

## Irish Examiner

Established 1841

Abortion law

## Early vote undermines work to date

THE all-party Oireachtas committee examining Ireland's abortion law took many people by surprise when it voted overwhelmingly against retaining the Eighth Amendment to the Constitution in its present form while still having five weeks of debate on the issue to run.

In doing so, the Committee on the Eighth Amendment to the Constitution, as it was formally known, has made itself all but redundant.

The committee of 22 members, which was established last April to consider the Citizens' Assembly report on the Eighth Amendment, was due to meet in public session for another five weeks to continue debate on the assembly's recommendations as well as interrogate the broader health, social, human rights and other issues surrounding the provision of abortion services.

It is unclear what purpose the committee can now find for itself, apart from examining the options put to it by the group's legal adviser, barrister Nuala Butler, as further debate has been rendered pointless by this pre-emptive decision.

Billy Kelleher was the only Fianna Fáil member to vote in favour of effectively repealing the Eighth which he did in spite of the fact that it was his personal preference that a vote on the amendment not be taken until November 22, the last day of the current weekly sessions. His fellow party members, Anne Rabbitte and James Browne, abstained, while Ned O'Sullivan was absent when the vote was taken.

The decision to declare in favour of repeal midway through what was meant to be a series of serious debates damages the credibility of the committee and undermines its good work to date.

It also lends credence to the assertion by Independent TD Mattie McGrath and Senator Rónán Mullen that the committee's work has become skewed in favour of abortion.

They said: "Over 20 groups and individuals pushing for abortion have been invited before the committee, while only a handful of pro-life people have been invited."

In response, chairwoman Senator Catherine Noone insisted the committee has been run impartially at all times and pointed out that both McGrath and Mullen had been given extra time to speak at meetings on several occasions. However, now that the committee has shown its hand before the issue was fully debated, all that is left for discussion is mostly logistical — whether there should be a straight full repeal with the Oireachtas having the final say, a partial repeal, or replacing the Eighth with a new amendment.

Whatever side one might take on whether we need a less restrictive abortion regime in Ireland or not, work by the Citizens' Assembly and the Oireachtas committee has been useful in bringing discussion of this important moral issue into the open. For some individuals, this public discourse has facilitated a journey of self-discovery, moving from an entrenched position on abortion to a more nuanced one.

Sadly, the latest move by the Oireachtas committee on the Eighth has done the opposite.

## Brexit negotiations

## Point scoring serves no good

IF Ireland is to secure as much as it can during negotiations on Brexit it is essential that the Taoiseach and our European commissioner Phil Hogan are singing from the same hymn sheet. That is clearly not the case, judging from Leo Varadkar's public admonishment yesterday of Mr Hogan, directly contradicting his stated view that negotiations are at a cliff edge to a hard Brexit.

"I think we've a long way to go yet," he told journalists in Brussels ahead of the EU summit. "Brexit doesn't happen until April 2019. We're quite far back from the cliff edge."

That may well be so but, instead of scoring points against a member of his own team, it would be better if the Taoiseach used his obvious talents to forge new relationships and cement old ones in order to strengthen Ireland's position in the EU after the UK leaves the union.

In fairness, he already appears to have grasped the importance of that by attending a meeting of the Nordic-Baltic group, an alliance of northern European states with shared values and similar open trading economies to Ireland. It was his first Nordic-Baltic leaders' group meeting.

He also exhibited political astuteness and a thorough grasp of Ireland's particular vulnerability to Brexit when he said: "I'm very keen that Ireland builds new political alliances in Europe. That's going to be particularly important when we lose our biggest ally — Britain — in a year or two."

## Inability to track sex crimes

## Shame on us

FOR many years the Rape Crisis Network Ireland has provided sterling service to survivors of sexual violence, offering support, counselling and advice to thousands. Its 14 rape crisis centres also deal with up to 20,000 calls, texts and emails every year.

On top of that it has, since 2005, produced annual national statistics, a very important measure of the scale of sexual violence in Ireland and a vital tool in providing frontline services to victims.

However, the removal of funding by Tusla, the child and family agency, means it can no longer afford to verify and publish these statistics.

That, along with the decision by the Government to scrap a nationwide full study of sex crimes — the first since 2002 — is likely to cripple our ability to track the success of national initiatives to combat offences of this nature.

If that happens, it will show a disregard bordering on contempt for victims of sexual violence in Ireland and shame us in the eyes of the world.

## Our Taoiseach really needs a lesson in checking his privilege

SURELY there was someone somewhere, a man even, willing to point out to the Taoiseach that he's big time storing up trouble with Irish women the way that he's going on.

Take one woman, for instance, sitting for hour after hour watching the Oireachtas committee on the Eighth Amendment, where eminent medics, with decades of experience at the front-line of obstetrics, make clear the absolute disservice that has been done, and continues to be done, to Irish women.

In the background bubbling away is another box in the teeth for women — the controversy over pensions impacting an estimated 35,000 females who took time out from the workforce before 1994, or worked part-time. Then yesterday, just as we're decompressing from the committee on the Eighth, comes another body blow — the decision not to fund a much needed study into the scale of sexual violence in Ireland.

To borrow a phrase from the world of social media, our Leo really needs a lesson in checking his privilege. It's either that, or risk alienating a considerable percentage of half of his electorate. He may have bristled at the beginning of his tenure over criticism of the number of women in his Cabinet, and indeed the lack of women in his kitchen cabinet, his inner circle. But at this point it's beginning to look as if he definitely has a woman issue. It may not be deliberate, or maybe it is something that is operating at a subconscious level — either way it's harmful — and he needs to address it.

The fact is that it's easy to preside over something like the decision to not fund a second Savi (Sexual Abuse and Violence in Ireland) study when you're as safe as houses from the prospect of sexual violence yourself, and don't appear to feel an empathy with those who are at risk. This is a position of privilege when you consider that at least one in five women in Ireland experience domestic or sexual abuse during their lifetime. While we know certain facts about these issues, there are huge gaps in our knowledge and at an official level these are being exacerbated rather than tackled.

With the controversies surrounding so many other areas of their statistics, unsurprisingly An Garda Síochána are not up to scratch on domestic violence, or to put it another way, seriously unreliable. But they are not the only ones. We actually do not know how many women report sexual and physical violence in Ireland on an annual basis because of issues across the system. Our information, such as it is, comes from EU level.

