

It's time to be straight about gay rights

IFIRST met a Protestant when I was 12. My family had moved that year to a town where there were a number of them. There were rumoured to be a few in my hometown, as well, down in the "deep south", but nobody my age.

I still remember the name of that first Protestant. He was handy at football; he moved with a certain grace that was beyond me.

There was nothing extraordinary about him — he wasn't that good — but his name and appearance have stuck with me into middle age. The first few times I was in his company, I couldn't help staring at him. Would he betray his rogue origins? Would he, at some point, burst into tears, because he was beyond redemption, doomed outside the one, true Church? What would it be like for him, out there in the ether, while I was lying up in the hereafter?

Pretty soon, my curiosity morphed into sympathy, and pretty soon after that I forgot that he was different. We weren't friends and I didn't encounter him beyond the point where children disperse into their own groups.

But anytime I saw him around the town, or played football with him, I couldn't help remembering that he had been my first Protestant.

I met my first gay person when I was 19. It was in New York, in a house in Queens, full of Paddies and soaked in booze. Ireland on tour in the 1960s.

Charlie was from Meath, a little campy guy with spiky hair. He was very funny, except when he was drunk, and then he often descended into sadness. One night, when I came home from work, he was drinking in the kitchen and told me that he had an awful time growing up. I felt sorry for Charlie, but found it difficult to take him seriously.

I had no idea what he had been talking about, because I didn't know anybody who was really gay. Sure, there were one or two fellas in school who were described as "poofers", because they displayed feminine traits, but nobody believed that they got off with other boys. And then there were the girls who had no interest in making themselves attractive. Dykes.

That's the kind of country in which I grew up. It was intolerant of diversity, not as enthralled to the Church as previous generations, but enough to contaminate the minds of the children. Minds filled with much about the world outside the one true Church were to be pitied rather than hated, and how those of a minority sexual orientation had been corrupted, were now deviant and consequently were doomed. But, thankfully, like the snakes, they have largely been banished from the sacred isle.

Society as a whole, or at least most of it, bought into that warped narrative. In his book, *Occasions of Sin, Sex and Society in Modern Ireland*, Diarmaid Ferriter referenced the reporting of Nell McCafferty after a district court case, in September 1975, in



Minister for Health Leo Varadkar in RTÉ studios after he came out publicly on a radio show.
Picture: Maxipix/Julien Behal

which two men were brought to trial after a sexual encounter in a public toilet.

"What was illuminating was the manner in which the men were 'pathologised', represented as immature, recommended for medical treatment and publicly humiliated," Ferriter wrote. "A priest referred one of the defendants to a psychiatrist; the other was deemed to be suffering from depression. They were bound to keep the peace for a year, the judge commenting, 'it's a completely unnatural performance.'"

When that's the start you get, it takes a while for the spell to wear off. But, to the credit of this country and its citizens, the spell has lifted at an accelerating rate in recent decades. Intolerance of diversity has been driven underground.

Religious bigotry has, to a major extent in the Republic, disappeared. The Catholic Church has, to some extent, moved with the times. I don't think that children today have the same hang-ups that most of my generation had, even though the Church still maintains its grip on primary-school education.

The influx of immigrants over the last 15 years has opened up the country in a way that never would have been dreamed possible a generation ago. Some things do persist, though.

Last Sunday, Health Minister Leo Varadkar, who is regarded as extremely able, told a radio audience that he is not an equal citizen in his own country. This is not somebody from an ostensibly margi-

“The no campaign is scaremongering that a yes vote will impact adopted children

nalised community. He is one of the main lawmakers in the State. Yet, he does not enjoy the right to cement a loving union in marriage, simply because he is gay.

On Wednesday, the Government published the wording for the forthcoming referendum on same-sex marriage, and got cracking on another bill, on adoption rights. As with other referendums, the Government is playing catch-up already, and the dangers of it failing are very real.

Some people in the country disagree

with the proposal, and that's their prerogative. However, the basis on which the main plank of the no campaign is being run harks back to a time when the Catholic Church controlled the State. Most of those in the no campaign ride shotgun for the Church. I believe their objection is based on their religious beliefs.

Politically, they know that the Church, as a brand in social affairs, is pretty tarnished, despite the genuine contribution to social justice of some within the institution.

