

## THE SUNDAY TIMES

ESTABLISHED 1822

## A way out of virus restrictions – but not electoral stalemate

We wrote last Sunday that, with Covid-19 largely under control, the task for the government was twofold: unwinding the restrictions that have put the economy into cold storage and managing expectations as to how that can be achieved. On Friday, Leo Varadkar met that challenge. There will be arguments about the details that emerged from the taoiseach's presentation, but what cannot be disputed is that there now exists a clear road ahead – albeit one that may contain a few unexpected potholes.

The taoiseach himself knows that the cabinet's plan is likely to prove controversial, alluding in a television interview on Friday night to the disputes that are likely to erupt at a later stage. This is inevitable. After all, the economy, for the most part, went into lockdown at the same time. As it reopens, however, some sectors will be favoured over others, leading to resentment and anger among business owners who feel that they are being further disadvantaged by the schedule of reopenings.

We believe that the government, for the most part, has made the right call. It is easy to underestimate the challenge that it faced. The daily recitation of medical statistics has indicated for some weeks that we are winning the battle to suppress Covid-19. But even as the news got better, we remained subject to the most extreme loss of civil liberties experienced in our lifetime. This created understandable frustration for many people and led to unrealistic expectations ahead of Mr Varadkar's announcement two days ago.

The single most important point to remember is that Covid-19 has not been eliminated: it has been suppressed. This has been achieved only because the public proved exceptionally compliant when asked to stay at home and take other measures designed to prevent the spread of the virus. If we rush the exits now, it is inevitable that the outbreak we sought to prevent by closing the country on March 27 will take place anyway, undermining the national effort that has got us this far.

It is welcome news that over-70s will be encouraged to leave their homes for exercise from this week and that movement

for the public has been increased from 2km to 5km, but unwinding the lockdown proper will not begin until May 18. Further easing of restrictions will take place at three-weekly intervals up until August 10.

But it is clear from the conditions attached to the various activities as they are unwound that the country will be operating in a completely different world, both economically and socially. While there are promising developments on the testing of drugs to treat Covid-19, there is much uncertainty about the prospects for a vaccine to combat the disease. There may be one in a couple of years, or there may never be one at all. What this means is that a high level of fear will remain in significant parts of the community even after August 10 when the "new" normal comes into being.

For good reasons, social distancing is going to become second nature for many people and, even with enhanced testing and contact tracing, that will lead to unimagineable changes in our way of life. Fear will have a dampening effect on consumer behaviour, with inevitable consequences for the public finances, which are massively dependent on the taxes generated by spending. The budgetary implications are alarming and will present the next government with unpalatable choices.

Against that background, the discussion document produced by Fianna Fail and Fine Gael in an attempt to woo the Green Party and independents into a coalition looks more deluded by the day. In this parallel universe, a country that has been subject to an economic collapse not seen since the Great Depression can promise billions in increased public spending while maintaining taxation at current levels.

The challenge is so great that it will be a miracle if Mr Varadkar and Micheál Martin, the Fianna Fail leader, can actually put a government together, never mind one that lasts a full term. As the economic implications become clearer, the task will get ever harder. Mr Varadkar is fighting a daily battle on the public health front; he may soon have to prepare for another one on the political front. Only an incurable optimist could rule out the prospect of another general election – even though it would be contested in the most extraordinary circumstances.

## State may struggle to step up to the plate for restaurants

For many people, a night out in a favourite restaurant with friends is one of the pleasures of life. Sadly, it is one of the social activities most at risk in the post-Covid-19 future. Most restaurants operate on wafer-thin margins, dependent on extravagant mark-ups on wine and other alcoholic drinks to create the profits to finance the operation. Running a restaurant is not cheap and the week's takings can be seriously affected by "no-shows", a phenomenon that was being reported with increasing regularity just a few months ago, as the economy began to exhibit some of the worst excesses of the Celtic tiger. Some restaurants cured that problem by taking credit card details in advance and charging a fee if the parties failed to honour their booking. Alas, there is no easy fix for the coronavirus, which has left the industry facing an existential crisis.

Chances are that by the time this pandemic has played itself out, many restaurants will have permanently closed their doors. Seasonally adjusted employment in the sector in the final quarter of 2019 stood at 179,800, according to industry figures. Employment in ancillary services was estimated at a further 72,000. As matters stand, a significant number of those people are unlikely to get back into their

workplace, creating misery for their families and another burden on the exchequer.