The National Women's Council has pointed out how Ireland has signed up to the Istanbul Conven-



Dr Peter Boylan, left, warned of deaths and Prof Sabaratnam Arulkumar has little time for our official abortion approach. Pictures: Gareth Chaney/Collins

issues. The Harvey Weinstein affair has been gripping the Western world, showing that even the world's richest and seemingly most powerful women, can fall prey to the most horrendous sexual violence. If you'd a lick of political sense you wouldn't need a brand new communications unit to realise this is a particularly sensitive topic at present; that it's not the best optics to be getting all the best boy toys when it comes to showing yourself in the best light, but leaving the manner in which we best tackle sexual violence back in the day of the abacus and chalkboard. This is a patriarchal decision.

At the Oireachtas committee on the Eighth Amendment on Wednesday, Dr Peter Boylan, chair of the Institute of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Ireland, warned TDs and senators not to underestimate the anger of Irish women. He agreed that Ireland is indeed a "very safe place to have a baby". But added a second half to that sentence that many, Taoiseach Varadkar included, would rather ignore. That is the fact that if not for the availability of abortion to Irish women in Britain, the maternal mortality rate here "would shoot up" because of women accessing illegal abortions.

It was clear from his contributions that Professor Sabaratnam Arulkumar, who chaired the HSE inquiry into the death of Savita Halappanavar, and is a former president of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists in the UK, has little time for the official Irish approach to abortion. He pointed out that making abortion illegal serves only to promote illegal abortions. He referred to the outrageous 14-year prison sentence for any woman or girl who accesses an illegal abortion here, as provided for in the Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act, asking: "Can you imagine putting those 4,800 women in prison?" One cannot imagine that but one doesn't have to imagine too hard to see how a few women could end up being imprisoned for just such a thing, why else have it as a reality on the statute books? Just as you don't need to stretch your imagination to see women officially targeted in the area of pensions or sexual violence.

It is not a joke on my part to suggest that Taoiseach Varadkar enrol himself for some serious gender sensitivity training. He may not be at all keen on it, but when he runs the numbers he may well realise there are votes in it, or at least the opportunity not to lose those female votes by the bucketload.

## Alison O'Connor



This is the international benchmark for tackling violence against women. However in order to ratify the Convention we need a gold standard in data collection, surveys and research.

The decision not to fund a new Savi report essentially means that victims of rape and domestic abuse are not counted unless they officially report their crime or are recorded by a charity. Yesterday, hardly coincidentally, the Rape Crisis Network of Ireland announced it would not be publishing statistics on the experiences of survivors of sexual abuse for 2016 because of huge cuts to its funding. The network had been producing annual national statistics since 2005, but after a massive skelp of 70% was taken out of its budget in 2015 this is no longer possible. So a key part of the existing domestic information we did have has now also been shut down. It is 15 years since the first Savi

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study was carried out. The previous justice minister, Frances Fitzgerald, had given a commitment to fund a new one but the current minister, Charlie Flanagan, has just reneged on that. You might well wonder what is the whopping cost of carrying out such a study? It's just too easy, but irresistible, to whip out the estimated €5m cost of Leo's pet project the new strategic communications unit and compare that to the relatively miserly €1m the study would cost. Bizarrely the decision was made known to *The Times* by the Department of Justice on Wednesday just shortly after the

Taoiseach had told the Dáil he would not rule out a second study.

Of course, by not funding Savi the Government has the added bonus of being able to underestimate the investment needed to help and counsel those who have been victims of sexual violence, overwhelmingly women. As we know many women never come forward to report such a crime so do not appear on official figures.

There appears to have been a pass the parcel element to this situation, with various members of Cabinet being asked to give funds towards the study. Social Protection Minister Regina Doherty, in a letter, did ask Children's Minister Katherine Zappone, then justice minister Frances Fitzgerald, and Health Minister Simon Harris to contribute towards the research. Her pleas fell on deaf ears.

The timing of this decision starkly shows how tone deaf the Government is on female-related

## Letters to the editor

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## Met Éireann fell short on 'hurricane' advice

Met Éireann deserve some criticism for the way they dealt with the Hurricane in advising people. First, we were told it was a "ex-hurricane", then it was "tropical storm" then a "category three hurricane" and then simply "a hurricane". They could not make up their minds what it was and could not envisage that once the weak tempest got caught up in the gulf stream it had the potential to reenergise significantly. Ex-hurricanes do not exist — a hurricane is a hurricane, nothing else, and they pick up dramatically once they hit high warm air in a moving stream such as the gulf stream.

Obviously the extreme weather system had travelled extensively throughout the Atlantic and, with the exceptional warm conditions for the time of year, had unlimited potential. A day before the extreme weather struck, Met Éireann labelled red warning counties which were told to close the schools, while incredibly orange status counties were not so advised to the delight of education bureaucrats. However, it was known that the Hurricane would be nationwide? Strangely too, Met Éireann took the view that even though they issued a red national warning on their website, marine warnings were only on amber or orange status. In fact, there was a small craft warning on yellow, no less, while a red national warning was up with an exclamation mark beside it stayed in place?

There seemed to be enormous doubt in Met Éireann's mind even though they had been in direct contact with Florida's weather service for hurricanes, which advised people in Ireland that they "should prepare". Very heavy rainfall was forecast by Met Éireann, up to 48in, however very little rain fell and it was 90% wind

apparently, despite the Noah's Ark conditions which were predicted. The media too fell short of expectations and were dismal on the opening and reopening of business and services such as post offices, libraries, hospitals, buses, ATMs and updates. They seemed to be a strong yearning by the media, especially on radio, towards sporting fixtures which crept in too often and of no practicable value given the emergency conditions which hit the country. Surprising too that the emergency broadcast system was not used, despite its high cost and its now apparent redundancy?

We seem to have a uniquely Irish approach to weather forecasting in this country.

We need a new weather reporting service and one that is fit for purpose, instead of all the guess work and mixed messages which came from Met Éireann during the hurricane as an excellent test of Met Éireann's ability to predict the weather. Time to change the old guard...