To run a campaign based on foisting religious beliefs onto a sceptical population would be as doomed as the Protestants of my youth. So, instead, they have resorted to fear and to concern for children. Their campaign is now largely built around scaremongering that a yes vote will have a negative impact on adopted children, denying them the right to a mother and to a father. This, despite the fact that one in four children in this State is currently

raised outside the traditional nuclear family.

Such a campaign also fails to acknowledge that adoption dictates that the child not be raised by his or her biological parents.

All of the available evidence suggests that other matters, such as the quality of the relationship between parents, mental health, addiction, and socio-economics determine a child's upbringing.

But, then, generating fear of the unknown, rather than producing evidence, is a well-worn tactic of those determined to resist the force of change. Back in the day, they wouldn't have had that problem. The Church would have merely issued an edict and the population would have complied, in both letter and spirit.

Now, it is necessary to go down a different route, one that is laced with cynicism. If the changes of recent decades are to be properly acknowledged, the very least that the country deserves is an honest debate,

based on genuinely held beliefs, rather than a dishonest tactic designed to spread fear.

Instead of persuade through argument, Don't hold your breath.

The no campaign is largely built around scaremongering.



MICHAEL CLIFFORD

There are no winners in the farce that is Irish politics

AH, POLITICIANS. Aren't they just wonderful? The awards season is getting into full swing, what with the nominations for the Oscars, Grammys, and top soaps, so isn't it time we celebrated our very own Dáil?

"Best actor in a leading role" would, obviously, go to Taoiseach Enda Kenny, for his sterling performance in *The Imitation Game*, in which he imitates a national leader when he is really just a mid-division football manager facing certain relegation.

He needs to remember that his once-impressive box-office appeal is waning, as critics have warned that his decidedly hammy performance in the Dáil, when he insisted garda commissioner Martin Callinan had "resigned" and had not been effectively sacked, may well come back to haunt him.

The Academy wanted to give Gerry Adams a lifetime achievement award, but the Sinn Féin member refused, stating that he was not, nor ever had been, a member of the Academy, even though he regularly speaks on their behalf, and shares the wider aims of the movement.

The "foreign drama award" would go to Leo Varadkar, as the health minister was busy sunning himself in Miami when the long-predicted trolley crisis exploded back home.

As the Oscars always attract desperate attention-seekers, the "wannabe of the year" award could only go to Lucinda Creighton, for her role in *The Wolf of Wall Street* (nothing, as she runs in front of every camera that has a working flash to push her alleged new party, which has everything, oh, apart from a name, anybody else of note (sorry Eddie Hobbs), or, indeed, any ideas at all.

The Oscar for "most touchingly brave performance of the year" has to go to Simon Conway for the heart-breaking outing of his bromance affections for Michael Martin, whom he has lovingly branded as "very competent".

The love that previously had not dared speak its name certainly broke the hearts of many Fine Gaelers, who, initially, hoped they had misheard the remark "very incompetent".



It's awards season, but the drama queens and preening wannabes in the make-believe world of the Dáil deserve no accolades, and, inevitably, the biggest losers will be the voters

Though not a re-imagining of *Brokeback Mountain*, the comments caused quite the stir, royally annoying current government partner, Leinster, allowing Fianna Fáil the glow of decontamination for taking the nation to the brink of bankruptcy, and hugely benefiting Sinn Féin, who now have enhanced legitimacy in portraying themselves as the only alternative to the austerity agenda of the triumphant of the establishment parties.

Speaking of which, the shiny little bald fellow — Oscar, not Michael Noonan — for "most unoriginal script" would go to the finance minister for ripping off Brian Lenihan's post-bail-out emergency agenda and presenting it as his own.



to the Republican leadership, for urging anyone with information about the whereabouts of all the paedophiles and rapists the IRA quietly shipped south across the border to go to the gardai with what they knew.

A cross between Judi Dench and Meryl Streep, with just a hint of the sauciness of Sarah Jessica Parker, Joan Burton is, of course, the grand dame of Irish political theatre.

After four consecutive victories as 'best actress in a supporting role' — when she won for acting-out support for Eamon Gilmore, when, in reality, she took every chance she could to stick the knife into him — La Burton is now up for 'best producer'.

Best producer of waffle, best producer of grand aspirations without substance, and best producer of dismal

opinion poll results have seen the initial Burton Bounce slump to the Joanie Jitters.

