

THE SUNDAY TIMES

ESTABLISHED 1822

Rural broadband plan is risky and expensive – but essential

There are many reasons why the national broadband plan, unveiled last week, is proving so controversial but the timing of the announcement has not done the government any favours. The big reveal was delayed to give Fine Gael maximum impact ahead of the local elections on May 24, so it was inevitable that opposition parties would seek to nullify this strategy by criticising each and every aspect of the proposed deal.

Most of the opposition claims are spurious, the knockabout stuff you expect from politicians who can feel their seats threatened by a government initiative. Fianna Fail and Sinn Féin now find themselves in the uncomfortable position of attacking a project that will benefit rural Ireland, even as they trawl the same constituency for votes.

The most serious objection to the scheme, however, is the one that we highlighted last year, when it became clear that bringing broadband to the most remote areas of the country would cost the taxpayers €3bn. We said this was a bad deal and that the bidding process, shorn of competition, should start again. As we now know, the secretary-general of the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform is of the same opinion. In documents published by the government last week, it was revealed that Robert Watt opposed the plan on grounds of affordability, risk and value for money. He also held the view that the procurement process should be cancelled.

It is encouraging to know that the civil servant with responsibility for budgeting shares the same view as we do when it comes to spending public money. Yet these objections were never going to outweigh the political necessity to do the right thing for rural Ireland. That was quite apparent when Paschal Donohoe, the minister in charge of Mr Watt's department, took to the airwaves on Wednesday to defend the capital expenditure. Mr Donohoe, whose carefully built reputation for prudence seems to be undermined on a weekly basis, wriggled uncomfortably on the hook as he tried to

justify why he and his cabinet colleagues were ploughing ahead with the broadband project in the face of such strong internal opposition. At one point, he practically repeated the headline that accompanied our front-page story last Sunday, when we called Granahan McCourt Capital, the last remaining bidder, the "least worst option". Because that is precisely what it is. The government looked at every other alternative before making its decision, and all of them were worse than the deal on the table. They were either too expensive, involved a longer rollout or would have been resisted by the EU on public procurement grounds.

By pointing out the dangers inherent in this project, Mr Watt is doing his job. However, if civil servants advise, it is ministers who decide – and in pressing ahead with the project the government has looked at the broadest possible picture rather than the narrow spreadsheet. Viewed from Dublin and other urban areas where broadband is taken for granted, the notion of spending €3bn to bring the same service to householders who live in remote parts of rural Ireland can be characterised as pandering to voters. That may be the short-term effect but the bigger picture is more promising. While broadband has not achieved the status of a human right, it is essential for the provision of an increasing range of services. In that respect it is as vital to rural Ireland as electrification.

Towns and villages all across Ireland are calling for investment but, without suitable communications, they will be bypassed. High-speed broadband is the lifeblood of small business and homeworkers, constituencies that have the potential to keep many thousands of jobs in parts of the country that are currently being drained of human capital. Staying local means resources are not wasted by long-distance commutes to work. As more essential services migrate to the internet of things, the gap between the broadband haves and have-nots will become even more apparent than it is today. We can question how government has gone about its business, but the vision behind the national broadband plan is correct.

Trump and the art of the international agreement

This was supposed to be the weekend when Donald Trump would demonstrate the art of the deal by concluding a trade agreement with China. Instead, the talks broke down in mutual recrimination, and tariffs on \$200bn of imports from China to America were increased from 10% to 25%, with a promise from the White House to go further on a wider range of Chinese products.

That is international dispute No1 for the president. The other is with Iran. America is in the process of strengthening its military operations in the Gulf, including warships, a Patriot missile defence system and additional B52 bombers. The aim, according to the Pentagon, is "to defend US forces and interests in the region", though the manner of the deployment appears to go beyond the purely defensive. America, having pulled out of an Iran nuclear deal Trump described as "a disaster", is ramping up its economic pressure on the Iranian regime and an economy already in crisis.

Whether this economic conflict will be followed by military conflict, as many fear, is a big question. Just as Trump does not want a share-price depressing, prolonged trade war with China, neither does he want the kind of foreign war in the Middle East for which he criticised previous presidents. Last week's Hamas rocket

attacks on Israel show how quickly military action can escalate in the region.

The president's disputes have consequences for others, too. Philip Hammond, the British chancellor, has warned of the risks to the UK economy from a full-blown America-China trade war. The opening skirmishes have already damaged world trade. Exporters eyeing the Iranian market risk falling foul of the Washington sanctions regime.

There is a wider issue here. America, the EU and Britain should be on the same side in urging China to end unfair trade practices, not presenting a disunited front. Trump was not wrong in criticising the Iran nuclear deal, and European support for it has given Iran less succour than it hoped, but on this, too, a united front would have been better, as the US secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, made clear on a visit to London last week, urging Britain to stand alongside America in reining in Iran's "bloodletting and lawlessness". Mr Pompeo also expressed Washington's disquiet over the involvement of China's Huawei in Britain's 5G network.

The world is still getting used to Trump. Whether he is winning his trade war with China can be debated; in the end nobody wins trade wars. He is clearly succeeding in inflicting pain on Iran. And he will not be going away.