The crisis facing restaurants has enormous implications and not only for domestic employment: it could also hamper Ireland's attempts to revive the vital tourist industry. Scenery is great but it's the *céad míle fáilte* eating and drinking experience that really draws in visitors. This will add to pressure on the government to lend a helping hand.

The Restaurants Association of Ireland (RAI) has produced a nine-point plan that it argues will give its members a chance of remaining in business. These include a temporary 0% VAT rate; legislation on rents; an end to banking fees; insurance payouts; wages supports; grant aid; rates write-offs; a ban on utilities cutting off services or demanding payments from closed businesses; and a waiver of licences for outdoor seating. In addition to the nine-point plan, the RAI has a further six "asks" on support to ensure recovery.

There are so many calls on the state for funding at this stage it is inconceivable that every request can be met. The government, should it decide to dine at this particular table, may eschew the fixed menu presented by the RAI and opt for the *à la carte* instead.

## Grand Swiss family idea

Switzerland has a population of 8.5 million but has registered only slightly more Covid-19-related deaths than ourselves.

The Swiss signalled a limited easing of their lockdown restrictions last week, including the gradual reopening of schools, restaurants and hairdressing salons.

However, the most controversial of the revisions has been the announcement that children under 10 will be allowed to hug their grandparents, after new research suggested they are not "vectors"

for the disease after all and may not even transmit it.

If this theory is borne out, it will come as great news to many elderly people, who have been restricted to waving at their small grandchildren through glass, or at lengthy distances, for fear of contracting the deadly virus.

And it will, no doubt, be welcomed even more enthusiastically by those children's parents, now that granny and granddad will no longer have a rock-solid excuse to shirk their share of babysitting.

Justine McCarthy  
Lockdown should open up our minds

## Gravity of coronavirus crisis gives us a chance to challenge the status quo

It was while in quarantine at his childhood home during a bubonic plague lockdown of his Cambridge college that, according to legend, Isaac Newton was struck – metaphorically, at least – by a falling apple in his family's orchard. Thus did he devise his law of universal gravitation, which would provide the genesis for the industrial revolution. In that moment of normal life suspended by a terrifying plague, Newton changed the world.

Over preceding centuries, physicists had been chipping away at Aristotle's theory that falling objects land the way they do because of their inner weight. No alternative theory managed to debunk comprehensively the Aristotelian consensus that had prevailed for hundreds of years quite as unequivocally as Newton's insight. In a time of paralysing uncertainty wrought by a plague that would kill 25 million people, one of humankind's most fundamental certainties was demolished. Not only did Newton's discovery change the world, it changed how the world thought.

Nearly 400 years later, here we are again, frozen in time and beset by uncertainties. How long will this coronavirus hound us? How many of us will it kill? Will scientists find a safe vaccine? How long will it take to produce a cure? Will there be a second wave of Covid-19, and successive waves after that? How many businesses will go bust and how many jobs will vanish? How can we survive this viral Armageddon that has turned our planet into a global ghost town where wild animals prowl the deserted streets?

Yet, while we grapple with existential doubts, our world is simultaneously witnessing the demolition of long-accepted wisdoms that have impeded real human progress. Expediency has whipped off the blinkers of certitude, giving us glimpses of a better future untrammelled by the prevailing global orthodoxy.

In Ireland, this has been most dramatically demonstrated by the nationalisation overnight, albeit temporarily, of the country's private hospitals, creating a healthcare system that is equally available to everybody. A psychological corner has been turned, too, with standard Covid-19 payments for anyone who finds themselves out of work, whether soldier, sailor, rich man or poor man. After this, a trial of basic income payments by the exchequer – one of the Green Party's requirements for entering government – has not created as much as a ripple of dissent. Bricks are slowly crumbling in the universal wall that decrees life was never meant to be fair.

Assumptions become conventional wisdom when they ring-fence the interests of those who have most to lose. Let's start with the long-held assumption that the planet's

biggest industrialised countries should hold the greatest sway. For most of the past century, those countries have ruled the roost, from Davos to the UN security council, Nato to the G8, reducing the rest of the world to the role of impotent spectators. As we watch with sadness while China, America, Italy, France and the UK buckled under the coronavirus, there has been a gradual realisation that, if size matters, it's not in the way we have been measuring it. Smaller, less crowded, less urbanised and less industrialised countries appear to be faring better in mitigating the pandemic. This does not mean that big is, therefore, bad. It means small has its advantages, too.

