

Over two months in that Belfast court we have witnessed the death of basic human decency and manners

All voices should be heard in debate

WE live in a democracy and, as such, the opinions of each and every one of our citizens are to be welcomed on all matters worthy of national debate. For Save the Eighth campaigner and mother-of-four Eimear Thornton to dismiss the opinions of people simply because they are not themselves parents, is therefore unfair and without validation.

Naming Taoiseach Leo Varadkar and Cabinet members Katherine Zappone and Simon Harris in this context, as she did at yesterday's launch of the Save The 8th campaign, Ms Thornton was clearly implying that, because they do not have children, these politicians are less qualified to speak on the subject of abortion than people, like herself, who do have children.

Similar accusations have been made in the past by those on the pro-choice side of the debate. Senator Rónán Mullen, for instance, a consistently strong anti-abortion voice, was castigated on Twitter for precisely this reason.

Neither side, therefore, appears to be beyond dismissing those whose personal circumstances simply do not fit, in their view, with the agenda in question.

Yet this is patently ridiculous. When it comes to matters of importance, to issues that define the nation, influence how we govern and how we construct our society, the rules of democracy mean that every citizen is entitled to an opinion. And every citizen is entitled to express that opinion – openly and honestly – within the context of any given debate.

We all know how complex and divisive the issue of abortion is in this country. With the referendum date now set for May 25, it behoves both sides to ensure that all arguments are aired in an atmosphere of honesty and courteous debate. They need to set aside point-scoring and concentrate on the real issues.

Opting in to opt out

IT IS heartening to learn that last year a record number of 311 organ transplants were carried out in Ireland. That number represents a significant 11% increase on the previous year. But that 311 number is so much more than just a number, for what it means is that hundreds of people were last year given the gift of life.

For those on waiting lists themselves, wondering every day if they would receive a transplant in time, and for parents, waiting anxiously for that lifeline to be handed to their children, those organ transplants will have meant everything.

Organ donation is crucial when it comes to saving lives. It is, of course, a difficult area when it comes to bereaved families, and those who decide, so selflessly, to donate their loved one's organs are due our sincere thanks.

This newspaper has long supported the opt-out system when it comes to organ donation, a system that Health Minister Simon Harris has pledged to put in place by the end of this year. It is a system that has now been adopted by all but four EU nations, leaving the UK (apart from Wales), Germany, the Netherlands and ourselves the only countries lacking in this regard.

In light of the incontrovertible evidence illustrating that the system saves lives, we must commit to moving to the opt-out model before the year is out. Lives will be saved as a result.

Be safe this Easter

AS Easter weekend is an annual blackspot when it comes to road deaths and injuries, the gardai will rightly be out in force over the next few days, mounting checkpoints throughout the country and monitoring speed on our roads. Remember, if you are driving this weekend, the most important thing is to arrive safely at your destination. So take it easy and drive with care.

MUCH has been made over the past two months, and especially over the last two days since the verdict in the Belfast rape trial was given, of the culture surrounding the sport of rugby. It is seen as one of toxic masculinity, driven by those born into privilege and who believe they are superior to the other boys and young men around them, and desired by every woman they meet.

And, to an extent, it is true. I was born and raised on the southside of Dublin, which is home to many of the schools and clubs that feed into the provincial and national teams, and I have been surrounded all my life by so-called rugby buggers.

I went to St Michael's CBS in Eblana Avenue in the heart of Dún Laoghaire town, where the primary and secondary schools had only concreted playing yards. The best any of us there could do was kick a football or carefully dribble a sliotar on a hurl, or maybe shoot a few hoops at the basketball net. The two other boys' schools in the immediate area, Presentation College in Glashule and the Christian Brothers College in Monkstown, were different.

Uncouth

We were a GAA and soccer school, they were rugby. They had their own playing fields and we were compelled occasionally to borrow the one in CBC just to have a school sports day. My only experience of 'Pres' was after Inter Cert, when I started going to the legendary teenage disco there every Saturday night, and only then did I meet any of the boys who attended it.