Whiplash and the brass necks

The government's proposals to cut awards for "soft tissue injuries" were halted so quickly by the judiciary last week that all concerned risked intractable whiplash themselves. Compensation levels for whiplash (which many experts doubt exists) and soft tissue injuries (otherwise known as minor bruising) are up to five times higher here than in the UK.

Last week yet another adventure park went under after insurers sought a premium of €40,000. Soft-play areas and all manner of other recreational activities are now under threat, at a time of increased

national obesity, from false and exaggerated insurance claims.

However, the judges warned that the Book of Quantum, the guidelines for awards, had to reflect the "going rate" and so any attempt to recalibrate it would prompt a spate of legal challenges.

Plaintiffs have a legitimate expectation of getting tens of thousands of euros for the most trivial injuries. If those who falsified or overegged their claims had the same expectation of a jail term for fraud at a "going rate" of five years, the issue might not prove so intractable after all.

Justine McCarthy
Why elected mayors deserve your vote

Plebiscite is designed to fail, but that's all the more reason why it shouldn't

If Roy Keane became the lord mayor of Cork, his first impulse might be to ban prawn sandwiches at city hall soirees. Then, you'd expect, he'd start kicking ass. With the country's second city on the cusp of rebirth and a population explosion, it needs a dynamic, straight-talking boss to kick it into shape, and Keane's kicking is legendary. He may be Irish by birth and Cork by the grace of God, but he's also Keane by name and keen by nature.

The government never tires of sweet-talking Corkonians these days. The population of the Munster capital, they say, will double in the next 20 years, growing at twice the rate of Dublin. Prospects of a city tram system, a rail link to the airport, high-density development by the harbour and a glittering necklace of outlying digital hubs have been dangled over Leeside by the government above in Dublin. But if that vision proves as half-hearted as the government's commitment to establishing directly elected mayors, the denizens of Cork should beware Greeks bearing gifts.

More than 380,000 people are eligible to vote in 12 days' time in separate plebiscites on creating directly elected mayors in Cork city, as well as in Limerick and Waterford cities and counties. A dearth of detail and a lack of public debate have put the plebiscites at risk of rejection by voters with little clue as to what the position will entail. The government's barely visible campaign started only a little over three weeks ago and some voters are under the misapprehension that, if they vote yes, they will elect their own mayor next month. The whole sorry shambles is reminiscent of another Keane axiom: fail to prepare, prepare to fail.

In Waterford, the Fine Gael mayor Declan Doocey has said he is advising constituents to vote no to the proposal. Indeed, the council there passed an emergency motion last month opposing the plebiscite. If politicians dread anything more than diluting their own power it is handing their power over to neophyte outsiders. Doocey has said that, after Ukraine elected a comedian as president, "you could have a sports star or actor with no experience in politics getting elected mayor".

Holding the plebiscite on the same day as the local elections is a masterstroke in mistiming. Asking councillors to endorse directly elected mayors is akin to expecting turkeys to vote for Christmas. Council candidates who have been stomping the campaign trail for weeks are unlikely to urge voters to back a proposal that would relegate them to the second division. In 2014, Dublin's 840,000-strong electorate was blocked from voting for the establishment of a directly elected mayor when 16 of Fingal's county councillors voted against holding a plebiscite

on the issue. Such is the current resistance in Waterford that even if its native son and magician Keith Barry were to wave his magic wand and hypnotise the entire electorate, only the pathologically foolhardy would bet on the outcome.

The bad timing, the lack of preparation and a widespread suspicion that Cork, Waterford and Limerick are being used as guinea pigs while Dublin is to get a citizens' assembly before the capital votes, all point to a proposal that has been designed to fail. The job specifications for an elected mayor should dispel any lingering doubts about that. What is proposed is a mayor with no development or planning powers – thanks to the penchant of some former councillors for brown envelopes, as chronicled by the Mahon tribunal – and severely limited power to do anything about public transport. Limerick is crying out for the rejuvenation of boarded-up parts of the city which fell foul over the years to a proliferation of shopping centres in the suburbs, but an elected mayor would, effectively, be handcuffed in addressing the problem.

More clout for new-style mayors is promised but the proposals produced by the Custom House in Dublin read more like a list of don'ts than dos. Civil servants are as notoriously reluctant to decentralise powers as the politicians they serve. So uninspiring are the proposed powers that the only debate the blueprint has ignited so far is about the €450,000 cost of the planned mayoral office

for each of the cities who will vote later this month. Scare talk about public expense can usually be relied upon to kill off a good idea.

There is an impressive history of politicians speaking out of both sides of their mouths when it comes to the devolution of local government powers. The Local Government Act 2001 provided for the creation of directly elected mayors, designed to commence with the 2004 local elections. An amendment to the act two years after it was passed, however, repealed that provision. The Fianna Fail-Green Party coalition promised after the 2007 general election to consider the issue again. A green paper was produced a year later and the election of Dublin's first such mayor was due in October 2010. The legislation facilitating it, the Local Government (Mayor and Regional Authority of Dublin) Bill 2010, was still meandering through the Oireachtas when that deadline came and went. The bill lapsed upon the dissolution of the Dail in 2011. Since 2016, Fianna Fail and the Greens have both published private member's bills restating the proposal. The expectation was that the plebiscite would go ahead in 2018 with the elections of the first incumbents this month.