Even in the world's testosterone-driven political offices and boardrooms, it is being acknowledged that many countries run by women have managed to flatten the curve faster than others. See Angela Merkel's Germany, Tsai Ing-wen's Taiwan, Jacinda Ardern's New Zealand, Katrin Jakobsdóttir's Iceland, Sanna Marin's Finland, Erna Solberg's Norway and Mette Frederiksen's Denmark. Frederiksen, you may recall, was the prime minister who declined to sell Greenland to the US president Donald Trump last year.

It could be a sweeping generalisation to conclude, on this basis, that women ought to rule the world. There are possible geographical, climatic, scientific, sociological and cultural reasons why some countries have been less severely affected by Covid-19 than others. What can be said is that many female leaders have adopted a more cautious and less economy-driven approach. Merkel is a prime example.

The psychology employed by Solberg and Frederiksen, in choosing to speak directly to their countries' children, is in stark contrast to Trump's "try bleach" solution, Jair Bolsonaro's "so what?" response when asked about Brazil's rising death toll, and Daniel Ortega's

pronouncement in Nicaragua that the disease is "a sign from God". None of this means women automatically make the best rulers. It just means men do not. That may seem a blindingly obvious conclusion, but it is one to which the world has remained blind for too long. In our pre-Covid patriarchal age, a man could carve a pedestal for himself in the international power league armed with only a sackload of bombastic inanities and a mother lode of self-entitlement. And the world has suffered for it.

For most of us, with our limited experience of one pandemic, the suspension of life outside the front door has switched on the light of reflection. While political leaders make urgent decisions in the endeavour to save lives, the majority of us have time to contemplate how decisions being made to address the here and now have the potential to improve the future. Paradoxically, the more we don't know, the more we question what we thought we did know.

In the past, whenever an alternative code to liberal capitalism was mooted and dismissed by masters of the universe, meek acquiescence persisted. The philosopher Alain de Botton has posited that we stifle our will to question the status quo because we presume conventions must have a sound basis – even if we are unsure what that is – because so many people have adhered to them for so long.

"It seems implausible that our society could be gravely mistaken in its beliefs," he said, "and, at the same time, that we would be alone in noticing the fact."

In our pre-Covid age, migration was viewed as "a problem" to be sequestered behind grim walls and wire fences. Now half the world depends on the other half for its food supply, from the migrant cherry and nectarine pickers in Spain and grape pickers in California to the strawberry pickers in north Co Dublin.

Even after Ireland's banks were saved from collapsing a decade ago, bank executives were considered deserving of six-figure salaries while childcare workers got paid the minimum wage. The pandemic has exposed the sheer lunacy of a mindset that handsomely rewards non-essential workers and not those who risk their own lives to save ours. The same mentality encourages mindless consumerism and vacuous celebrity, revering "influencers", "fashionistas", "taste-makers", television chefs and reality TV participants.

There is a strange liberation in this lockdown. We should grasp the opportunity it gives us to do a great decluttering of the fallacious axioms to which we have clung in upholding a worldwide code that has disadvantaged and harmed more people that it benefited. What this crisis tells us is that the impossible is possible after all.

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The suspension of life outside the front door has switched on the light of reflection

## Sarah McInerney

## Just a minute – what has Nphet got to hide?



## How state's virus experts make decisions is a matter of vital public interest

For a while, one of the best things about Covid-19 was that we knew just how bad it was. Politicians who normally made themselves dizzy spinning their way out of grim news were instead rushing, unbidden, to reveal all the grave, scary details of the virus. Health chiefs, who ordinarily insisted things were not as bad as we thought, instead displayed graphs outlining how our hospitals could be overrun. The news itself was awful, but being given the information, unvarnished and terrifying, was like being handed the keys to the kingdom. Finally, there was a sense that we, the public, were in the know.

There are plenty of straws in the wind now to indicate that this golden era of transparency may be coming to an end. Indeed, closer scrutiny suggests it never really began.

The first bump in the road came two weeks ago, when Labour Party leader Alan Kelly noticed the National Public Health Emergency Team (Nphet) hadn't published minutes of its meetings in almost a month. This committee of 32 people dictates how we live our lives: whom we may hug; how far we can walk; and what funerals we can attend. How they reach their decisions is a matter of vital public interest.