This division wasn't completely class driven, but mostly so. My school was for the children of the working class, the oil delivery men like my father, the church sacristan like my best friend's dad. 'Pres' and CBC were where the middle-classes sent their sons or, if they had a few extra quid in their wallets, they might even stretch to Blackrock College.

We mostly took the bus from Ballybrack to school, but the middle-class boys all lived in the suburbs that were served by the train, and when I occasionally took it after the long walk to Killiney station, I always was dazzled not by their clothes, which undeniably were better, or by their behaviour, which often was uncouth, but by their confidence.

Long before Tom Wolfe sat down to write *The Bonfire Of The Vanities*, they were our very own Masters of the Universe; many, though by no means all, had futures mapped out and all they had to



PHILIP NOLAN

do was show up to claim them, while the rest of us had to work doubly hard to keep up.

In public, they were loud and entitled (it's funny what you remember, but I recall them putting their feet up on the train seats, something for which I could have expected a good clip on the ear if my parents found out), and they had the 'Dort' accent long before there even was a Dart.

If they were caricatures, it seemed to me that was because they chose to be, and I mostly watched them with a mixture of fascination and disdain. So, I suspect, did fellow 'Bracker' Paul Howard, who so deftly has chronicled the milieu in his Ross O'Carroll-Kelly novels, though the rugby set that wolfs each new one appears to see not satire, but celebration. They are so confident, they either don't know they're being ridiculed or, much more likely, they don't even care.

And, of course, I'm caricaturing too, because I probably was a little chipper back then than I am now, and annoyed that the rules I adhered to really didn't seem to apply to them. It is, after all, a long time ago.

Grandstand

Later, I developed a much wider social circle than just my school friends, and of the five who have formed my core group of close friends for over 30 years now, we still refer to three as 'the Pres boys' and the other two of us as 'the Eblana boys'. In an extended group, I even hang around with a few who went to 'Rock. Imagine.

All of them, as it happens, are very decent men, and while we got up to hijinks in our late teens and early 20s (well, pretty tame middling jinks, if I'm being honest), we all settled down much sooner than today's young men do. And at no point, ever, do I remember any of us talking about women the way some of the defendants and their other friends on

WhatsApp talked. I won't even rehash it – you've all read the base descriptions of the women they were with, and you all know that what they appear to crave most is not just sex but sex with the others present, the same way they seem to need a grandstand of alickadoos cheering on every try and conversion.

I genuinely can't think of anything less appetising than intimacy in front of an audience, and I have no idea why anyone would want to be involved in a threesome with a woman and one of his friends. I'm not prudish, and what happens in other people's bedrooms is none of my business so long as everyone has consented and is having a good time, but it's certainly not for me, and nor was it for anyone I knew.

We now know, very starkly, that this type of sexual behaviour is normalised in rugby, but are these men really any different to others? Judging by what I hear from parents, the answer is no.

Bombarded

Terror of pregnancy acted as a brake on excess when I was their age, but there are plenty of ways to avoid that now – and most of what we dreamed of doing might have been fuelled by a still photograph in a magazine passed furtively around the school yard, or a grainy, pirated VHS movie, but access to pornography was nothing like it is today.

And what we are seeing is the first generation not just exposed to porn, but bombarded by it, in all its brutal, loveless forms. It offers a world in which women are supplicant and willing, a world in which 'no' really means 'yes', a world of threesomes and orgies.

We read of young men addicted to Viagra in their 20s because they already are suffering performance anxiety, terrified they won't live up to the expectations of women who also have watched porn. Even when they date, they are not looking for a rounded woman who might be clever, or quirky, or funny. Everything is about appearance, and if they don't like it, they just swipe left on Tinder, the dating app effectively predicated on how you look, not who you are.

When they get these women into bed, they refer to them by the names we heard during this trial – but what is their opinion of themselves? Oh, yes, they're 'legends'.

It is profoundly depressing, but it would be a foolish mistake to put this all down to rugby culture, because it is everywhere. We live now in a pornography culture available at the tap of an app, a culture in which consent never is discussed.

Until we accept that, and tackle it with the ferocity these lads exhibit on the field, we cannot be surprised at the death of chivalry, the death of manners, and the death of basic human decency we saw in that Belfast courtroom.