Now, here we are, still waiting – and politicians wonder why people are cynical about their promises. David Cameron called the Brexit referendum in the firm belief that it would flop. Donald Trump's presidential candidacy was initially considered no more than a business-promotion opportunity, even by his own acolytes. The lesson that politicians should be careful what they don't wish for has yet to be learnt in Merrion Street.

Just because the plebiscites have been designed to fail is no reason why they should. In fact, it is a very good reason why they should not. Now is the time for Rebel Cork to live up to its name. The city's medieval streets, spectacular views from the vertiginous northside and its lovely riverside have been paralysed in red tape for too long. A people's mayor would have the authority to start unravelling it and bringing fresh life to the city. Ditto Waterford. Imagine how a strong, visionary mayor might interpret its civic sobriquet "the untaken city". Why shouldn't Ruth Negga or Blindboy Boatclub be the mayor of Limerick?

Cities such as London, Paris, Manchester, Barcelona and New York have blossomed under the direction of powerful, imaginative mayors. Voters in Cork, Limerick and Waterford have the opportunity to follow suit. The challenge is not to let apathy win out. Plato said one of the penalties of refusing to participate in politics is that you end up being governed by your inferiors. Another is that nothing much ever changes.

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Asking
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Christmas

Larissa Nolan

Don't let the media airbrush autism



Celebrity cases and talk of little professors overshadow a severe disorder

For parents of a child with a disability, well-meant sentiments can feel condescending. The broadcaster Brendan O'Connor has identified the patronising "head tilt" adopted when some people regard his daughter Mary, who has Down's syndrome.

For those with autistic children, in my experience, the corresponding response is the trite remark "ah sure, they all do that" as a blanket response to problematic behaviours. It translates to frazzled parents as a dismissal of their child's diagnosis, and an erasure of their efforts to deal with it. When people claim there's "nothing wrong" with your boy, it's a form of gaslighting. Like O'Connor said about the head tilt, it drives me potty.

While there have been improvements in autism awareness and education services, there has also been a worrying rise in veiled, sneering cynicism. With figures showing new cases of autism at a record high last year, some people believe kids are being overdiagnosed and parents are colluding in the medicalisation of normal aspects of childhood.

There are reasons for this perception. First, the broadening of the definition of autism has led to a doubling of rates since the start of the decade. While formerly it was only profound autism that was diagnosed – non-verbal or intellectually impaired – the widening of the criteria means most of those being identified today are on the mild end of the spectrum, often referred to as "high-functioning autism", or what professionals call "autism-lite".

Those with autism-lite are often portrayed as more gifted than disabled, more special than stigmatised. They are sometimes flatteringly referred to as "little professors" due to sky-high IQs coming at the great expense of social skills.

Is it so unimaginable that some people might even like to be labelled as such? The comedian Amy Schumer, whose husband Chris Fischer was diagnosed in adulthood, frames it as the new attention deficit disorder. Comparing the two, she said: "When ADD was the new thing, you were embarrassed to be diagnosed and now it's like, 'Oh, I have that.'"

Increasingly, it is members of this group who are the most visible representatives of autism, the acceptable face of the neurodevelopmental disorder. In the past fortnight, RTE1 has featured dynamic young women talking about their late diagnosis of autism on two shows: Aoife Dooley on Cutting Edge and Ciara-Beth Ni Ghríofa on The Tommy Tiernan Show.

Illustrator Dooley, 28, was the most impressive guest I've seen on Cutting Edge: charming, witty, insightful, intelligent. She told how her diagnosis a year before was "soothing" after feeling so long misunderstood. While live television was "daunting", she coped without any overt sign of the typical issues that those of us who live with autism know as its hallmarks.

Teenager Ni Ghríofa was precociously sociable. She batted off Tiernan's bold jokes with eloquence. When asked how her autism became apparent, she said she couldn't bear

scratchy school jumpers or sudden noises and didn't get semantics or sarcasm. Confused, Tiernan commented: "I don't get a sense now you're wired any differently." Ni Ghríofa replied: "The more you get to know me, the more apparent it becomes. It's no more than anything else, I suppose."

But it is. Even at the lower end of the spectrum, autism is a life-changing, punishing, constantly challenging disorder that has a profound impact on the whole family. For the child, it means intolerable assaults on the senses, adherence to rigid routines, serious issues with social interaction, problems at school and anxiety. It typically makes itself very loud and clear, early on. Creche and preschool refusals are not uncommon.

In severe form, it is Martin Finn, who cannot speak, but can sing, performing Sweet Disposition on The Late Late Show, standing on the balls of his feet, never once looking at the camera, his left hand out, in the autistic behaviour of stimming – a coping mechanism.

It is also, as the autism campaigner Adam Harris has described, "like being blasted into outer space and arriving on a planet not built for you".