Tony Holohan, chief medical officer and chairman of Nphet, then did a *mea culpa*, claiming the failure to publish the minutes was due to the enormous workload of all involved. It's a "huge job", he said. Is it, though? At most board meetings, a secretary takes notes of what is said and it's approved by members when they next meet. Why is this such a mammoth task? No one doubts that members of Nphet are extremely busy, but good governance is not an optional extra – especially when it involves decisions of national importance.

To be fair to Holohan, by the end of last week the published minutes were all up to date. A perusal of the documents further undermined Nphet's "commitment to transparency", however. The minutes tell us that the team decided on March 10 to overrule nursing homes' restriction on visitors – a controversial decision. The record of the meeting doesn't say whether any of the health experts present argued in favour of the nursing homes' decision.

A crucial four-hour meeting on March 11, at which Nphet decided to recommend shutting schools and banning mass gatherings, is summarised in just four pages. Did anyone demur on the plan? Was any argument made for stricter or more lenient measures? We're told only that the issues were "discussed".

The closest to a hint of disharmony is recorded in the minutes from March 8, which note there was a "robust discussion" about cancelling St Patrick's Day celebrations. There's no detail on what was said.

To be clear, this is not intended as mean-spirited crabbing about the apparent lack of

infighting among people who are doing their best for the country. There is genuinely something wrong here. Minutes are not expected to be a faithful transcript of a meeting, but they are, at a minimum, expected to record arguments that are made both in favour and against decisions made. If there are no such disagreements on Nphet, we have a problem. If divergence of opinion is simply not being recorded, we have a bigger problem.

There are other indications, too, that our brief glimpse of a transparent public service is coming to an end. The Department of Health is refusing to release letters sent to it from the HSE, which reportedly raise concerns about the processes that led to a commitment to do 100,000 tests for coronavirus a week.

The Department of Justice has refused a Freedom of Information Act request from the journalist Ken Foxe for details of briefings to the justice minister on Covid-19, on the basis that Charlie Flanagan is getting only "verbal updates" from officials. The justice minister oversees a police force that has been given unprecedented powers to restrict the movements of citizens, and there's no written record of his daily briefings? This *à la carte* approach to governance and transparency is unacceptable.

We are just at the beginning of the Covid-19 crisis. There are many more controversial and difficult decisions to be taken, and it is crucial that the debates and briefings about these decisions are scrupulously recorded. Where possible, this information should be quickly communicated to the public. The choices being made now are too big, too fundamental, to tolerate a lazy return to the public sector's factory setting of opacity. We're either all in this together, or we're not.

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A crucial four-hour meeting is summarised in just four pages

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## RTE must turn up the volume on its austerity programme

Even in death, Gay Byrne caused problems for the top brass in RTE. The station had planned to unveil an austerity programme early last week, but his passing delayed the announcement. Then details of the programme were leaked to a newspaper, and the recriminations started even before director-general Dee Forbes announced that RTE plans to cut 200 jobs next year and reduce costs by €60m over three years. Even allowing for the fact that RTE is heavily unionised, that is not particularly demanding. Ignore the special pleading that RTE's viewers and listeners have been subjected to in recent days: Ms Forbes needs to do much more to fix the station.

Given that the staff numbers at Montrose have climbed to more than 1,800, a more ambitious target is called for. Half of the €60m in savings will come from staff cost reductions, but these include up to 70 musicians from the National Symphony Orchestra, which is being transferred from RTE to the National Concert Hall. Moving the orchestra out of Montrose – which was approved by the government last year – will save only €4m, for example. Selling the RTE Guide – no more than taking the art off the walls to sell at Sotheby's – has only symbolic value.

RTE's financial problems have been well-rehearsed. The biggest one is a sharp drop in advertising revenue, which has stalled since 2014, and which is down €100m since the Celtic tiger boom. Most Irish media organisations have suffered a similar reversal of fortunes, and have responded by reducing overheads. RTE's costs have risen by €28m over the past five years. Licence-fee revenue – contrary to the impression you may have received from listening to the intensive lobbying by RTE executives – has also increased: it's up by 10% since 2014. Last year RTE got €189m from this source. Added to €150m in commercial revenue, you would think that was more than enough to run a TV and radio service in a small country. Apparently not: RTE has been running a deficit for some time.

We agree that the licence fee is outdated and needs to be modernised. The annual charge of €160 is linked to ownership of a TV set, and just over one in 10

Irish households no longer has one, though they do still watch RTE Television on laptops and tablets and listen to RTE Radio on phones. The proportion of homes without a telly will grow. Meanwhile, there is a relatively high rate of TV licence evasion: 12.83%. This means €25m a year goes missing.