The award for 'achievement in tragic farce' is shared by dumped justice minister Alan Shatter and Martin Callinan, who, ahem, "resigned" as garda commissioner, and hero whist-leblower, Maurice McCabe: they all starred in *The Triangle of Disgust*, in which Callinan branded McCabe's actions "disgusting". Shatter backed up the top cop, leading to two of the three being swept into history, while the truth-seeking garda was vindicated in the final reel.

Mr Conway is a double award-winner, as his overtures to Mr Martin pave the way for taking the "worst remake trophy" in the form of the next trot-out for that franchise of very

diminishing returns, *The Hangover*.

The post-election opening scene sees the Fianna Fáil boys awake in the wreckage of mass destruction of their own making, as they try to piece together the chain of disastrous decisions that led them (and the country) to this very sorry state.

Why, they even have to deal with an angry (Celtic) tiger, which they lost control of, and which then turns on them in ferocious anger.

And, as everyone who saw the disappointing, unfunny sequels to the Hollywood version knows, it is just the same plot, with the same old cast, set a couple of years on.

While predictions can prove tricky, it's a safe bet Independent TD, Mattie McGrath, would walk away with 'best adaptation from a foreign language'.

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Lucinda Creighton has been nominated for 'wannabe of the year' for publicising her new political party.
Photo: Sam Boal/Photocall Ireland

The problem is not so much his accent, but the odd stream-of-consciousness exploding from his mouth, at scatter-gun speed, which makes observers wonder if they are, indeed, listening to the English language at all.

"Cameo of the year" must go to everyone's favourite, befuddled-looking tax cheat, Mick Wallace, for his role in *Vat Man Returns*.

The dark noir tells the story of how the Wexford TD remained unscathed, after revealing he knowingly lied to Revenue by providing under-valued Vat returns for two years when he was managing director of his construction company.

After Wallace's company reached a €2.1m settlement with the Revenue over the matter, the TD claimed he tax-dodged in order to try and save the company from going under, yet failed to explain how this tallied with him doubling the salary paid to himself and his son, from €148,141 to €280,000, in the year ending August, 2008.

And the loser is? You, the voter.

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The real crime is not arresting decline

THERE is no rural crime epidemic. There is no rural crime wave, sweeping across the country, driven by marauding thugs whose stock-in-trade is terror. These statements may, to some, appear self-evident, but to anybody engaging with the media over the last few months, they need to be spelt out in plain English. The impression conveyed by vested interests is that rural Ireland is going through an epidemic of burglaries, most of which are perpetrated by recidivist thieves terrorising home and farm owners. This is simply not the case.

There is certainly a huge amount of fear about crime across rural Ireland, but the basis for that fear is questionable. There is also a specific problem with burglaries, particularly of commercial and farm premises, in midland counties easily accessible by the motorway network. This problem has grown in recent years. For example, burglaries in Co. Offaly have increased by 67% in the last five years. The recent public meeting in Thurles, Co. Tipperary, which attracted a huge attendance and where the anger and testimony was vented, illustrated the high incidence of burglary from farms in particular.

That meeting followed the criminal conviction of a vicious gang who terrorised the Corcoran family in Tipperary two years ago. The family had been subjected to a terrifying ordeal, and the gang members received lengthy sentences. The family were extremely traumatised by what was a life-altering event, but the incident was highly unusual.

In August, John O'Donoghue of Doon, Co. Limerick died of a heart attack after discovering his house had been burgled. This was an extremely tragic incident and generated much anger. Again, however, it was not indicative of any trend at all.

The crime statistics from the CSO show that while burglary increased in the last five years — as would be expected in a recession — by 20% over the fifth of that increase occurred in the greater Dublin area. Outside the midland counties, with a few exceptions, there has been a relatively small increase in rural Ireland. Any violation of one's home is traumatic. Even when, as is the vast majority of cases, the thieves have come and gone before the crime is discovered. But those who live in Dublin, Cork and the other cities are far more likely to be targeted.

Human stories that have a huge impact on the public consciousness, and those that came to the fore in recent months understandably generated much sympathy and anger.

What resulted was a campaign by elements of the media, ably assisted by garda representative bodies fighting for more resources. This led to a response from Government, which culminated in last Monday's announcement of Operation Thor by Frances Fitzgerald.

Operation Thor, which includes deploying high-powered vehicles, motorway



patrols, and tackling the sale of stolen goods, is designed to tackle the specific issue affecting the midlands. Time will tell whether it is an appropriate response.