Seize Nama lands and start building

FOR some considerable time this newspaper has been advocating the necessity to use Nama's landbank to build the houses that this country so desperately needs. Indeed, a leaked Government report on building costs identified very clearly that it is the cost of land that is so crucial to the viability, or non-viability, of such an undertaking.

There is much to be said, of course, for simply seizing the land from Nama – no ifs or buts. Just take the land required and get the building programme underway.

Even if Nama were to become builders themselves – bearing in mind that there is already an existing relationship with developers – this is an option that should not be entirely ruled out, once strict criteria are in place.

And while there is an argument, up to a point, for that approach, on balance, the preferred option would be to seize the land. Nama's job, after all, was to deal with our toxic banks, something which requires a different skillset to what is now so essential. Ultimately, therefore, the argument that Nama lands should be seized remains the better option.

Whatever the specifics of the way forward, however, with the Taoiseach advocating, as he did yesterday, that Nama should be building houses, at least the Government has now got the message and things are moving in the right direction.

In order for the project to succeed, vested interests must not be permitted to exert any influence. It is critical that they are kept at arm's length in this regard.

What is also vital is the establishment of a fast-track planning process. Time is of the essence here.

Essentially, however, the Government's acknowledgment of the role that Nama can play is a significant step forward. The implementation of such a simple and sensible plan can only have a hugely positive impact on the lives of hundreds of thousands of people.

It's there to be done. Let's get on and do it.

Address 'core' issue

IT is good to hear Junior Minister Ciarán Cannon say that, despite planning objections, the tech giant Apple does not intend to pull the plug on its data centre plan for Athenry. Nevertheless, the very fact that such assurances are required is still somewhat alarming.

Everybody must, of course, have the right to object to planning decisions but, equally, there is a necessity for the process itself to be much more streamlined.

How many businesses, after all, can afford to sit around waiting while such objections grind their way through the long, slow process? None, is the straightforward answer.

So while this particular issue specifically involves Apple, there is a broader message here and it is one that must be listened to – and acted upon.

Let's hope that in this instance the minister is right. But let's also address the system that allows this kind of situation to drag on for so long.

Far too many livelihoods depend on it.

Keep children offline

THAT paedophiles are targeting children on social media, luring them into unsavoury and potentially dangerous online 'friendships', is totally abhorrent. But it is just yet another reminder that the world of social media is not for children. Make no mistake about it, this is an adult world and a world, therefore, where only adults should be operating.

There is no reason why any child should be part of this, particularly when it appears that many children are going online without strict adult supervision.

Social media is an adult forum. It is not a world that any child should ever inhabit.

Go where you like, do what you like, be who you like: just don't ever turn your back on your county

WHEN I go up to town tomorrow, I'll see dozens of them. There will be women and men holding the hands of excited little boys and girls, all dressed in the two-tone blue strip of Dublin and waiting for Sunday's epic All-Ireland Final rematch against last year's defeated Mayo.

Nothing unusual in that, I hear you say, except for one thing – the town I will be strolling around will not be Dublin itself, but Gorey in Co. Wexford. Like other satellite towns that boomed in the bubble years, sleepy villages that overnight saw population explosions, in Meath and Louth, Wicklow and Kildare, the northern half of Wexford took in its fair share of Dublin refugees, myself among them. What was bought as a holiday house became my full-time home after my marriage ended, and I live now in splendid exile from the county of my birth.

In truth, it often feels very little different to actually living in Dublin anyway. There are times I could go days on end without ever hearing a Wexford accent, and seeing a Dublin football shirt on someone on the path actually is a daily occurrence. In fact, I once got the wrong end of the stick when a woman whose family used to own the local shop told me they referred to all Dubliners as 'the Blues'.

'Ah, the shirt thing,' I said.

'No,' she corrected me. 'They all come into the shop and ask for 20 John Player Blue.'

That mild mistake aside, one fact remains. We all can leave our counties – and, until relatively recently, that meant migration to Dublin, not from it – but we never leave our tribal loyalties behind. As a child at the time of one of the great waves of movement from the land to the capital, it was common to have friends whose parents never would dream of shouting for Dublin when a match was on, and many of the children took the lead from their parents, still decking themselves out in the colours of counties they visited just a few times a year.