In the well-intentioned zeal to spread the message of autism as a vast spectrum, we've cleansed the truth of this disorder. We are in danger of making it so broad, it has become meaningless to many, damaging its public perception. We are inadvertently airbrushing out the severe cases, the profoundly autistic who will never talk, socialise, get married, have careers; who need respite, rehabilitation and residential care. Yet all are "stoic heroes", as the autistic author Naoki Higashida wrote, and they deserve visibility, too.

Not to do so is to devalue autism itself.

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Hard Brexit has gone. So what now, hard Brexiteers?

When the British prime minister's withdrawal agreement was voted down the first time, in January, it established a new record, being defeated by 230 votes. Last week's rerun saw some progress – a defeat by “only” 149 votes – but in normal times any government motion twice defeated so heavily would by now have been put out of its misery.

This, however, is the world of Brexit, and things are different. When the agreement comes back to the House of Commons this week for a third time, Theresa May will be hoping that the pressure of the clock, parliament's clear majority against a no-deal Brexit, and the threat to Brexiteer Tories that Britain will never leave the EU will be enough to swing it. On past form, that looks optimistic, even though it would bring relief to British business and voters alike. It would also be welcomed in Ireland and Brussels where politicians have spent the past few days railing against the UK's plan to impose hefty tariffs on the import of certain agricultural products in a no-deal scenario.

Brexiteers do indeed fear being caught up in a “Hotel California” exit, courtesy of a line in that song: “You can check out . . . but you can never leave.” But as anybody who has ploughed through the lyrics of that Eagles' number knows, and as the band's own members have admitted, you can make of them whatever you want.

It is a bit like that with Mrs May's withdrawal agreement. Brexiteers can, in insisting on the purest form of Brexit, tie themselves up in ever-tighter legal knots. Or, as we have argued and an increasing number of pragmatic Brexit supporters now accept, you can make of the agreement what you want and, while sometimes through gritted teeth, support it. One former cabinet minister who resigned over Brexit, David Davis, voted in favour of Mrs May's deal. Another, Esther McVey, has suggested she might. Others could be ready to move.

Brexiteer Tory MPs who do not shift, instead of seizing the opportunity of what for some is almost a lifetime's ambition,

risk exchanging that for a permanent diet of sour grapes. Years of moaning will lie ahead of them, blaming Mrs May's failure to secure the kind of Brexit they wanted, but the fault will lie with them. There will be ample opportunity, once the withdrawal agreement has passed and Brexit has occurred, for shaping Britain's future relationship with the EU under a different prime minister.

As Matthew Elliott, who was chief executive of Vote Leave, writes online for us today: “If MPs vote down the withdrawal agreement for a third time this week, Brexit probably won't happen.” Policy Exchange, an influential think tank in the Tory party, has commissioned three legal experts, Professor Guglielmo Verdirame, Sir Stephen Laws and Professor Richard Ekins, who conclude that the safeguards and assurances “do provide the UK with ample legal comfort, and considerably more than seems to be understood by many”.

Nor should Tory MPs be hanging on the coat-tails of Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). A better case of the tail wagging the dog would be hard to find. As long as the DUP believes it has the massed ranks of the Tory European Research Group behind it, it can adopt the hardest of hard lines. If that were to change, it is not difficult to envisage the DUP, too, clambering on board.

This will be another big week for Britain's parliament and Brexit. If Mrs May's deal is voted down again, any number of possibilities open up. They will not include a no-deal Brexit on March 29.

There could be endless extensions of the article 50 process, or a “Norway-plus” Brexit, in which Britain remains in the single market and, to all intents and purposes, a customs union with the EU. There could be a second referendum, which may overturn the result of the 2016 vote, or a general election, a Corbyn government and a softer, “socialist” Brexit.

The time for playing games is almost over. Tory MPs have it in their hands to prevent outcomes that would be much worse, for them, than accepting Mrs May's withdrawal agreement. They should face up to their responsibilities.

Long road lies ahead for the extension of our voting rights

The people of Ireland are poised to change the constitution to allow citizens living outside the state to vote in Irish presidential elections. Two out of three voters polled by Behaviour & Attitudes for The Sunday Times said they would vote yes in a referendum to extend voting rights to citizens living in Northern Ireland and further afield. The vote, originally planned for May, has been moved to October because of the demands on Oireachtas legislative time imposed by the passage of a comprehensive law to cope with a possible no-deal Brexit.

Fewer than a quarter of voters – 22% – said they would reject the proposal, and 14% were undecided. Some supporters of centre-ground parties have privately voiced fears that opening up the presidential elections to citizens outside the Republic could throw up dramatically different outcomes.

In the 2011 presidential election, the late Martin McGuinness attracted almost 250,000 votes, and came third ahead of David Norris and Fine Gael's Gay Mitchell with 13.7% of the poll. What would he have polled if Irish citizens in Northern Ireland had been entitled to vote? And is that a good reason to reject the proposed extension of the franchise? The electorate thinks not, according to the result of the Behaviour & Attitudes poll, though opinions can shift significantly when voters engage on a proposal closer to polling day.