That is the positive outcome. The negative outcome is the campaign has generated huge fear. Up and down the country rural dwellers, many elderly or vulnerable, have slept with a lot less ease in recent weeks and months.

The only organisation to broach the possibility that things have been blown out of all proportion is Muintir Na Tíre, the group which set up the community alert scheme 30 years ago. Appearing before the Oireachtas Justice committee on Wednesday, they referenced the possibility that crime can be "overhyped".

"The fear of crime can be almost as harmful as the actual effects of crime," the group said in a statement.

Generating unwarranted fear is a major outcome from all the hype, but it is not the only one. Kicking up fear and anger about crime also provides an easily digestible distraction from the really serious issues blighting rural Ireland.

Rural Ireland is in long term decline principally due to economic forces. But is still keener here because of history, culture and the higher proportion of people who still live outside cities and towns.

This decline was masked for at least 15 years, firstly by the construction boom, and then by a recession. In a political culture that caters only for the short term,

“Rural Ireland is in long-term decline principally due to economic forces

precious little was done through policy to tackle the transforming landscape.

During recent years the Government's concentration on righting the economy relegated normal governing matters such as formulating a long-term vision for rural Ireland. Instead, we've had the piecemeal withdrawal of services, political knee-jerk reactions and the setting up of a task force to find out what's wrong. In the great tradition of these things the findings of the Commission for Economic

Development of Rural Areas has received a lukewarm response.

So, as the night of recession lifts, a cold dawn is emerging in rural Ireland. There is a general feeling of abandonment in many areas, rooted in the belief that the State is pulling out, retreating into the major towns and cities.

The outcry over the closure of garda stations is symptomatic of the prevailing sentiment. It's difficult to sustain the claim the closures have any impact on rural crime. On one hand we're told that organised gangs of thieves are behind burglaries, yet on the other we are to believe that they were heretofore put off by the presence of a single garda in a rural station for a few hours each afternoon.

For many the significance of the closures lies not in anything to do with crime, but the psychological impact of the latest example of the state's withdrawal. One more service gone, the shutters pulled down on one more vestige of a

Thomas Flynn was jailed for 12 years with three suspended at Clonmel Circuit court for breaking into the home of Mark and Emma Corcoran in November 2013. Picture: Liam Burke/Press 22

kindler, gentler time. One more reason to fear the future.

Across rural Ireland there are many individuals and organisations focussed on tackling the problems of economic decline but a national policy is required. That will be difficult, messy, and will require difficult decisions to be made in the short term in order to secure some security over the longer term. But that needs to be the focus if Rural Ireland is to have a future.

The alternative, retreating into victimhood, or hyping simple issues like crime, may temporarily satisfy frustration, but does little to address the real problems.

A few years back, we were told by other vested interests that the abandonment of rural Ireland was exemplified by changes in drink driving and fox hunting laws. This was spurious nonsense. This time around, it looks like the recent campaign will ensure that rural crime is a major election issue.

If so, the main event is being missed.

Rural Ireland has far bigger fish to fry. An organised and sustained concentration on arresting economic decline is what should be to the fore of any group wading through the muck to represent the interests of rural Ireland.



MICHAEL CLIFFORD

Keep a lid on it-Leo has turned into Dr Do-Little

END A KENNY sold us a five-point plan to become Taoiseach in 2011. Since taking power, he has been implementing a secret five-word plan on the health service: "Keep a lid on it."

This week that plan blew up in his face. People being forced to endure 29-hour stints on trolleys or chairs in Irish hospitals was nothing new. Trolley counts, strike ballots and opposition Dail theatrics are commonplace. We ignore them. Mr Kenny ignores them. He "Keeps a lid on it".

But it was the story of a 91-year-old with Parkinson's who spent 27 hours on a trolley in Tallaght Hospital, in an ordeal one crusading doctor described as an act of "torture", that meant we could no longer ignore the disgusting state of our Emergency Department.

We didn't have to look far for similar stories; we all have them in our own families and at least 30 patients a day are waiting 24-hours or more in grim conditions. However, it's the elderly left in such inhumane conditions that can't be explained away.

There is no cure for ageing and the problems it will bring us all. This 91-year-old didn't need a cure, he needed care. And this was when Ireland was found to be at its most careless.

The whistleblower is being attacked and this journalistic assault of Enda-blaming for the sake of it. But Mr Kenny is to blame. He didn't appear in posters promising to "End the scandal of ropey wireless at the Web Summit".