In fact, if I am being honest, many disappointments at the hands, and feet, of Kerry in the '70s and '80s left me with an aversion to the entire county, but one I happily overcame when, after visiting, I decided it was ludicrous to dislike a place of such astonishing beauty.

Not everyone in the country can make the same leap of imagination, I know, and I even understand it. Let's be honest. The only people cheering Dublin on Sunday with be Dubs themselves. Thirty-one other counties will root for the underdogs



PHILIP NOLAN

as they attempt once again to beat the so-called curse that has kept the Sam Maguire out of Co. Mayo for 66 long years of disappointment and pain.

I can see the romance in that, and understand the elation and pride that would result if Mayo actually did make it across the line. Even though I'm a blow-in, I became engrossed in Wexford's great run in the hurling this year. I loved seeing the houses decked out in flags and bunting, the signs on the side of the road wishing the team well, the banners hung from bridges on the M11, the increased number of kids on the street with hurleys. It would be a push to believe I'm ever going to feel like a full-blown Wexican because, in my heart, Dublin always will be home, but it's nice to have a second county to root for without feeling like I'm letting anyone down.

Community

I was very taken with a story in yesterday's Irish Daily Mail about a woman called Kany Kazadi, born in Congo and an Irish citizen since 2015. With her friend Linda, from the Philippines but living here for 20 years, she saw an interest in GAA as a way to integrate with her community, and then developed such a passion for the sport she has been to all but three inter-county games this year. In advance of the final, she even has coloured her hair red and green – as vivid a display of the Mayo colours as ever you'll see.

And what she said actually touched me deeply. 'The GAA made me feel really comfortable, because I found something I could really bond over with the Irish people,' she explained.

What became her path to inclusion is, for those born in one county but living in another, a badge of identity that ties them together in a way that support for an English or Scottish soccer team never

could do. My nephew, born and raised in Surrey, is a fanatical Liverpool supporter, and we all know millions of Manchester United fans probably never even have been to the city.

That fandom of choice is a luxury we Irish don't have. We are duty-bound to support our own counties. Any failure to do so would be like turning your back on family, a betrayal that never would be forgiven.

This must be Purgatory for the counties that never win anything, in any GAA code, but their stoicism and loyalty are all the more admirable. Dubs have known many disappointments too, don't forget. You might not remember this, but we went from 1995 to 2011 without a win, even though the rest of the country still passionately believes we sneak into Croke Park every year and prise the cup from the President's hands, with only a curt 'thanks, bud' before it is filled with Coors Light in Coppers.

The truth is that Dublin might be dominant now, but they won't have it easy on Sunday and I wouldn't care to speculate on the outcome. In any case, a great game of football always is better than an easy win, and unless my heart feels like it is about to spontaneously splatter itself on the ceiling as the last minutes tick down, then I couldn't be bothered watching anyway.

Outsiders love this. As one English friend said to me, when they meet strangers, the first question usually is: 'What do you do?', because class underpins life there. The first question we tend to ask is: 'Where are you from?', and that more often than not is followed by a discussion of how the county is doing in the hurling, football or, increasingly, camogie, which has taken on spirited new life.

And what all this leads to is a tremendous amount of one-upmanship and occasional slugging. All of it good-natured because we understand, instinctively, the importance of tribe, the comfort we get from our colours (well, maybe not Wexford – sorry, neighbours, but that yellow and purple combo is shocking), and the joy of finally getting revenge on an arch rival.

Maybe Mayo will taste that sweetest of elixirs on Sunday, and if they do, fair play to them. They have fought hard for it, and their fans deserve it to make up for all the lonely nights driving back west contemplating what might have been.

As for me, well, I'll have my feet up at home in Co. Wexford, with maybe a can of draught Guinness to hand. When I shout at the television, my accent will get stronger again, and the air very likely will turn as blue as my shirt.

And, exiled or not, my county loyalty, my birthright, will be stronger than ever. Up the Dubs!