Academic studies suggest out-of-state voters do not dramatically alter the results of domestic elections. In 2013, 74,000 of the 1m Australians living overseas voted in their federal elections. The experience of Canada is often cited: 2m Canadians living in America and overseas are entitled to vote in domestic elections, but only 15,600 bothered to register for the 2015 general election – and just 11,000 of those cast a ballot. However, if 1m Canadians were living just across the border in Buffalo, New York, the uptake in the out-of-state franchise might be higher. No fewer than 530,000 Irish passports have been issued to people living in Northern Ireland since 2016, a figure that suggests the number of Irish citizens there is significantly higher.

Some have suggested that extending the franchise only for presidential elections does not go far enough and, if citizens are to be enfranchised for one election, they should be given the vote in all. Others have argued for dedicated Northern Ireland seats in the Seanad, but this is a chamber crying out for wider reform than a mere tinkering of seats to accommodate our northern brethren.

On the basis of the 65% support that the proposal now enjoys to extend presidential voting rights, it appears likely it will be adopted this autumn. Further franchise extensions can be only a few more years away.

Feast day is turning ghoulish

St Patrick's Day is fast becoming the springtime equivalent of Halloween: a low-key Irish holy day that has been exported, processed, repackaged, repurposed and flogged back to us by the Americans.

They were the ones who pioneered the parades, bathed their public buildings in green light, draped themselves in enough green stretch polyester to roof the rain forests, and introduced us to a blunt instrument – unknown in these parts –

called a shillelagh. Instead of pinning his shamrock to his lapel, in traditional fashion, Leo Varadkar copied President Donald Trump this year and wore it in his top pocket, like a little window box.

The similarities with Halloween don't stop with the changing styles of fancy dress, either. This year, St Patrick's Day brings the threat of a scary man, who looks like a badly carved pumpkin after a week in the rain, turning up on our doorsteps in the near future. Trick, or treat?

Justine McCarthy
Unity is best way to ease pain of the past

A united Ireland would be fitting tribute to innocent victims of Bloody Sunday

Seven of the 14 innocent people fatally shot by British soldiers on Bloody Sunday were teenagers. They went peacefully on to the streets of Derry on January 30, 1972, to object to the sectarian implementation of the British government's internment order issued the previous August.

Every one of the 342 individuals whom soldiers had rounded up for jail without trial in the initial phase of internment belonged to the predominantly Catholic nationalist community. Many, if not most of them, had no connection with the IRA. Over four days, 20 civilians were killed and about 7,000 others fled or were forced from their homes. Of the 1,981 people arbitrarily imprisoned during the four years that internment lasted, only 107 were not part of the nationalist community, which had been systematically treated as a second-class citizenry since the foundation of Northern Ireland.

When those seven teenagers joined a peaceful march that fateful Sunday, they had justifiable cause to protest. Who would have expected them to return home in coffins? For decades afterwards, the British establishment closed ranks around the soldiers, accusing the dead and wounded survivors of being “hooligans” who started it all by shooting and bomb-throwing. It would be 28 years before the Saville inquiry found not one of the 28 people shot had posed a threat that day. After Lord Saville prompted a comprehensive apology in 2010 by the British prime minister David Cameron, the cover-up which began almost immediately after the massacre, including the Widgery inquiry traducing the innocent dead, was no longer sustainable.

A police investigation commenced. Last Thursday, Northern Ireland's prosecution service announced that, of 17 soldiers still alive who were implicated in the massacre by the Saville inquiry, just one, Soldier F, would face charges, for two murders and four attempted murders. In Derry, the families received the news with palpable sorrow and resilient grace.

The reaction could not have been more different in London. Howls of indignation that even one soldier was to stand trial emanated from Westminster. Gavin Williamson, the defence secretary, said his department would “drive through a new package of safeguards to ensure our armed forces are not unfairly treated”. Williamson previously said he intended legislating to prohibit the prosecution of soldiers for killings perpetrated more than 10 years earlier. A government that has proved itself an ass in recent months now intends proving the law is one too by passing legislation designed to put the state beyond its reach, even when it comes to murdering its own citizens.

Before last Thursday's prosecution announcement, Williamson described the

cases against the soldiers as a “witch-hunt” that “completely turns the stomach of the British people”. The sensitivities of the people of Northern Ireland, by implication, were deemed irrelevant. His is not a lone voice. Michael Fallon, a former defence secretary, has said any decision made about the soldiers by the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland (PPS) should require the approval of the attorney-general in London, who would consider “the wider public interest”.

Some in London have peddled the untruth that, while soldiers are being investigated, paramilitaries are going scot-free. In fact there are IRA prosecutions currently before the courts. Others have decried the investigation of elderly former soldiers. Those same politicians dared not advocate clemency when Gary Glitter, a septuagenarian former pop star, was jailed for sexually abusing children. Do they sincerely believe that somebody who molested a minor ought to be prosecuted regardless of the perpetrator's age, but that age ought to be a get-out-of-jail card for someone who has murdered minors?

When it comes to Ireland, Britain's political class never learns from its errors. Just as the executions of the Easter Rising's leaders led to independence and as Bloody Sunday proved a recruitment magnet for the IRA, the despicable utterances emanating from Westminster are accelerating the conversion to Irish reunification.