Maurice Fitzgerald  
Shanbally  
Co Cork

## The generosity of our ministers

Seeing that in the recent budget the extra €5 per week granted to pensioners and others does not come into effect until the end of March, the increase in fact amounts to a paltry €3.75 only per week for the year 2018. The ministers' generosity should never be forgotten.

PJ McGuire  
Athlone  
Co Westmeath

## A motorway to Kerry is a must

What is happening with the Macroom bypass? It's disgraceful to expect tourists and others to travel on such inferior roads to the tourism capital of Ireland (Killarney). Cork Airport and business in general would benefit tremendously with

upgraded infrastructure. I would also urge the business community reps to travel between Tralee and Cork to observe the poor signposting to Cork (especially in Tralee Town). Again on a recent journey from Galway I found the signs to Cork to be few and confusing, so please, please maybe more publicity for a motorway between Cork and Kerry.

Donal Harris  
Sth Douglas Road  
Cork

## CCTV endeavours are appreciated

A small space in your letters page, please, to allow me offer my appreciation and thanks to the public representatives serving Midleton Town, Co Cork and their endeavours to have CCTV installed in the town, with full power public lighting, if it is to operate effectively in the apprehension of thieves.

Prior to my coming to Midleton five years ago, I lived in a West Cork town where CCTV was installed but the public lighting was not adequate to catch the robbers in action. It proves a waste of public funding not to have both lighting and cameras corresponding to rid our towns, cities and villages of night prowlers. Renewed thanks to Midleton councillors and officials for their foresight to have both cameras and lighting working simultaneously, thus allowing householders to sleep in peace and quiet.

Mary K Devlin  
Midleton  
Co Cork

## Long, deadly wait for gun control

After the Las Vegas massacre of 58 and 525 injured, one would think that the immediate banning of arms would be common sense. Some say this is not the right time but due to the numbers already committed this ban should have already been in place. Donald Trump says discussions on gun control will take place as time

goes by. What is he waiting for — another massacre?

I'm sure nothing will happen any time soon. The National Rifle Association (NRA) are powerful and many. It seems that the NRA voted for Donald Trump. Knowing Trump by now, it is unlikely to change much, if any, because he would see this as something not in his favour or best interests. Massacres happened in the UK (Dunblane) and in Australia. They regulated guns immediately, and so it can be done in the USA. Don't hold your breath.

Bernard Naughton  
Farranree  
Cork

## Republic of missed opportunity

Letting people go homeless, leaving conditions in need of addressing which lead to homelessness, not adequately addressing high housing purchase or rent costs have been poor responses to a major housing challenge. Society itself contains much cruelty. A homeless woman dying in a tent. People so bereft of company or who feel alone looking for solace in addictive drugs that lead to chaotic impacts on individuals, family, friends and wider society, in turn leading to cartel wars or contributing. Drug gangs feed from and stoke misery. Homelessness and abandonment are cruel facets of contemporary society that in turn mock a statement like the "republic of opportunity".

How to best help the wide population should be the intention. People had genuine, actual fear about the sell-off of Irish water, selling water in the more and more crowded east would be extremely lucrative. Water is liable to be sourced in the west one way or another. It would be an interesting PR campaign, the one about de-salinated Irish sea water — given Windscale/Sellafield and other such nuclear sites on Britain's westerly seaboard.

We may yet be fending away

multinationals wanting to run our drinking water and sewage.

Tomy Ryan  
Doon  
Co Limerick

## Blemish on Cosgrave's career

The media has united to proclaim that the late Liam Cosgrave was "tough on terrorism".

But there are two types of terrorism. The most well known is paramilitary terrorism. Less talked about is state terrorism such as the Rainbow Warrior attack, Operation Condor, the bombing of Korean air flight 858 etc. Mr Cosgrave was not very tough on state terrorism. The Barron Report criticised his administration for a lack of interest and a lack of action on the biggest mass murder in modern Irish history.

The Dublin/Monaghan bombing has been officially described as an act of international terrorism on the part of British forces. Liam Cosgrave's refusal to co-operate with the Barron inquiry will forever remain a blemish on his political career.

Michael O'Flynn  
Friars Walk  
Cork

## Greek tragedy of its own making

I cannot understand why Yanis Varoufakis is whinging about the EU interfering in Greek state affairs, *Irish Examiner* October 9.

The Greek government allowed its civil servants to collect up to three state pensions annually when they retired and paid them 14 months wages every year.

So when the Greek government could not — or would not — do anything to rectify the situation then I think that the EU had to step in to improve the Greek government finances.

Thomas Herlthy  
Newtown  
Charleville

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# Irish Examiner

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Skewed economic forecasting

## It's time we read the tea leaves better

It's been a while since the Victorian historian, Thomas Carlyle, described economics as the dismal science, but, even so, the discipline and its practitioners' predictions have more influence than they did in Carlyle's time. Every government decision, every piece of legislation, every decision to spend or not is framed by that all-important known unknown — "our economic prospects". They are the drums we march to. Social stability and equity depend on how this particular set of tea leaves is read. Though it's been a decade, the world's economy still bears the scars of America's sub-prime mortgage fiasco, an adventure unhindered by economists' intrusions and facilitated by Bill Clinton's capitulation to Wall Street on relaxing regulations that had protected America's banking system from itself for decades. Just this week, we were reminded of the ongoing impact those reckless concessions have on our capacity to provide public services that match today's needs or expectations.

The head of the National Treasury Management Agency, Conor O'Kelly, expressed those constraints in the starkest terms. He pointed out that Ireland pays €16.5m a day in interest to service our national debt. That is a startling figure, for a country where just over 2m people are in work and with so many pressing demands on the public purse. It seems a perfect example of today's ever-tightening reality — socialism for the rich, but no-option austerity for the poor.

It is a shocking figure, in a country where, according to the independent advocacy group, Social Justice Ireland, almost 800,000 people, many of whom work, live in poverty. SJI said, and it is hard to argue with them, that "these figures are unacceptable in a rich, developed country, like Ireland". That bleak situation is confirmed by that fact that the number of people who contacted the helpline of budgeting service, MABS, last year, was higher than at any time since early 2013, when the figure was just 1% higher than that recorded last year. The country's unresolved mortgage crisis, another toxic legacy of 2008, contributes to that figure and it shows that the much-trumpeted recovery is, at best, uneven.