Snail-pace planning system is a disgrace

THAT Denmark has the ability, not only to grant the planning permission, but to actually build two Apple data centres in the time that it has taken our authorities to decide to deny planning for one such centre is very concerning.

We have had, of course, a peculiar relationship with the planning laws in this country with myriad instances over the years indicating that it was a process that, historically, was wide open to abuse. It is also a process that has traditionally dragged its heels when it comes to decision making.

Now Apple has abandoned its plans for the proposed centre in Athenry, citing the delays in planning over a three-year period as the reason for pulling out of the project. A project that would have provided some much-needed jobs for this part of Galway and would have created a state-of-the-art data centre.

There were a number of people prominent in their objections to the granting of the Apple planning approval. That is their democratic right and it is to be welcomed that citizens take notice and care about what affects their environment and their community.

On all kinds of planning issues there can be many genuine concerns, concerns that are due proper consideration and investigation before planning is either granted or denied. That is entirely as things should be.

The problem, therefore, does not lie with objectors per se. Rather it lies with a system that is structured in a way that allows for the process to be dragged on and on, not for a matter of a few months, but, as with the Apple project, for years.

That an €850million project should have the plug pulled because the company in question can no longer afford to wait around at the pleasure of our planning authorities is simply not acceptable.

This is not about specific approval or denial, this is about the need for a streamlined system that operates swiftly and efficiently and, crucially, reaches a decision within an acceptable timeframe.

Day a nation wept

NO-ONE who heard Emma Mhic Mhathúna's heartbreaking interview on RTE Radio 1's Morning Ireland yesterday could fail to have been moved. It was obvious indeed to all who listened that the normally steely presenter Audrey Carville was, herself, extremely upset.

As Emma Mhic Mhathúna echoed on radio the appalling reality of her terminal diagnosis as outlined in an interview with this newspaper yesterday, everyone listening knew that it was one of those broadcast interviews that will never be forgotten. Like Marian Finucane's interview with Nuala O'Faolain back in 2008. Tragic as Ms O'Faolain's situation was, however, she hadn't been denied the truth about her cancer, she hadn't been part and parcel of a cover-up.

Yet that is precisely where Emma Mhic Mhathúna, and Vicky Phelan, and Orla who rang into Liveline to say that she awaits news of her own fate next week, now find themselves. It's where countless other women may well still find themselves too. Seriously ill because no-one told them what had been going on. No-one gave them the information about their own health that they were entitled to.

The internal memo to departing HSE director-general Tony O'Brien in 2016 warned about negative media coverage over its information failure but stated that there was a communications strategy in place to deal with the fall-out.

What the HSE and CervicalCheck needs is not a communications strategy. What is needed now is a service that is trustworthy and fit for purpose, a service that will never again let down the women of Ireland in such a brutal, unfeeling and cavalier manner.

Her dignity left us in tears. Now, for Emma, her children and the women we betrayed, we must feel her rage

IDON'T even know if my little baby is going to remember me.' They were the 13 words that went through the heart of a nation like a spear, and left anyone who heard them simultaneously mute with sadness and with rage.

I wasn't driving yesterday when Emma Mhic Mhathúna was interviewed on RTE Radio 1's Morning Ireland, but I suspect if I had been, and had looked sideways, every driver on the road would have had tears running down his or her face.

The anguish in Emma's voice was so raw, so palpable, so desolate, it made for deeply uncomfortable listening, but it and the interview Emma gave to Jenny Friel in this newspaper yesterday were a powerful reminder of one thing, and it is this.

We must not lose sight of what the CervicalCheck scandal is all about. It is not about bureaucracy. It is not about Tony O'Brien, the hapless head of the HSE whose cyborg lack of emotion this week has been startling. It is not about politicians. It is not about procedures. It is not about defending or protecting the institutions of the State.

It is about women. Full stop. Women such as Vicky Phelan whose clarity of intent and refusal to be cowed have made her a towering figure in the history of our country, the woman who hopefully has changed forever the culture of omertà and - forgive the language, but I'm mad as hell - the relentless arse-covering that blights every aspect of public life.

It is about Emma Mhic Mhathúna, a lone parent to five children aged between two and 15. She is one of the 209 women whose smear tests were misread, some of whom already have died and others who face hearing the same devastating news that was delivered to Emma this week.