Which brings us to the reaction in the Republic, where the cappuccino chatterati decry the atrocities north of the border before hastily clarifying that unification would cost this part of the island too much hard cash. South of the border, we're so busy congratulating ourselves on our new-found tolerance, openness, inclusiveness and embrace of human rights, we cannot see the

mote in our own eyes. As citizens, our mission statement is Bunreacht na hÉireann, which explicitly aspires to a 32-county Ireland. This aspiration is not conditional on how much dosh we have in the bank.

The closer Brexit staggers towards us, the more Northern Ireland seems to be receding into its hellish past, led by the Tories and the DUP. The latter wants to stop the six counties joining the rest of the world in the 21st century by denying citizens their cultural, social and healthcare entitlements. To borrow from Lord Denning's memorable justification for prolonging the miscarriage of justice against the Birmingham Six, an appalling vista is unfolding. Theresa May and Michael Gove have talked of bringing Northern Ireland back under direct London rule in the post-Brexit twilight. This is a government motivated by its urge to set its own human rights standards and whose Northern Ireland secretary, Karen Bradley, said that killings by soldiers were “not crimes” but orders obeyed with dignity.

More than four years ago, the British government made a commitment under the Stormont House agreement to establish legacy bodies for establishing the truth about historical killings. That has not happened. To the contrary, it emerged last month that significant information was withheld by the PSNI about cases under examination by the police ombudsman.

While these eerily reminiscent events have transpired, the families of 11 other Catholic civilians who were killed in the Ballymurphy massacre in Belfast by soldiers of the same Parachute Regiment that rampaged on Bloody Sunday have been listening to harrowing evidence at their inquest. Witnesses have recalled a woman crying out that she could not see, unaware that half her face had been shot off; of a soldier walking up to a wounded man lying on the ground and finishing him off with more gunfire; of soldiers tossing the dead into army vehicles, flinging them in by one arm and one leg.

Simon Coveney, the foreign affairs minister, has called out May's government for reneging on its commitments to justice, after being pilloried for saying he hoped to see Ireland united in his lifetime. There is no doubt that this island has entered the transition to unity. We are now in the persuasion phase but, before we try to convince reluctant unionists to join a brave new all-Ireland, citizens of the Republic must acknowledge our duty to fellow citizens in Northern Ireland. We cannot leave them in the lurch again.

As we watch the shutters coming back down on the border, we must acknowledge that a united Ireland is not a luxury we cannot afford. It is a debt we owe and is long overdue. justine.mccarthy@sunday-times.ie

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A government that has proved itself an ass now intends proving the law is one too

Larissa Nolan

Man up, Hollywood, and stop making boys wimps



Males are weak, females are cool and powerful – that's real fantasy, Disney

The other day I praised my son for being “manly”. He'd handled a situation with a maturity beyond his nine years, showing honour, courage and responsibility. It seemed a fitting compliment. Yet he looked shocked. “I don't want to be that,” he told me. “That's a bad thing.” I reminded him of his school motto, right there on the crest of his uniform: “Viriliter Age”, meaning act manly. It was sad, as a mother, to have to reassure a boy his innate being is, in fact, a good trait. Not something to feel ashamed of, or guilty about.

That any child should feel bad about their gender identity is particularly rotten in a supposedly progressive society. Yet it wasn't wholly a surprise, considering the cultural brainwashing from a radical left agenda that is being force-fed to younger generations in the form of cinema.

It seems impossible to go to a kids' movie nowadays without being lectured on Hollywood's twin pillars of liberalism: political correctness and identity politics. I just want to bring them out for an afternoon of innocence and pleasure, not ideology and propaganda. Instead it's like being at mass.

Worryingly, the constant message being transmitted is one of emasculation. Boys are inept imbeciles who require eye-rolling, risk-taking, can-do girls to come to their rescue. They're to be ridiculed, chastised and denigrated. Males are weak, females are cool and powerful – in every film. It was wrong when Disney always portrayed princesses as helpless victims whose main talent was attracting princes, but it's equally wrong to go to the other extreme.

Take The Lego Movie 2: The Second Part, in which the protagonist Emmet Brickowski is

shown in a personality assessment to be “weak, naive, simple, powerless”. The supposedly oppressive patriarchy, for which all boys need to apologise, is highlighted when an alien asks his girlfriend Wyldestyle: “So you fought and built and kicked butt – and the hapless male was the leader?”

The villain of The Lego Movie 2 appears to be toxic masculinity. Emmet loses his way when he falls in with a loner tough guy action hero called Rex Dangervest; and Finn, the real-life boy in the movie, triumphs only after he gets in touch with his feminine side.

Ralph Breaks the Internet was such insidious dogma I nearly walked out of the theatre. Ralph is a manipulative, controlling bully who wants to possess the female lead Vanellope. He turns from a needy, clingy sap into a giant monster of his own “bad” feelings. At the end, we get to point and laugh at Ralph when he's dressed up as Snow White and kissed by a frog.

“
Women in the movies get everything their own way. That's not equality

Hollywood is telling us there is no place in society for masculinity. What might this do to boys' mental health, and self-esteem, at a time when we pride ourselves on such concerns? I can't decide which outcome is worse: that our boys grow up to be self-loathing male feminists, or react with resentment.