The response from communications minister Richard Bruton has been lackadaisical. He is putting collection of the TV licence fee out to tender for a five-year contract and says the government will dream up a “device-independent” charge, which will come into effect after this – in 2025, in other words. Politicians like nothing better than to give troublesome cans a kick down the road, but this is a particularly hefty punt. There is likely to have been two changes of government by then. Fianna Fail's promise to reform the TV licence within a year is more realistic and distinctly doable.

The spectre of the water charges still hangs over this Fine Gael-led government. It just does not have the bottle to revisit that unhappy episode by turning the TV licence into a “broadcasting charge”. And yet the two things are quite different. Water charges were a new imposition, but 87% of Irish households already pay the TV licence fee, and it would make no difference to them if it was called a broadcasting charge, a device-independent levy or anything else. Indeed, if such households were offered a small reduction on the €160 levy, they would sign up with alacrity. Only the “TV spongers” would be left to complain.

Before that, however, RTE has to engage in more serious reform than the half-measures announced last week. On this front, the omens are not good. For a start, it has taken Ms Forbes more than three years to reveal her big plan which, when boiled down to its essence, isn't much of a plan anyway. She could have made the case for even greater job cuts, selling 2fm, closing the repeat-laden RTE2 or moving the station from its valuable Dublin 4 campus to an industrial estate on the outskirts of the capital.

Drastic? Certainly, but no more so than the measures other companies in the legacy media business have been forced to take. Is Ms Forbes up to the challenge?

## Will the DUP end up backing Mr Johnson's 'Betrayal Act'?

What is the DUP going to do to stop the “Betrayal Act”? That is the provocative title loyalists have given to Boris Johnson's Brexit deal, which they see as breaking up the UK. Their concern is widely shared across the unionist electorate in Northern Ireland. Well-attended “Stop the Betrayal Act” rallies have been held in unionist heartlands since the British general election was called. The DUP has joined other unionists on the platform at each event, pledging to stop the Brexit deal.

Audiences have given Arlene Foster's party an easy ride, considering it was responsible for putting Mr Johnson in office. In fact, the charge sheet against the party is damning: the DUP backed Brexit; it was instrumental in sinking all previous Brexit deals, plus previous British prime minister Theresa May; it finally agreed to a sea border anyway; then claimed it was betrayed by Mr Johnson on the details, as if it had not been warned all along.

Some observers hoped the election in Northern Ireland would be about leave versus remain, rather than orange versus green. Instead, Brexit has made the election another tribal headcount. The DUP has used the fear of a threat to the Union to tell voters to circle the wagons around the largest unionist party – namely, itself. The UUP stood down in North Belfast, where DUP deputy leader and chief Brexititeer Nigel Dodds faces losing his seat to Sinn

Fein. Afterwards, a de facto nationalist pact emerged in the rest of Belfast, which will persuade many unionist voters to overlook the DUP's role in creating the threat to the Union in the first place.

There is a familiar purity about the prospect of unionists raging impotently against the inevitable, especially when it involves British betrayal. Loyalists have been warning about protests, blockages, strikes and other classic reflexes from the unionist discomfort zone. The DUP is adept at riding these waves of anger, which energise its base and distract from the awkward question of how its arguments at Westminster will have any effect. Would the DUP put Mr Johnson back in office and extract fresh promises from him on a Brexit deal? That invites the accusation of walking into another betrayal. Alternatively, it may be acceding to Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn entering No 10. This is not such anathema to unionists as many believe – the DUP has kept channels open to Labour since 2017. An existential threat to the Union could justify working with Labour, which wants a new Brexit deal put to a referendum.

Comments from unionists and loyalists indicate an assumption the DUP must back Mr Johnson instead of Mr Corbyn, which must mean Johnson's Brexit, or something like it. Consternation at this prospect is growing.

## Coke users face a comedown

Cocaine, according to the late Robin Williams, is God's way of saying you have too much money. Given that use of the drug peaked in Ireland in 2007, just before the economic crash, it may also be God's way of saying you might not have that money for long. So perhaps we should be concerned by fresh reports that cocaine use has almost reached Celtic tiger levels once more.

This time, however, it is not just the

bankers and brokers. Gardai say the average user is a farmer or a nurse, and more likely to be found in a rural village than at a middle-class dinner party.