There are many reasons for these failures, but, this week, the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) pointed to one that may not be immediately apparent. It urged the Government and the Central Statistics Office (CSO) to adopt a separate set of national accounts to better tell the story of our economy, without the distorting influence of multi-nationals' transactions in this jurisdiction. The ESRI warned that headline growth figures are skewed by large transactions by a small number of firms, involving the transfer of intellectual property assets to Ireland, in the wake of global moves to clamp down on tax avoidance.

In a country where a finance mandarin is rewarded despite a €3.6bn accounting blunder, this might seem unsurprising, but it may also be another expression of our cultural aversion to look-in-the-mirror exercises in the dismal science — and our reluctance to learn even the hardest lessons of our past. Reading the tea leaves properly may make for grim reading, but, in the longer run, it would be the wise thing to do.

### Teenager's death

## Do our drug laws cost lives?

The older we get the more certain we are that youth is indeed wasted on the young. It is also true that despite getting older we have not worked out how to convince young people not to make the same mistakes we may have made or to avoid life-threatening risk. Such is human nature even if it can have disastrous consequences.

Cork City coroner Philip Comyn dealt with one disastrous consequence yesterday when he returned a verdict of death by misadventure for Michael Cornacchia, aged 16, who died after taking U47700 and ecstasy at his home in Cork on January 16, 2017. The coroner warned that young people are playing Russian roulette after it was revealed the teenager thought he was buying cocaine but it turned out to be a powerful opioid.

The teenager's death came almost two decades after Portugal became the first country to decriminalise the possession and consumption of all illicit substances. The country's opioid crisis soon stabilised, and the country has seen dramatic drops in problematic drug use, HIV and hepatitis infection rates, overdose deaths, drug-related crime, and incarceration rates. Portugal's remarkable recovery came about because of an enormous cultural shift, and a change in how the country viewed drugs, addiction — and itself. Is it time we followed Portugal's example? Would Michael Cornacchia and many others still be alive had we done so already?

### Mandatory retirement age

## Same old story

Former RTÉ employee Valerie Cox was awarded €50,000 this week by the Workplace Relations Commission after it found the broadcaster had discriminated against her on age grounds. Changing demographics and a pension time bomb suggest that Ms Cox may not be the last person to take such an action.

In the grand scheme of things, if a person is able to do a job to the required standard, then their age, like their gender, should be irrelevant but, as this case shows, that is not so. The nature of work is changing radically too so it seems appropriate that legislation around work, designed to protect workers and employers be reviewed so it might far better reflect an older but still capable Ireland.

Unfortunately, and it hardly seems too cynical to suggest this, but those who should lead this debate already expect exceptional pensions and enjoy an indulgent culture of early retirement, so anything that might impinge on those arrangements may be filed under "pending". The majority may once again pick up the tab for the privileges of the minority.

# Fianna Fáil TDs say we should not trust the Oireachtas to legislate

TOLERANCE for listening to someone who holds the opposite view to your own on abortion depends, I find, on the day, the hour and the speaker. But if there is one thing worthy of zero tolerance it is the elected politicians in our national parliament who say, in essence, that the public would be mad to trust them.

We had a number of examples of that in the Dáil this week during the debate on the bill to allow the holding of the abortion referendum which passed, happily, by 97 votes to 27 on Wednesday night.

It shouldn't be surprising, I suppose, that it was Fianna Fáilers, in their contributions, who were most inclined to tell the public that politicians were not to be trusted on such important matters. For instance, Bobby Aylward pointing out that if the protection of the Eighth Amendment is removed "the fate of the unborn will be placed in the hands of the legislators".

"Future Governments with a strong majority, whether they lean hard to the left or hard to the right, could make further legislative change which the people of Ireland may have no control over. That is important," said Mr Aylward.

Elaborating on the theme, party whip Michael Moynihan said it was "not acceptable to allow an Oireachtas, whatever its make up, to decide" on the rights of the unborn.

"Many people debating this 35 years ago would not have envisaged the type of Oireachtas we have today and who is to say what an Oireachtas of the future will be like? It could be ultra-liberal or ultra-conservative but God alone knows. I am standing by what is in the Constitution and it should not be repealed," said Mr Moynihan.

Surely that is the point of a democracy — the voters go to the polls, on average every five years or so, and they have the power to elect whomever they wish.

Ploughing a similar doubting furrow TD Eamon Scanon roundly talked down himself and his Dáil colleagues. "As a political class, can we be completely trusted on this issue? I do not think so," said the Sligo/Leitrim TD. Somewhat perplexingly he also said that those surrounding him in the Dáil chamber had the right to be there and had been "put here by the people".

The contribution of FF Laois/Offaly TD Sean Fleming bordered on the extraordinary when he said that deputies were involved in a "power grab" with the idea that they would be the ones to legislate for the grounds on which abortion be allowed, once the Eighth Amendment is repealed.

"I want the people to think about this. As I said, very important issues are dealt with in the Constitution and I would consider the issue of life and death to be a matter for



“Politicians who hold this view, it could be argued, do not deserve to hold office”

TDs Bobby Aylward, Eamon Scanon, and Sean Fleming would have believed that elected representatives are not to be trusted.



## Alison O'Connor

the people to decide rather than Deputies. I am concerned that Deputies want to take too much power for themselves."

He went on to commend the public for not trusting politicians. "One of the reasons is that there are 158 of us here... We have a particular bias on most issues either for or against, although some are probably neutral and their views change over a period of time. We are not a neutral assembly."

What bizarre and illogical views for someone who has been elected to represent a constituency in the national parliament, and to what end? Politicians who hold this view, it could be argued, do not deserve to hold office. Not to mention opting to not even give the Irish people the option to vote in a referendum themselves.

Abortion has been our major national controversy for decades. It's fair enough to have a particular view on abortion, but a potential Dáil candidate, hoping to get elected, could hardly argue they did not expect it could possibly be voted on during their time as a legislator. What a cop out to sug-

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gest otherwise. Politicians get enough of a hard time, admittedly merited at times, without their own denigrating them and further eroding our faith in democracy.

The good news is that Labour leader Brendan Howlin stood the ground for politicians.

"That was the spurious argument made in 1983," he recalled. "I believe the real position is the exact opposite. Politicians, no more than any other citizen, struggle with this issue and act in accordance with their consciences. If afforded the responsibility of legislating for this issue, I am confident that all the members of these houses will do so in accordance with their best beliefs, the balance of advice afforded to them by medical experts, and in the best interests, as we perceive it, of the people of this Republic."

