin over the course of his contract. Presumably RTÉ will be able to find space in their budget for some seeds and a watering can.

As of this weekend, the story is far from over. The answers proffered across the two Oireachtas sessions appear to have been insufficient for the TDs and Senators present, insufficient for the roughly 1,800 ordinary staff at RTÉ, **insufficient for advertisers**, and insufficient for the public.

Nobody of note – literally nobody! – has come to the defence of RTÉ management. And if nobody wants to forgive you over one thing you've done wrong, the chances are that their problem with you runs significantly deeper.

RTÉ now finds itself in nothing short of an existential crisis. The national broadcaster – a vital pillar of Irish life and home to hundreds of good workers, researchers, journalists, and media technicians – faces an omnidirectional discord that promises to drag into next week and beyond.

RTÉ's wasn't the only financial scandal that came before the Public Accounts Committee this week, but I am no Billy Joel. If you can compose a song that puts the "grave financial matter" raised by the Irish Horseracing Regulatory Board alongside **the sentencing of Paul Hyde** for making false or misleading declarations of interest to An Bord Pleanála then... bravo.

For now you'll have to make do with imagining me being tackled off the stage as I try to finish the line "Presenter pay! Tubs away! What else do I have to—?"

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ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

CORONATION

The mind-shattering boredom and bemusement of watching a man be crowned king

Attending a celebration of the monarchy simply makes it more incomprehensible.

80.9k 64 May 6th 2023, 3:19 PM



Carl Kinsella reports from London

GIVEN THE SHEER scale of the attendance, I expected the Hyde Park coronation fanzone to be abuzz with excitement.

On the way in, it seemed to me an unholy throng of people. It felt like a capacity Croke Park crowd. Lined with food trucks, people picnicking despite the rain, and a palpable sense of dehydration, the set-up was little different to a music festival.

Only there was no music. No singing. No buzz of any kind. Nobody was paying any attention to the big screen – on which the entire ceremony would be broadcast – while it showed the eight living Prime Ministers filing into the Westminster Abbey.

Prime Ministers of Canada and Australia were shown similar disinterest. Instead of doing any journalism I found myself writing chants for the ignored world leaders (*My lover's got no money, he's got his Albanese*).

Then: Prince Andrew. **Dry as a bone.** I braced myself. Surely. Surely now the crowd would react. There are simply so many things one could say, or scream, or chant about this man. There was nothing. Maybe it was up to me. Maybe they're just waiting for a leader. Maybe they'd regard me as a hero. I thought better of it.

The announcer kept it to one line: "A rare public appearance for the Duke of York." *Indeed.*



ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Even the arrival of Prince Harry, a now much-maligned figure for his choice to publicly criticise his family, was completely ignored.

I thought hard about how an enormous Irish crowd would react in a situation like this. Gathered tens of thousands strong, with access to beer, watching divisive public figures in fancy dress on a big screen.

I believe it would be messy, it would be funny. It would be, for want of a better word, mad. This was none of those things.

The first cheers – cheers which I would describe as respectful, or polite – were for the king's golden chariot as it began its journey from Buckingham Palace, and for the arrival of William and Kate. There was also a crowd-wide rendition of God Save The King that briefly triggered my fight or flight response, but soon that, too, was over without much fuss.

The ceremony began, and any illusions I'd been under that the British would be watching in wonderment, with rapt attention, or tears in their eyes, were snuffed out for good. This was mass, plain and simple. I was at mass. English mass, outside, in the rain.

By 22 minutes in, I was praying for Just Stop Oil to storm the abbey and throw soup over the orb. Please, God, just let them soup the orb.

Having failed to obtain a programme, I didn't know which parts of the ceremony would be best for me to skip out on and go have a wander. I chose my moments carefully. When the third person started repeating the spiel about "paying homage" I decided I was probably safe to explore.

I walked from the very front of the crowd to the back, standing in different spots and striking up very few conversations. I asked one woman, probably without the necessary journalistic tact, why she liked the monarchy so much. My tone must not have been great, because her immediate reply was "The best strategy is: if you don't have anything nice to say, best not to say anything at all".

While Twitter was excited by all sorts of things – Penny Mordaunt holding a big sword, Charles reading one of his oaths off a card, Charles getting stripped off and oiled to the Champions League music – the atmosphere in Hyde Park remained muted. Pleased.

Part of me had hoped the crowd would cheer the orb in the same way the world fell in love with the little car that drove the ball out onto the pitch during Euro 2020. No such luck. Maybe if they'd had the little car bring him the orb.



ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Less than an outpouring of national pride, it seemed more so that this was just something for people to do of a Saturday morning. A reason to come together and (I use this term loosely) celebrate.

It was impossible not to be struck by what society could accomplish if it came together for something useful, or productive, in the name of pretty much anything other than a man riding through town in a golden chariot that he won in a lottery of birth.

It's not a very profound sentiment, but it was a hard one to ignore. Between the plastic union jacks bearing the logo of The Sun, a small girl in a Camilla Parker Bowles mask that I will see in my nightmares until the day I die, and the utter lack of atmosphere, I couldn't help but wonder what this was all for. Why anybody would be content for society to be arranged this way and not some other way.