He promised to "End the scandal of patients on trolleys". As the longest serving deputy, Mr Kenny is the father of the Dail and has spent the majority of his career in opposition participating in the theatrics that shamed "Shame" the minister for health of the day.

Taking power with a huge majority in 2011 was Mr Kenny's chance to show he could do better but, in the four-and-a-half years since, he has issued more press releases about Rory McLroy and Graham McDowell's golfing successes than he has about the health service. The Taoiseach opens facilities and



This 91-year-old with Parkinson's didn't need a cure, he needed care. And this was when Ireland was found to be at its most careless. The whistleblower is being attacked... but it is Mr Kenny who is to blame

buildings at the drop of a hat but kept his eyes and ears closed on health matters when their urgency has been obvious. The removal of medical cards from vulnerable children had to become politically toxic after the *Irish Examiner* exposed it day after day before the Taoiseach and his circle of advisors did the right thing and abandoned the cruel policy. It was also political toxicity that led to Mr Kenny's biggest intervention in health in 2014 when he personally performed a doctor transplant. Dr Reilly was replaced with Dr Varadkar, and now "Keep A Lid On It-Leo" just shrugs his shoulders at every new calamity, says how awful it all is, and rolls his eyes in a "nothing to do with me, gov, I'm just the Health



Taoiseach Enda Kenny: promised to "end the scandal of patients on trolleys".

Picture Colin Keegan, Collins Dublin.

Minister" kind of way. And Dr Do-Little Mr Varadkar was opening up his old black bag of little lies over the latest outrage by insisting the 91-year old was "caught in the crossfire" in a conflict between emergency department staff and management at Tallaght Hospital. No, Mr Varadkar, he was not. He was caught in the chaos of your incompetent handling of the health service you have failed to get a grip on in the past 16 months. And to make things worse, Keep A Lid On It-Leo has now rounded on the whistleblower in a diversionary tactic to try and shift attention from the real story. Funny how Mr Varadkar only seems to champion whistle blowers when they damage the careers of rival min-

isters like Alan Shatter. Also, isn't it funny how Eamon Gilmore revealed he and his chief flunky started crying after Joan Burton unceremoniously tossed him out of Cabinet after leading the Labour Party to mid-term disaster, because he doesn't mention crying about medical cards being snatched from disabled children under his watch? Rather than feeding resources to where they are needed at the sharp end of the system, Gilmore and Burton bought in to a middle class tax bribe that sees healthy five-year-olds from wealthy families get free GP care while sick seven-year-olds from poorer backgrounds are left out in the cold. How Ms Burton must have believed she had gotten through the fright night of Halloween only to see Mr Gilmore

emerge from the political coffin she stuffed him into to come back and haunt her. Even British Labour's very own self-styled prince of darkness, Peter Mandelson, waited until after a tricky and sticky general election before rushing out his score-setting memoirs. But it seems Mr Gilmore could not show such decency and restraint and thoroughly shafts his successor ahead of a Dail showdown that was never going to turn out well for Labour. While there is little doubt that Joan does deserve being on the receiving end of his righteous anger, it would have served his more loyal colleagues better if he had managed to postpone the feud frenzy until the polling stations at least had closed. Revenge porn has become one of the

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More strolling bones than rolling stones

I'M standing in the middle of Croke Park, worried about Stevie Van Zandt's cholesterol. He's up there on the stage beside his old mucker, Bruce Springsteen. The only other time I saw Springsteen and the E Street Band in a stadium was 31 years ago at Wembley. It was the first time I was away from home, full of teenage angst and devoid of a clue as to the respective locations of my arse and elbow.

Rock 'n' roll was going to save me. Not necessarily Bruce and the band, but they were in the frame. Stevie was on stage that sunny July evening, a skinny little guy doing his thing at Bruce's right hand. Last week when I spotted him I couldn't help noticing that he had piled on the pounds. The guy is 65 years of age. My relationship with rock 'n' roll has transmogrified since I first set eyes on him. Teenage angst has been replaced by middle-aged dread. But what about Stevie?

When did he last get his cholesterol tested? He is obliged to play his guitar up there with Bruce for three and a half hours every night as if the pair of them had just finished their Leaving Certs and were jamming for fun. Doesn't he know that rock 'n' roll's promise of immortality has been exposed as a lie?