## Letters to the editor

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### We cannot hide behind 13th, 14th Amendments

We approved the 13th and 14th Amendments to our Constitution. It's hard to understand how a country could vote for the right to travel to terminate a pregnancy and to get information on the same, but reject abortion here. It's a not-in-my-backyard mentality that we can't continue to have.

Women's healthcare should not be exported. With the abortion pill now freely available on the internet, early-term abortions are occurring every day in Ireland. We can't continue to hide from this fact. Ireland is where I live, work, and pay taxes, and have my family. When I chose to settle here, I didn't think about my rights to healthcare as a woman.

These constraints have only become clear to me over the last few years. Irish people don't talk openly about women's healthcare. Having a baby is only discussed with respect to the wonder of it. Well, it's not always a bed of roses. Support only comes when people are open and honest. Irish people have gained nothing good from our history of hiding, being fearful, being silenced. It's time to speak up. It's time to have conversations about this important topic. Let's move forward together.

Helena Conlon  
Galway East

### Abortionists will be excommunicated

If a pregnant woman is in danger of dying from medical complications caused by pregnancy, removing the child prematurely is not against the law, as every effort will be made to save the life of the child.

Abortion is the deliberate killing of the child, which is murder, regardless of how the pregnancy came about. Under canon law, Catholics who have an abortion, or Catholics who vote for abortion, are automatically excommunicated from the Church. The bishops will be held responsible, as well as the voters, who should know better. If you want to stay out of hell, vote to retain the Eighth Amendment. Save your soul.

Jim Linehan  
Carrigrohilly  
Co Cork

### Trite slogans do not justify abortion

On International Women's Day, Sinn Féin leader, Mary Lou McDonald, and her deputies, stood in sheep-like obedience outside the Dáil gate, all holding their plastic "Trust Women", anti-Eighth Amendment placards. Ms McDonald and her Sinn Féin hierarchy might more usefully start trusting their own TDs and grassroots members to make up their own minds on abortion and the Eighth, instead of imposing the rigid Sinn Féin party whip on them, in this, literally, life-or-death issue.

We now hear that Sinn Féin has cancelled its much-trumpeted special ard fheis to debate abortion until after the coming referendum, when, of course, their grassroots members' views will be irrelevant. It's difficult to reconcile trite, meaningless catchphrases about "trusting women" with a rigid party whip on abortion. The abortion-on-demand, "trust women" mantra in Britain has resulted in 200,000 dead, aborted babies per year. Ninety percent of UK Downs babies die by abortion. Cheap Sinn Féin photo-ops on International Women's Day, outside the Dáil, are no substitute for giving your TDs a free vote, without a whip, or for cancelling a special ard fheis, where grassroots Sinn Féin members could have their voices heard on abortion. The abortion debate is deeper than cheap, plastic placard slogans on International Women's Day outside the Dáil.

Most women, and everyone else, will be aware that at least 50% of abortion babies are, in fact, female. These sisters will never get to be born, live, love, or be loved. All TDs should have a free vote on abortion.

Oliver Maher  
Harold's Road  
D6W

### Water system is leaking money

Is it not time that all responsible politicians in the Oireachtas came together to sort out this sorry mess of how Irish Water is to be funded, going forward, after seeing all the mayhem that occurred during the recent snow storm? We saw, daily, the rotting infrastructure that is being utilised to carry treated water to households. As we are going from one disaster to another, we have no long-term plan to sort out this sorry mess. Responsible politicians (I am not including people who are going around advocating that we should not have to pay for anything like public utilities) should be able to agree to some reasonable way of funding this very necessary utility, called Irish Water, before the whole system breaks down, which, for the most part, is almost 100 years old.

Teddy O'Mahony  
Bandon  
Co Cork

### Newspapers give everyone a voice

I am glad that the *Irish Examiner* still has a letters page for readers. It gives a fair advantage to all people to express their points of view. It can also be one of the most interesting features in any newspaper. Due to modern technology, an Post must be feeling the pinch, too, as the price of a local stamp is €1. I think the previous price was 72c, an increase of 28c. Newspaper sales have been hit by the internet, where news is readily available, often for free, and easily accessed on computers

and smartphones. Newspapers here get a double whammy, as they have to pay Vat, but the English tabloids do not.

The internet is competition for TV, as well. TV shows are being made and distributed online, by companies such as Netflix. This being so, in the future laptops/smartphones may be subject to a "TV licence" of sorts. Social media is damaging to proper communication, since users are anonymous, or have a handle or false name. It's a coward's way of saying anything, and it's very easy to tell lies. I have an ordinary mobile phone, which is right for my generation (I am 73), as I can make and receive calls. Finally, TV advertisements presume everyone has the internet or a smartphone. This is not so.

Bernard Naughton  
Farranree  
Cork

### Brexit negotiations border on chaos

Northern Ireland will be leaving the EU, with the rest of the UK, on March 29, 2019. If, at that stage, an agreement is not reached on the border, customs officials on both sides of it will set up their stations. There will have to be physical inspections of goods vehicles to and from Northern Ireland, no matter what else is agreed. In the area of food safety, there can be little doubt of the imperative for checks and sourcing. The Nordic-Swedish solution seems to be the only viable alternative, with a very high level of co-operation between two sets of customs officials operating two systems by throwing a switch. Time is marching on and still there is no sign of a breakthrough, just dithering on what to do. The notion of a frictionless border is not tenable. As many as 18 EU countries have borders with various countries, and they manage various customs systems — but not without a border of some kind. Ivor Roberts, before becoming an Irish citizen, made it clear

to Downing Street that there was "delusion" in the British government and said: "It could take as much as ten years" to sort the customs/border situation out.

Britain, the Republic, and the EU are now adrift, in looking at everything and coming out with nothing. Britain is getting out on exit day. And, ready or not, the Republic will have to put contingency measures in place, if there is not a deal by then. The clock is ticking and, sooner or later, there will be untold problems with the border and trade. Number-plate recognition technology is not going to do it on its own. There will have to be checks, given that the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is leaving next year.