Before the ceremony had even begun, **protestors were arrested** for 'conspiracy to cause public nuisance'. They hadn't even started protesting yet. This was in keeping with the Metropolitan Police's strange midweek announcement that their 'tolerance for any disruption, whether through protest or otherwise' would be 'low.'

That background might provide something of a context for the strange atmosphere in Hyde Park today. It is hard, consciously or otherwise, to be enthusiastic about something you have no say in. How much can you truly love a monarch?

Maybe it's a cultural quirk that, as an Irishman, is simply beyond my grasp. On today's evidence, I am fine with that.

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SASKO LAZAROV

GARTH BROOKS

Does Garth Brooks really love us? An hour with the man shines a light on our mutual weirdness

Brooks is a consummate showman who has identified something that Ireland needs.

44.6k 22 Sep 9th 2022, 8:21 AM



SO WHY DID Garth Brooks care so much about five cancelled gigs in GAA Headquarters?

Since his career kicked off in the late 1980s, Brooks has sold 157 million albums. He is the first and only artist in history to receive nine RIAA Diamond Awards. You can pick up a repetitive strain injury by scrolling the Wikipedia page detailing his various awards.

By rights, when his 2014 gigs were shut down, Brooks should not have been bothered. It shouldn't have even registered with him. Yet, here he is, eight years later, still talking about it, and finally on the eve of exorcising that strange demon once and for all.

On Thursday afternoon, Brooks made a final media appearance ahead of his five-gig slate at Croke Park, for which he has sold out 410,000 tickets with ease – a cumulative attendance that far outstrips the population of most Irish counties.

The atmosphere was unusual. Repeatedly Brooks was praised by reporters for how fit he looked. Many of his answers were greeted with applause. One young journalist was accompanied by his father and Brooks took care to shake both of their hands. His persona is the perfect inversion of the jaded rockstar stereotype.

“If there’s one word in their minds after the show, I want it to be ‘love.’ I want people to feel like they’ve seen love up on that stage,” he said.

It is alluring to take him at face value, ignore the millions of dollars that are there to be made, and embrace him as a man who cares about nothing more than giving his fans precisely what they want.

To that effect, he railed against musicians who insist on playing their new music when fans want to hear the classics. He gave committed answers to questions like “What advice can you give to up-and-coming artists?” and “Can you give a special message to the fans who can’t be there?” He’s so unpretentious that it’s almost pretentious, chewing on the softest of questions as though he’d been given a chance to expound on his philosophy for life, the universe and everything.

Throughout the press conference, which lasted over an hour, Brooks talked himself to the point of tears on several occasions and made repeated references to 2014, calling it “a debacle”, describing the Irish people as “victims” and ultimately putting the blame on “the powers that be”.



MARK STEDMAN

While journalists seated in the aisles made comments about how they could faint from the heat, Brooks paced indefatigably before them, giving eulogies to the late concert promoter Jim Aiken, telling us that he loves his wife Trisha Yearwood so much that he’d happily have taken her last name, and expressing the view that “no mortal” should have been able to sell out five nights at Croke Park, twice, eight years apart.

And let’s face it. Garth Brooks has immortalised himself.

Music firmly aside, Brooks has become an indelible fixture of modern Irish mythology. Even those who couldn’t hum a note of his work know well his significance.

What draws us to Brooks?

There has to be a non-musical explanation for how this has come to pass. Of course there does. Twice now, the man has sold out five nights at one of the biggest stadiums in Europe. This is not something he has replicated, or even sought to replicate, in any other country besides his own — and that’s despite

the inherent logistical difficulty in getting it done. No other artist has done it. No other artist has even tried. Surely, there is something at play here besides nearly half a million people just looking for a bop.

And yet, there are subtle giveaways that his investment in Ireland isn't all that personal. When asked if he'd be staying in Kerry, he said that he simply didn't know. He's not capable of reproducing names like Mairéad and Aileen, even after a few attempts. When asked if he has plans to eat or drink anywhere special, he demurs. The lack of any specific sentiment gives him a vaguely fictional quality, like the figment of an American an Irish person would invent if trying to describe an American.

But if we do accept that he is sincere, or at least concede that it doesn't matter much whether he is or not, Brooks cuts a compelling figure. "I've been waiting for this my whole life, and I decided to stop waiting. Tomorrow night," he says.

After all, when does anybody else take the time to seduce us like this?

Brooks' charisma and self-assuredness seems to put the Irish at ease with ourselves in a way that our own artists do not. In his rapt, hyper-eye-contact, televangelist sort of way, Brooks seems to have identified something in us that perhaps we are not aware of. A longing.

If there is some psycho-social explanation for Ireland's affinity with the Oklahoman, perhaps it is the lack of reciprocal love we share with our own superstars. After all, for well over a century now, some of our best known artists have been quick to leave our shores to pen their greatest works, make their magna opera and, in some cases, pay their income taxes. In turn, we tend to be a nation that snipes at our taller poppies, disliking them irrationally until they do something to vindicate us.

Brooks' own legend has allowed him to create the opposite relationship. That he's a man who'd rather walk away from an enormous payday than prioritise one night of ticket-holders over another. That he truly, deeply cares about his fans in a way that is almost selfless.

Whether or not he actually does care is oddly besides the point. This time, both he and his fans are going to get exactly what they want.

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