If Stevie is going to carry on with that, comporting himself like the Mafia boss don he played in *The Sopranos*, he'd want to get with the programme. Cut out the pizzas. Stevie. Stay within the weekly 10 units of alcohol healthy limit. Get the full NCT from your local medical centre. Don't mess around as if you still believe that rock 'n' roll is going to let you live forever.

The longevity of a Bruce Springsteen concert allows time for little pockets of reflection on where it all went wrong. Back in the day when I saw Bruce at Wembley, rock 'n' roll was full of promise. We were never going to get old. Things would be different, our parents would be freed from the shackles that had turned our parents into bores.

We were never going to settle down. There would be no of that going-to-live mullarky. No sir, work would be an added extra, like maybe cleaning windows with Van, or even choppin' wood for a few quid here and there to survive before getting back onto the open road, where the wind blows through your hair, and you never go home. We were going to live forever, having been born to run, born to be wild, born just yesterday. Above all, we were never going to turn into our parents.

Then we turned into our parents. The chain of years did for the dream. We grew up, some of us skinnier than others, and finally realised that it didn't matter what nobody says, but in the end rock 'n' roll's promise of immortality was a great deception.

This came home to me last week in Croke when I should have been fully engaged in the band belting out 'Hungry Heart', which kicks off with the line:



"I got a wife and kids in Baltimore. Jack. I went out for a ride and I never came back." At Wembley all those years ago that line spoke to me of the open road, the search for a truth beyond the mundane, the loner looking for love in all the wrong places, the essence of rock 'n' roll.

At the Croke gig, I had a different perspective. Who the hell did this character think he was? Taking off in that irresponsible manner, actually deserting his family as if he had a right to do a runner. Who was going to pay the mortgage while he was off finding himself? Who would support the kids? What about the cost of their after-school activities? Who would pay for the wife's therapy? The fella needs a serious boot up the rear end if he thinks he's going to get away with that.

Far worse than my own internal wrestling was the decrepit state of rock 'n' roll as glimpsed from the hallowed turf last week. Did you know that it is now illegal to smoke cigarettes at an open air concert? One man who was ahead of me in the queue on the way in was told to stub it out. Inside, a few smokers were furtively puffing away, as if they were inhaling pot rather than tobacco. Oh mercy. If there is a smoking exemption for prisons, then is

"We were going to live forever, born to be wil... then we turned into our parents"

there should be one for rock 'n' roll, which has its own constituency of outlaws. That was nothing though compared to the scourge of the natterers. As it looked a bit too dangerous to venture to the front,

the wife and I hung back about halfway down. That meant I got a crick in my neck straining to see over the heads of the throngs between me and Bruce, but at least an ambulance wouldn't be required.

Anyway, all around us, while the band was playing, people were talking incessantly, as if they were in a pub, or gathered for a toastmasters convention. They wouldn't shut up, going on and on, each trying to out-shout the other about how great a gig this was to see. To see? No chance they might try to listen?

I was in a state by the time a text pinged through from my friend who was up in the stands. "What a show!" he texted. "Unbelievable," I pinged back. While I was at it I had a quick peek at Twitter just to see

POUNGING IT OUT: Bruce Springsteen delivering his set at Croke Park last weekend. Time stands still for no man they say, but this guy never stands still.

Picture: Stephen Collins

what was going on in the world since the gig had started.

There was worse to come. Nothing defines the antithesis of rock 'n' roll like the selfie. They were all at it, there at a concert to hear music, even the music that had for most of them long ago died, and all they wanted to do was take photos of themselves.

These photos aren't even for posterity, but to be sent out to all their friends to show them how they are busy being fun people, having a good time, projecting a smiley face to tell everyone they were present at the gig, seeing if not hearing it. Then the nail in the coffin. My wife, not somebody usually given to lightly nonsense, beckoned me to her side and I complied before I copped what she was at. She held her phone up in front of us as if it was a device to protect from the fleeting years.

This was my chance. I could rebel. I could say 'no, put me in the doghouse if you must, but I will not submit to this outrage at a rock 'n' roll concert'. I could have fled to the highway, jammed with broken heroes.

But I was tired and defeated. I smiled a dead smile and appended to my 19-year-old self for absolution.



MICHAEL CLIFFORD

Reform of our prison system requires bold steps

IT'S almost comical now to think that Kilmainham Gaol — voted Ireland's top landmark by TripAdvisor for the fourth year in a row — was once considered a dream disciplinary machine that could "grind rogues honest".