The notion of associate membership is not going to fly with the EU, unless it agrees to the free movement of people — which is the last thing in world it is going to do. The options are indeed limited and it is about time all the nonsense ended about having a frictionless border. It is purely aspirational and, rather than waste time on it, contingencies should be put in place now, by both governments, from the chaos that will ensue on exit day.

If not, we are going to a situation where thousands of trucks will be lined up, awaiting clearance at both sides of the border, and a litany of officials from various departments demanding paperwork. That is exactly what is going to happen without a deal. The Nordic-Swedish solution takes only minutes to complete and hauliers are under way again. The way things are, at the moment, the trucks could be there for months, in lieu of an agreement, while perishable goods become worthless. The talking and dithering about what to do cannot go on.

There will be a border. It is there already and there is no getting away from the fact that Northern Ireland will not be part of the UK on March 29, 2019 and will be out of the EU customs bloc. Time to get cracking!

Maurice Fitzgerald  
Shanbally  
Co Cork

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# Irish Examiner

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Learning hard lessons

## Time to put a brake on car debt spiral?

WE all too easily blame fate for the misfortunes that afflict us. Fate is a convenient catchall that hides behind the fatalism underpinning the Calvinists' Westminster Confession of Faith which declares that our lives are "freely and unchangeably ordained whatsoever comes to pass". It suggests that everything has been decided by a higher power and that we are just bit players in a divine comedy. Grand, freeing work if you can get it.

In a world where despair seems to lurk around almost every corner that doctrine can offer attractive options. However, anyone seduced by it will struggle to live a modestly secure life because it suggests we do not need to learn from our mistakes so we might not repeat them. We are, it seems approaching a point where we will see how well we have learned the lessons of our recent history. We will, soon enough, have to decide between blaming fate or tipping our hat to that eternal leveler — personal responsibility.

There is growing evidence that we may be waltzing towards another 2008 implosion when out-of-control lending meant banks needed massive, generation-grinding taxpayer intervention. The international warnings about the soaring level of personal debt, especially car loans, have been persistent for some time. The figures are so startling that they must provoke a sense of déjà vu in anyone with eyes to see.

Europe's largest car companies have more than doubled the lending on their balance sheets in less than a decade. Increased use of manufacturer-driven car financing has driven their exposure to consumer borrowing to record highs. Volkswagen, BMW, Daimler, and Renault had more than a €400bn exposure to loans and leases at the end of June, according to a *Financial Times* analysis. To put those figures in a domestic context Bank of Ireland, at the end of last year, had a net asset value of around €8.1bn.

As ever, things are bigger in America. Last year, Americans bought more new cars than ever. Car sales represent around a fifth of all US retail spending, so the record year is seen as an expression of recovering consumer confidence. That is reflected in the car-debt graph. America ended last year just shy of \$1.2tn in outstanding car loan debt, a rise of 9% from the previous year and 13% above the pre-crisis peak in 2005, in inflation-adjusted terms. The number of cars and trucks on the road rose by just 1.5% last year, and 9% since 2005. Total household debt levels are barely a sliver below their 2008 peak, with some of the fastest growth down to car loans. Those trends are apparent here too — though we cannot be exact about the amount of money tied up in personal contract plan deals as they do not fall under the Central Bank's remit. A central credit register is being prepared and that important data will be revealed that way.

In the meantime we are sailing blind, relying on fate. Car manufacturers' self-centred loyalties were exposed by the emissions scandal so there is an urgency about this issue, especially as it is one more instance of how very difficult it has become for small national governments to manage multinational corporations' impact on our economy and society.

### Farming and climate change

## Conflicting messages

THERE seem to be conflicting messages in the *Irish Examiner*/ICMSA opinion poll on how farming contributes to climate change. More than 60% of farmers have taken measures to cut greenhouse gas emissions but just half accept that farming is a negative contributor to the crisis. Incredibly — there is no other word — 30% imagine that farming has no negative impact on climate change. Donald Trump may indeed have a constituency in Ireland.

With his usual assurance, the architect of Irish Water, European commissioner Phil Hogan said the poll showed the "lazy narrative" that farmers were not helping combat climate change was wrong. He suggested European farmers have cut emissions by 23% since 1990. CSO figures show that, in 1990, Irish farming and forestry were responsible for 37% of the country's emissions. The CSO records that that figure had fallen to 33% in 2014, a year before milk quotas ended.

Climate change is far too important an issue to fall into the urban/rural divide. It will affect farmers at least as much as it will affect urban communities. National food production plans do not suggest that the farm sector, or their government partners, accept this. Much, much more, as recent EPA water reports confirmed, needs to be done. A sector so dependent on subsidies — more than €1bn a week under CAP — might be wise to consider if that support can be guaranteed unless far more radical change is delivered.

### Changing faces of Ireland

## Rainbow nation

THE latest tranche of census results shows that there has been a drop in the number of non-Irish living here. It also shows that this remains an attractive country, with a 90% increase in the number of people who hold dual citizenship, up from 55,905 to 104,784. We must be doing something right.

Mayo might not have brought Sam home, but the country can take some comfort in the fact that Ballyhaunis is the most multicultural town in the country. Almost 40% of its population of 3,056 — 941 people — are non-Irish citizens.

Cork City saw the largest increase in the number of resident non-Irish, up 2,505, marking a 17.2% increase in diversity, suggesting that the Rebel County may soon become the Rainbow County.

Hinting at the problems of assimilation facing all of Europe, nearly 40,000 people who were born in Ireland did not identify themselves as Irish. In a society where emigration is a permanent reality, this is somewhat understandable, but it is also a warning that something is not quite right.

# President Higgins is just too old to serve for a second, seven-year term

TO SAY someone is too old to do something is viewed by many now as an unforgivable insult. But here goes anyway — our President Michael D Higgins is too old to serve a second term as President.

I say this with some regret because he has been a very fine President and a steady and wise presence at a time when we needed it most. But when you consider that at the end of a possible second term in 2025 he would be 85 years old; that pushes the boundaries of any active ageing initiative.

There is no doubting that our currently 76-year-old head of state is in full possession of his mental faculties, as he proved with the verbal wall he constructed this week as to when he would be announcing whether he would go forward for a second term, and why that announcement would be no sooner.