What kind of sexist attitude does it engender in young girls when all their heroines are hard-bitten female leaders who, for all their independence and achievements, are obsessed with men and competing against them? Women in the movies get everything their own way. That's not equality.

It has left me questioning whether it is irresponsible to bring children to what should be “family-friendly” cinema while this plague is infecting screens. Am I, worse, allowing it?

Professor M Keith Booker, author of Disney, Pixar and the Hidden Messages of Children's Films, believes it is right to be vigilant. “The complexities and responsibilities associated with being a parent to kids who watch movies need to be dealt with, by all parents, whatever their political persuasion,” he says. “Films do not function in a vacuum but rather reinforce lessons children receive from other cultural influences.”

Jordan Peterson, a clinical psychologist, worries that our children are not being educated, “they are being indoctrinated, and there's absolutely no excuse for it”. There's certainly no justification for millionaire movie bosses reprogramming children in order to make a fashionable political point.

Peterson's advice on what to do as a parent of boys is to instil courage, and teach them to rely on themselves to prevail, step forward with confidence, and shoulder the burden. In other words, act manly.

COMMENT



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Larissa Nolan

#MeToo adds insult to injury for rape victims



How does it feel to be raped? In the clamour to be the most righteous of the #MeToo era, the voices of those who have actually experienced it are rarely heard. Maybe it's because our views don't fit the dogma.

Here's how I describe it. When I was raped, my first instinct was to jump out of the window of the house. Not to kill myself, but to save myself. I was in such fear of the man who had entered my room as I slept that I was willing to jump from a building to escape. That's how horrifying rape can be.

The author Naomi Wolf, who was raped by a male babysitter as a child, made similar comments recently. "Every woman I know who has been raped thought she might have been about to die. What is damaging is being nothing in the presence of another human being."

No one I know who has been raped as an adult woman supports the #MeToo movement. At best, they see it as a well-intentioned but misguided campaign which was hijacked by militants ignorant of the reality of rape. At worst, they feel used by opportunists who have weaponised compassion in a bid to control sexual behaviour and undo years of sexual liberation that women have enjoyed.

As someone who has been raped, I see it as a vigilante movement with a dangerous open-door policy that allows some vengeful people to stand with genuine victims. Victims' views often contradict the tenets of #MeToo ideology. I've been called a "rape apologist" by those who purport to champion victims, yet haven't the empathy to consider they might be talking to one. They don't want to hear



Not yet a year on, we are beginning to see how the movement is turning on us

that we find the blanket "I believe you" stance to be offensive and damaging. Instant belief is patronising and dismissive; as bad as instant disbelief. It renders truth meaningless.

We are appalled by the notion of an innocent person being convicted. In the kangaroo court of #MeToo, you can be guilty because accused – a travesty of justice that encourages false allegations. We know the only thing as bad as being raped is being wrongly convicted of it.

Many of us feel the movement has been bad for rape victims and for women in general. Not yet a year on, and we are beginning to see how it is turning on us.

Asia Argento, the figurehead of the movement, is accused of being an abuser herself, of paying off a child star with whom she had sex. Actress Roxanne Pallett falsely accused a male housemate on *Celebrity Big Brother* of "beating her up". Both these incidents are damaging to the gravity of rape as a crime, and the public's perception of the rape victim. So too is broadening the definition of rape to the extent that every woman can claim to be a victim. The message that sends out is: if everyone's a victim, no one is.

We're troubled by how women are encouraged to reframe past sexual experiences as rape. This is irresponsible and damaging, and it takes agency from those who have been through the trauma. Ask them: they'll tell you preventing rape where possible is preferable to any useless sympathy after the fact. What we don't want is to be terrified of sex.

This is why the empowering No Means No consent policy must not be discarded in preference to the "progressive" but puritanical affirmative model, which reduces women to Victorian maidens. The penis is not a lethal weapon, as Germaine Greer says in her new book, *On Rape*. Greer also states we are not irrevocably damaged in body and soul by what happened to us, and this is a common feeling among raped women.

However, as a rape victim herself, will Greer be listened to or sidelined? Because it seems that, in certain circles, unless your viewpoint is in line with the orthodox, no one cares what happened to you.

QUOTES OF THE WEEK

"I don't have a passion for baking; I have a passion for eating cakes"

Prue Leith sets out her qualifications to be hosting *The Great British Bake Off*

"I was eating chocolate biscuits, I had a blonde bombshell in front of me, and the rest is history"

Fianna Fail councillor Joe Queenan claims he fell victim to an RTE sting

"Many aspects of the Irish constitution are still sexist and backward"

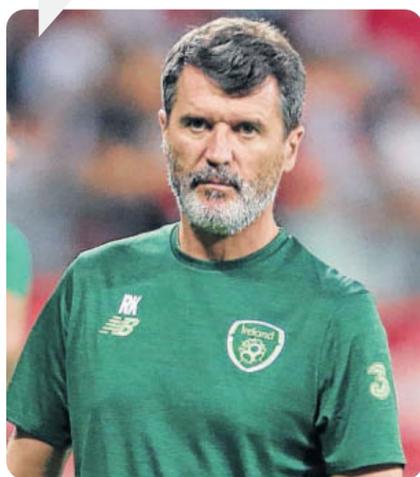
Taoiseach Leo Varadkar says some clauses are insulting and outdated