All you had to do was put hardened criminals in at one end of this vast correctional cage, ensure they were separated, silenced and supervised at all times, then watch as they emerged as "ground honest" to re-emerge upstanding citizens at the other end.

The prison building itself was designed to transform deviant behaviour into socially acceptable behaviour. It was a "machine to grind rogues honest", as Jeremy Bentham put it when he developed the panopticon, or all-seeing prison, in 1789. At the time, his invention was hailed not only as an innovation in prison architecture but as an event of the human mind.

If prisoners knew they were being watched, or might be watched at any time, then their behaviour would improve. Or so went the thinking, though as we know in this world with 'eyes' at every street corner that is patently not the case.

Back in 1861, though, the east wing at Kilmainham jail was intended to ensure that those held captive behind it were always visible. A strip of carpet was even laid along the landings so that 19th-century jailers could creep up and peer into cells through a spy-hole on the door, nicknamed the "eye that never sleeps".

The building's fascinating social history has been obscured in the recent commemoration of the 1916 leaders who spent their last days in this "city of cells, a place where the sun shined on a piercing wall", as Sean O'Casey once described it, but it's worth recalling now, if only to remind us of how little progress we've made.

If 19th-century architects used space to enclose, separate and control, modern architects have been more inclined to favour green areas, openness and integration.

Though, it's interesting to see that prison officers — the people on the ground — are once again calling for the

CLODAGH FINN



With 62% of our former prisoners re-offending within three years of release it's obvious that our prison system is an utter failure, but a new Troubled Families Programme in the UK may offer an alternative way forward

separation of prisoners to tackle the issue of gangs in the system expected of them. High recidivism rates (62% of prisoners will reoffend in three years) are proof that prisons do not rehabilitate, though many are happy that they simply keep the wrongdoers off the street.

What is particularly striking when you compare the prison of yesterday, with its high ideals, and its modern equivalent is that the profile of the average prisoner hasn't changed a jot since the 19th century. An Irish prisoner is still 25 times more likely to come from — and return to — a seriously deprived area.

Nobody's going to pretend that the well-to-do and those in the corporate world don't break the law. This week's finding that Anglo Irish executives



Tánaiste and Minister for Justice Frances Fitzgerald needs to take bold steps to reform our penal system but is unlikely to do so. Picture: Gareth Chaney Collins

were guilty of conspiring to defraud the public in 2008 is a rare example of the untouchables being called to account.

Why is that? Is it because we are inclined to think corporate wheeler and dealing is necessary to grease the wheels of industry or is it because it's obscenely convenient to lock up those who leave school early, are out of work and/or have a history of addiction?

Whatever the answer, we now have an unrivalled opportunity to do something radical to break the vicious cycle that has entrapped so many from disadvantaged communities.

Justice Minister Frances Fitzgerald's allocation of resources to fund a new crime taskforce has been welcomed by those working in Dublin's inner city.

But — and this is a really vital bit — it needs to go further. Anna Quigley from the Inner City Organisations Network has said you can't address the policing problem without providing support for drug addicts and increasing economic opportunities for people in the area all at the same time.

Independent TD Maureen O'Sullivan echoes that view. The former teacher said education seemed to be the Cinderella of the Government's new strategy, but it was vital: the majority of Irish prisoners have never sat a State exam. In 2008, of the 520 who enrolled in the school at Mountjoy Prison, 20% could not read or write, according to Irish Penal Reform Trust figures.

When will the Government listen to those who really know what it's like to

have their lives fractured by crime and social deprivation and reach further and deeper for real, lasting solutions? The findings from the Troubled Families Programme in the UK offers a possible path to radical change. Earlier this week, its director general, Louise Casey, explained how the scheme had helped turn around the lives of some 120,000 so-called troubled families in the UK, saving the government an impressive £29,000 per family, per year.

After the 2011 riots, the British Government gave the country's 152 local authorities £448m to identify and help families at risk. The results have been impressive and the savings considerable.

The initial investment involves huge money. And more, the type of bold, imaginative and far-reaching steps that are generally not favoured by governments during their, at best, five-year lifetimes.

The alternative, though, is pretty bleak. Fast forward another 100 years — without action, prisons will still be locking up the poor and disadvantaged. ■ Twitter: @Finnclo

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