The failure to correctly identify obvious signs of cancer in a smear test Emma underwent in 2013 was the gravest of errors, but it might, if you were to be excessively charitable, be put down to human error.

Except that is not good enough, because no one person alone ever should be left to check every test, and we still have no idea if all the oversight protocols were followed in the laboratory contracted to assess them.

Even more chillingly, though, multiple signs were missed. Emma knew she was sick, but her concerns were routinely dismissed. At 35, as she was then, and with five children, who could know her own body better than Emma? Instead, she was treated with condescension.

When she was pregnant with her youngest child, Donnacha, she was worried about excessive tiredness and unusual



PHILIP NOLAN

discharges. Remember, she had not suffered these symptoms on the other four children, but still she was told they were effects caused by her pregnancy.

She was on immunosuppressants for Crohn's disease, which has been linked to a higher risk of cervical cancer, but that too was ignored. In July 2016, she went to A&E and was bleeding on the floor but she was told she would have to wait until the end of October for an ultrasound.

She was bleeding on the floor.

In front of them.

And they sent her home.

Later that year, another smear test picked up the fact that she had Stage 2B cervical cancer. The tumour had been present that July, the cause of the symptoms she begged them to investigate, and they did nothing.

Relentless

So she underwent gruelling, invasive treatment, including internal radiation that left her so sick she, at one point, was hospitalised for a month while a friend minded her children.

Finally, on April 4 just gone, she was told she was free of cancer, but less than a fortnight later found another lump in the same area. On Wednesday, she received the news that her cancer was back and has spread to her lungs, and that her condition is terminal.

Some time today, when you and I will be making plans for the weekend, hoping that Leinster win the Champions Cup and Ryan O'Shaughnessy wins Eurovision, Emma will sit in an office. And there, someone will tell her when she is going to die.

Even typing those words is making me shiver, so I struggle to imagine what it would be like to hear them. Imagine sending your children off to school, and trying to compose yourself before heading off to

that meeting. Imagine the emotions that would be running through your head - the regret, the sadness, the anger, at how needless and pointless the whole situation had become.

Often on this page, I indulge my frivolous side and write about the friveries that make life what it is, a vast ocean of possibility and an endless source of fun. For the third week in a row, though, even thinking about such trivialities is beyond me as I again have to address Ireland's profoundly negligent treatment of women, a national shame for which we not only never have fully atoned, but that we perpetuate.

Today, as has been the case every day since Vicky Phelan stood on the court steps and defiantly laid down a marker that she would not be muzzled by the State that was supposed to protect her, we will hear of efficacy rates in the testing process, and how the new HPV test will be more accurate, and we will ask why the head of the HSE - who was asked to resign 'respectfully' - declined to do so until last night when the pressure from Emma became to great, even for him.

Respectfully? Yesterday, when asked what he thought of Emma's interview, the one that those unconnected to her listened to as their lower lips trembled, Tony O'Brien said he hadn't heard it. Where is the respect in that? If I were him, I think the very least I would do, to prepare for my day, is listen to RTE's flagship news show, even if it cynically was to plan my arse-covering strategy.

But, look, enough of him - he will go now, unlamented - and back to Emma. It would be lovely if someone could give her a hug, then look her in the eye and tell her, yes, of course Donnacha will remember her as he grows up, but that sadly cannot be said with certainty. And this is where we come in. Long after the clinicians and the politicians are footnotes to history, we must remember the names of Emma, Vicky and all the women so badly failed in what now surely is the worst medical scandal in our history.

We must do everything in our power to demand change, to demand that women are listened to when they know they are sick, to accept that they know their own bodies better than anyone, and that if a concern is voiced, that voice must be listened to, immediately.

Above all, we must tell Donnacha, and his siblings Oisín, Mario, Séamus and Natasha, that their Mammy loved them very much and that we know this because, even through her tears, even with her voice shaking, even as she faced the toughest news of her life, she was thinking only of them, the joy they brought her, and the love they shared.

And for Emma Mhic Mhathúna, in her remaining time, we wish her only love and strength.