"Nuns don't get cervical cancer"

What the relative of a woman who died was told by a consultant, as revealed by the Scally report

"You're always just looking for an argument, like you are now"

Assistant Ireland football manager Roy Keane's reported comment to striker Jon Walters



David Quinn
Why we can't lose all faith in CervicalCheck



Screening scheme clearly needs improvement, not abandonment

All professions work behind a veneer of authority. The experts are supposed to know best, and you should take their word on trust. When that trust collapses, however, the effects are disastrous for society. This can happen when you suspect the experts are either incompetent or self-serving. Then you don't know to whom to turn, or you start listening to snake-oil salesmen and hucksters instead. Politicians, bankers, clergy, gardai, journalists and now doctors have all suffered from a public loss of trust in recent times. Now the CervicalCheck scandal has further eroded trust in doctors. The Scally review of the controversy, published last week, unveiled an arrogant and defensive attitude on the part of some medical professionals towards some female patients.

One woman asked her doctor why she had not been informed of a cervical smear test which had resulted in a false negative. "What difference does it make now?" he asked her. "How will I be informed from now on?" she wondered.

He replied: "Watch the news." Another doctor wouldn't tell his patient whether her false negative from an earlier smear test meant that she had developed cancer several years prior to diagnosis. She told the Scally review: "He shut down, refused to answer the simplest of questions, and ushered me out the door with no support and many questions."

The family of one woman who had died said a consultant emphasised that she had been a smoker. Smoking increases the chance that the HPV virus will eventually lead to cervical cancer. He then observed: "Nuns don't get cervical cancer."

Reacting to this, Scally commented: "Now if that isn't paternalism, what is? It's verging on misogyny."

It might be misogyny; it is certainly arrogant. But doctors with a poor bedside manner weren't invented today or yesterday. Does the same culture exist in other areas of medicine? Probably, but the Scally report says the BreastCheck scheme "has a culture of open and supportive communication with its clients in relation to all aspects of their care and experience". BreastCheck, like CervicalCheck, is aimed only at women.

If an opinion poll were conducted today, how many Irish people would say that diagnoses of cancer had been withheld from the women at the centre of this controversy? It's an important point, because if members of the public believe that doctors knew a given woman had cancer and did not tell her, that would be considerably worse than not telling her about a false negative from some years earlier.

However, women did not have cancer diagnoses withheld. If they had, that would have grossly, negligently and catastrophically affected their health. What actually happened is that, when a given woman was diagnosed with cervical cancer, her past medical records were analysed, and it might have been discovered that she had previously had a cervical smear and received a false negative, which is to say abnormal cells were not detected. Abnormal cells might or might not lead to the development of cervical cancer later.

When the earlier test was reviewed, it may have been found that she was given an incorrect reading. However, as the Scally report makes clear, when you know the woman now has cancer, you are reading the old sample with the benefit of hindsight.

The discovery that many women previously received false negatives and were not told is at the heart of this scandal. Yet to repeat, diagnoses of cancer were not withheld and therefore treatment was not denied or delayed. If a large proportion of the public believes the contrary, then the erosion of trust in doctors is greater than it ought to be. In that case, the ability of doctors to serve their patients properly is

further compromised because their authority is further undermined.

A small number of journalists, in particular Susan Mitchell, have drawn attention to the way in which the scandal has been reported. Mitchell places much blame on the media for causing public confusion. She has written that the media "repeatedly failed to do basic fact-checking and allowed a single narrative to be told by one party: medical negligence lawyers".

Whether the lawyers are impartial or not, their claims need to be fact-checked. For example, it is suggested that the vast majority of the 221 women involved are victims of medical negligence. There is no hard evidence for this. The Department of Health has told *The Irish Times*: "Determination of negligence is one which can only appropriately be made by a court, and the department is not in a position to comment beyond acknowledging that no such determination has been made at this time." In other words, we don't know how many of the 221 cases involve negligence.

This question is integral to the amount of compensation that will eventually be paid to the women involved. Not being told about a previous false negative is one thing, but if those false negatives were the result of negligence, that is something else entirely. Scally has already said the labs used by CervicalCheck, including those in America, are run according to quality management processes. Nonetheless, the investigation by the UK's Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists might conclude that some labs are returning an unusually high number of false negatives. That investigation is vital, whatever it finds.

A huge black cloud on the horizon is that the US labs fear that the public and political mood in Ireland will lead to large payouts being made to hundreds and maybe thousands of women who have received false negatives, even though incorrect readings are an unavoidable part of the screening process. This is why they want the Irish state to indemnify them against future claims. No lab could stay in business if an excessive number of false negatives ended in lawsuits.

We are in severe danger in this controversy of turning the perfect into the enemy of the good. The CervicalCheck programme is clearly beneficial, but it has inherent flaws. If the inbuilt imperfections leave the state open to unending and expensive lawsuits, and the labs stop co-operating with the programme, then the system could collapse. That would be the most tragic and disastrous end possible to this sorry episode.

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Not being told of a previous false negative is one thing, but if those results were a result of negligence, that is something else entirely