Even though at €70 a gram it makes for an expensive snack, cocaine is said to be as commonplace as “a bag of crisps with your pint”. An overdose of harsh reality, which Williams described as “a crutch for people who don't do drugs”, is surely on the way.

Justine McCarthy  
Loyalty of self-styled patriots is to our past

## Ultra-conservatives who 'love their country' hate how far it has progressed

Amid the patriotic fervour that gripped Britain after the triumphant Olympic Games in London in 2012, the BBC came up with a television quiz show to tap into the zeitgeist. It was called I Love My Country and managed to dredge such deplorable depths of inanity that it was deemed the worst kind of idiot TV ever. Against a backdrop of red pillar boxes, Stonehenge and Big Ben, celebrity contestants competed to say how many letters there are in the English alphabet and what is the capital of Wales. Geographical questions were answered by contestants pointing to places on a studio map, using a fake Yorkshire pudding as the pointer. The show lasted all of eight weeks.

Last month Justin Barrett, founder of the right-wing National Party, spoke at a meeting in his hometown of Borrisokane, Co Tipperary, and urged the community to resist a Department of Justice plan to house 84 asylum seekers there. “I love my country and I want my country to be Ireland and I want my country to be an Irish island and I'm not ashamed of that and I shouldn't have to be ashamed of that,” Barrett told the gathering. Some people walked out. Others applauded. Afterwards, outside the venue, members of the National Party handed out leaflets bearing a photograph of Dan Breen, a legendary guerrilla freedom fighter from Tipperary. “Stand up for Ireland,” the leaflets exhorted.

“I love my country” has become quite the anthemic refrain of ultra-conservative activists. They iterate it and reiterate it ad nauseum with lashings of case-shut definitiveness. Facebook is a hotbed of this pious patriotism that brooks no argument. Of course, the insinuation sewn into these plaintive declarations is that anyone who dissents from their vision of a judgmental, monochromatic Catholic state obviously hates their country. Accusations of treason get thrown around by self-styled patriots on social media like juveniles tossing stink bombs from a passing bus.

Barrett maintains he is saying nothing different “from [what was said by] Wolfe Tone, Pádraig Pearse and the 1916 leaders”, which is patently not true. He aspires to an orthodox Catholic country, contrary to the vision of those leaders, many of whom were not born in Ireland, and who fought for self-determination in a republic of equals.

These professions of patriotic love usually go hand-in-hand with demands for a return to old Catholic Ireland. For some ultra-conservatives, Ireland is not Irish enough, nor is the Pope Catholic enough. They recognise no irony in their simultaneous railings against “Islamification” while twinning their ethnic identity as inextricably Catholic and Irish.

To them, Ireland means having no marriage

equality, no abortion, no diversity, no sex education, no honestly nuanced journalism, no broad-minded judges and nobody in government that doesn't agree with them. They yearn for the old country of secrets, stigma and a solipsistic state. They want us all to live by their idea of morality, and some of them get quite vituperative when others disagree.

One of the reasons Pope Francis is not Catholic enough for them is because he has called them out on this hypocrisy. “How many times do we see the scandal of those people who go to church, and are there all day or go every day, and then they live hating others or talking badly about people,” he has said. “This is a scandal. It is better not to go to church if you live like that, like an atheist.”

Last week, on a silently packed rush-hour bus in Dublin, we commuters were jolted out of our preoccupation with our mobile phones when a woman wearing a holy medal stood up near the front of the vehicle and shouted at another woman seated near the back.

“Cover your mouth when you're coughing,” she ordered. “I got a cold from people like you coming into our country and spreading your germs.”

You could feel the entire bus stiffen. What should we do? If we challenged the shouter, we risked causing her victim further hurt and embarrassment. A woman sitting across the aisle from the victim reached over, touched her arm and asked quietly if she was all right. Everyone else kept schtum, albeit with all sorts of brave words swirling inside our heads.

Some bishops, too, are not Catholic enough for the self-appointed police of Ireland's morality. The way some of them rebuke Diarmuid Martin, the archbishop of Dublin who has withstood seething scorn for his zero-tolerance of child abuse, you would think he was the devil himself. Much of what he says is too damned liberal for their liking.

For example, speaking to a congregation of girl guides in Arklow on Thursday, Martin said he was distressed by “groups who, on false grounds, foment hostility to people like asylum seekers who come from troubled situations and seek a safer life for themselves and their families. Ireland must always be an Ireland of welcome for the distressed.”