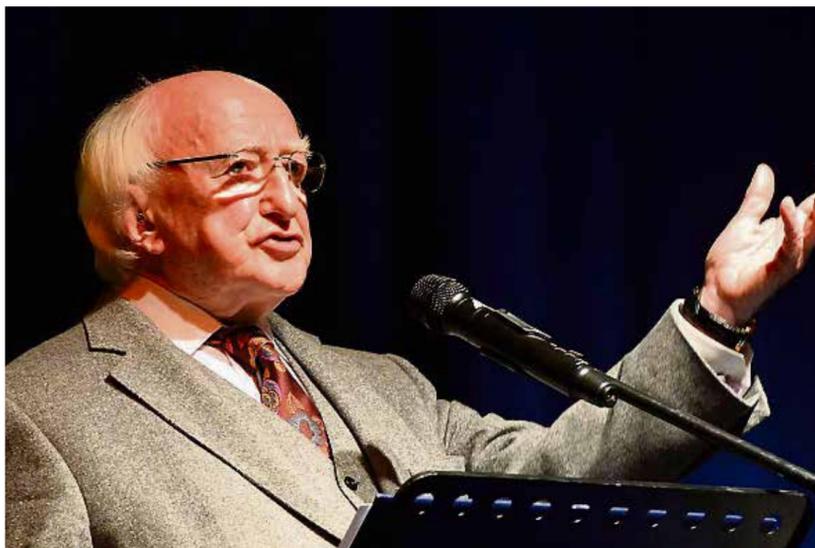
You see he will be so busy concentrating on the job that he will be making no announcement until September next year. He has upcoming trips to Australia and New Zealand, to countries in the European Union, and is likely to take up an invitation to Canada proffered by prime minister Justin Trudeau.

He began an interview with RTE's Sean O'Rourke at the Ploughing Championships by saying he had ruled nothing out, which isn't strictly true given that he did actually firmly rule out a second term way back in 2011 just after he was first elected. He explained this week he had said that after what had been a very long campaign. Actually even back then his age was a factor and this fact is what prompted much of the questioning around a second term.

If President Higgins is to remain on for a second term he would be over 80 for a significant part of that term. I know many octogenarians who lead full and fulfilled lives but the thing about being President is that you are the head of state and there are many demands on your time. President Higgins explained during the radio interview how the Government had asked him to go to Australia and New Zealand next month. He had a "very full programme". In all honesty could any Government feel fully comfortable in five years' time asking an 82-year-old man to take himself off to the southern hemisphere for a month representing Ireland; to undergo the rigours of a presidential tour with all the protocol and pomp which that entails?

No more than Enda Kenny not wishing to stand down, and delaying as long as possible, this looks like a situation of someone who has been involved in politics all their lives, who has reached a pinnacle and done a very good job, but doesn't realise that the time has come to hang up their spurs.

Reading between the lines President Higgins is actively considering running again, has probably



“Reading between the lines President Higgins is actively considering running again”

President Michael D Higgins would be 85 years old at the end of a second term were he to run for re-election.

Picture: Denis Scannell



## Alison O'Connor

even decided to do so. But there was a definite disingenuity to him saying he won't answer the question concerning his intentions because he is concentrating on his job, and to do so would be an unwise distraction.

He mentioned the eight or so garden parties he and his wife would be hosting next summer, not to mention the other functions that he will host and attend over the next year. All of these people with whom he will be interacting are entitled, he said, to his "full concentration and that's exactly what I'll be doing".

Now leaving aside the fact that men are acknowledged at not being good multitaskers and foreign trips can be arduous, and garden parties while pleasant and an important part of the work of any incumbent in the Aras, hardly too taxing, these reasons are fairly threadbare. Needless to say our President

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Our President, a politician who served 25 years in the Dáil and nine in the Seanad, would have known well his future intentions would be a question when he agreed to the interview. Nevertheless he did a very good "don't hit me now with the Presidency in me arms" impression during his chat with the Radio One presenter.

He also said this was "just my decision, and it doesn't affect anyone else, and I'm just being dead straight and therefore I haven't ruled anything out". This, viewed at its most benign, was more foxiness from our President.

If he carries through on that intention, to make the announcement next September, it leaves just one month before his term expires, effectively cutting off any potential rivals at the knees.

The President also spoke of how he receives "great support from the Irish public" and this is absolutely

true. There is a genuine affection for him. People feel he does a really good job as our President. But people would also recognise now the intrinsic unfairness in his approach of not announcing his intentions until the last minute.

Indeed he must recognise it himself because this is what happened in 2004 when he wanted to stand then for the Labour Party but wasn't successful in getting nominated. The tactic he is using now was used by President Mary McAleese in 2004 who announced late in the day that she wanted a second term, much to his then annoyance.

IT SEEMS clear that if he does announce his intention to stand for another term that Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and obviously the Labour Party, would not put up a candidate against him. What they're not saying out loud is there is also the possibility of a general election next year and the cost of that combined with Presidential one could be ruinous.

Independent Senator Gerard Craughwell recently said he would put his name forward to ensure there is a presidential election next year. But in order to secure a nomination for Áras an Uachtaráin a person must get the backing of at least 20 TDs and senators, or four local authorities. We've also had the rather tantalising prospect of a possible run at the Aras by broadcaster Miriam O'Callaghan.

If Michael D were to stand a second term he should be prepared to fight for it. But what he should really be considering now is a well deserved retirement after many decades of very fine public service.

## Letters to the editor

The Irish Examiner, Linn Dubh, Assumption Road, Blackpool, Cork. 021-4272722, fax 021-4275477, [letters@examiner.ie](mailto:letters@examiner.ie)

### Stalinist tactics used in debate on abortion

Last week a former master of the Coombe Hospital, Prof Chris Fitzpatrick, complained that people are "firmly pro-choice or pro-life, nobody seems to live in the space in between". This is a classic Hegelian dialectic; a tactic employed by Stalin no less: The revolutionaries try to create two "extremists" and then attempt to portray themselves as the sane voice of reason looking for the rational middle ground.

On one hand, there is the pro-abortion move that demands abortion right up to birth for any reason. On the other hand there are the pro-life groups who think the unborn child is a human being who should have the full protection of the law. Difficulty is an abortion is a matter of a child being alive or being killed before his or her birth. It does not appear that there is any "in between" area between life and death. Prof Fitzpatrick gave his opinion on when abortion should be permitted. Similar consideration was presented at the Citizens Assembly earlier this year by Dr Anthony Levatino. As a former abortionist who has practiced obstetrics and gynecology since 1980, he cautioned that firstly abortion would be permitted only in "hard cases", then it would be for "health of the mother" and eventually it will be performed for any reason Dr Levatino warned Irish people saying: "If you let this genie out of the bottle, you will not be able to put it back".

strike against abortion that has been undertaken by Tim Jackson of Donegal. While outlining the many conditions attached to his action, the former Independent election candidate made clear that he is bereft of the capacity to appreciate irony.

Mr Jackson has stated that his protest against abortion would not bring him "to the point of death", a luxury sadly denied to victims of Ireland's archaic abortion laws, such as Savita Halappanavar and Ann Lovett. He mentioned on the *Newstalk's Moncrieff* show that he doesn't think the strike is "...worth picking up the colds and flus..." over, so clearly protecting his own health is deemed an acceptable limitation on his undertaking. Sadly, this option is denied to pregnant Irish women, who must be in danger of death before a termination can be considered. Mr Jackson also appears oblivious to the fact that a pregnant woman staging the same protest would likely result in a High Court order determining that she be force fed, as seen in the case of Miss Y. While I find Mr Jackson's commitment to oppression repugnant, I am glad that he is free to exercise his inalienable right to bodily autonomy. We must now fight to ensure that those same rights are extended to every citizen of this country, by ending our Constitutionally endorsed oppression of Irish women.

Robert O'Sullivan  
St Luke's Cross  
Cork

### Rename bridge in honour of Rena

I would like to congratulate Rena Buckley and let her know she has done Cork proud and more especially to the people of Inniscarra. Her place is assured in the history of the GAA; 18 All-Ireland medals will stand the test of time. It is our turn now to give the honours so let's get working. Let's form a team with Cork County Council and the local citizens to revamp Inniscarra bridge. The prize would be a lower blood pressure for all of us who have to negotiate a safe crossing daily. When complete with glowing

traffic lights let's rename it as the Rena Buckley Bridge. Rubber stamping Rena's place in the GAA and historical archives of Inniscarra.

Gladys Crowley  
Inniscarra  
Co Cork

### Hook's 'blame' question pertinent

The blame game is a funny old game, someone once said; how right they were. George Hook comes across as a grumpy old so-and-so — and in reality he probably is. However that doesn't mean he should be ridiculed by all and sundry, for asking a very pertinent question: "Is there no blame now to the person who puts themselves in danger?"

My computer tells me this is the wording contained in Mr Hook's query, during a radio discussion on the subject of a specific rape case. Many of us have put ourselves and others in danger at some point, whether it's overreaching on a ladder while cleaning the guttering, using the phone while driving, or worse again drinking and driving, so in that respect we must assume responsibility for our actions.

I have worked as a doorman for many years in various nightclubs in Donegal and London, and I can say within reason that I've seen it all. On numerous occasions, I have persuaded reluctant taxi drivers to take home both males and females who were so drunk they couldn't stand on their own two feet, and others who could barely string two words together. I have witnessed people engage in various sexual acts with others who they just met, all through being intoxicated. I have had stories recounted to me of people waking up and not having a clue who's bed they were in, or what they had engaged in with the person lying next to them. In these type of instances, the blame has to be shared. I think Mr Hook was right to pose the question, although in some contexts it may be uncomfortable to do so, but at the same time it created hysteria for all the wrong reasons. We have to be grown up enough to

discuss and debate circumstances that lead to situations where rape occurs in order to prevent a recurrence of this nightmare for any victim? It is not beneficial for anyone to be controlled by the thought police, or only allowed to listen to approved politically correct commentary at all times. Although not a fan of George Hook by any means, he says things that fellow commentators agree with, but would be afraid of their lives to say it themselves.

My opinion, is that he should have stood his ground on the blame issue, rather than apologising for drawing attention to behavioural attitudes that in some instances lead to dire consequences' which foresight could have helped to prevent.

James Woods  
Gort an Chroice  
Dún na nGall

### Who sends women away for abortions?

I object to your headline: "We can't keep sending women to England for abortion" (*Irish Examiner*, September 12). We are not sending them, I am not sending them; it's their own decision, perhaps they get bad advice. England's abortion clinics are no answer for our sisters problems.

Micheál Ó Lionsaigh  
Baile Mhic Ire  
Co Chorcaigh

### Ambiguity of the Eighth explained

I am inclined to think the Eighth Amendment is a little ambiguous to a lot of people: "A mother and unborn child's equal right to life." I emphasise here that the mother has an equal right to life; the baby has no priority over the mother's life. I am no solicitor but what it means is that the doctor is dealing with two lives, and has to keep both alive. If in trying to keep the mother alive the unborn child dies, this is not abortion, and is allowed by Church and State. I would also emphasise that abortion is the deliberate killing of the innocent

unborn child for no medical reason.

Bernard Naughton  
Farranree  
Cork

### Call a halt to the repeal of the Eighth

In view of the recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly to allow for abortion in Ireland in extremely liberal circumstances and of the Oireachtas committee's proposed deliberations on this issue, I wonder where the voice of the unborn child is to be heard. It seems the Government, backed by a compliant media, is determined to remove the human rights of the most vulnerable in our society, particularly if they are less than perfect or suffering from a pre-natal illness. We only need to look across the water where a liberal abortion regime has led to 90% of babies, diagnosed with Down syndrome in the womb, being aborted. The Eighth Amendment exists to protect both mother and unborn child, to remove the rights of the child is a denial of the very concept of human rights. Part of the function of laws in society is to protect the weak from the strong. It is to be hoped that our legislators will call a halt to these aggressive attempts to repeal the Eighth.

Tony Curran  
Firhouse  
Dublin 24

### Superb TV show on schizophrenia

Well done to everyone who appeared in the schizophrenia documentary *Schizophrenia: The Voices in My Head* on RTE 2 (September 19) including Rita Bourke from Clonmel. It was a very well-made documentary and allowed sufferers to tell their stories in their own words. A lot of modern documentary is focused on the presenter and how wonderful they are. Ordinary people are much more interesting than the so called celebrity presenter.

John Williams  
Clonmel  
Co Tipperary

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