It is perfectly laudable to love the country one lives in, but to presume that those born into that country have a superior love of it to those who choose to come and live in it, or were welcomed into it after fleeing some strife-ridden place, is warped thinking. Less-fortunate lands than this one have suffered the consequences when self-styled patriots and religious fanatics took over.

No country is immune. Ireland got an inkling of it in the 1980s and 1990s when raped girls were dragged before the courts to stop them going abroad for abortions. For that generation, the cartoon image of a Taliban-type moral police force prowling our airports still has the capacity to chill.

Ireland is no longer that place. It has matured and gained the confidence to allow itself to enjoy freedom and self-determination. True patriots do not feel the need to scream their love of their country from the rooftops. They demonstrate it by the good that they do for that country.

Referendums, elections and opinion polls consistently show the majority of people in this country have no wish to return to the valley of the squinting windows and an inflexible, repressive, doctrinaire past. A minority of the minority who yearn for it do so under the friendly flag of patriotism. When they claim to love their country, what they really mean is they love what it used to be. They do not love what it is now: a place shaped by the wishes and tolerance of the majority.

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Accusations of treason get thrown around on social media like juveniles tossing stink bombs from a passing bus

## Larissa Nolan

## Murphy aside, Gaybo gave us what we want



## Flawed interview with Casey's lover should not stain broadcaster's legacy

Gay Byrne was winding up his interview with Annie Murphy and searching for a closing punchline. The American woman, who had a secret son with Eamonn Casey, was on The Late Late Show in 1993 to publicise her tell-all book, *Forbidden Fruit: The True Story of my Secret Love for the Bishop of Galway*.

Murphy had wanted the final word on how Casey had pressured her to have their son adopted. “Don't forget, Eamonn harangued me and bothered me to the point I could never have another child again. He'd say to me, “Those adoption papers were there” and I'm not saying that to end on a bad note, I actually felt bad for him, I felt sad for him that he would feel that necessary,” said Murphy.

It was an important point made with composure, reason and understanding. Byrne could have left it there, but perhaps in an attempt to play devil's advocate, he delivered the greatest insult you can give a strong, proud, independent woman who has successfully raised a child alone: he praised the absent father. “He would say he was doing that, Annie, because he didn't have faith in your capacity to look after the child. That's what he would say.”

Instead of slapping him live on air – as I fear I might have – Murphy remained calm. “But I have brought that child up well. He [Casey] was wrong in that respect. I gave my heart, body and soul, and people will tell you he's a good child. I think if I have done anything, I have brought someone into this world who will continue to do good,” she said.

Earlier The Late Late Show host had asked her if Casey was the child's father – an unnecessary indignity, as Casey had admitted paternity the previous year. Then it came, the

remark from Byrne we all remember. “Let's end with this note and say if your son is half as good a man as his father, he won't be doing too badly.” Murphy's reserve finally cracked. “I'm not so bad either, Mr Byrne”, she responded, and promptly disappeared off the set.

The applause that followed her comeback remark must have been an indication to the master broadcaster, known for his instincts, that he had called this interview wrong. His attitude had revealed a blind spot, or perhaps a prejudice.

This is not back in some “other” Ireland: I remember watching the interview as a teenager and realising it was unjust. In that moment Gaybo was being “a proper little prig”, as he once jokingly described himself. With that one interview he had undone a reputation built up over decades as a champion of Irish

feminism. It was a low point and, sadly, for many women, a career-defining moment.

It was all the more disheartening as Byrne had gleefully given a platform to Ireland's feminist firebrands such as Nell McCafferty and Sinéad O'Connor. He hosted numerous programmes on feminism, including one in 1980 when he handed over the presenter's seat on The Late Late Show to Marian Finucane. When schoolgirl Ann Lovett died giving birth to a grotto, hundreds of women wrote to his radio show, and he honoured their stories of concealed pregnancy and abortion by reading out their letters on air.

But was he being a feminist, or simply abiding by his mantra “Give the people what they want”? In the RTE documentary *Gaybo*, journalist Mary Kenny says: “He would have made a wonderful editor of a tabloid newspaper. He introduced, in effect, tabloid television.” Provocative debates were staged in the interests of a lively show, Byrne agreed, and not out of “any mission to reform society”.

On the Late Late tribute broadcast last Tuesday, Miriam O'Callaghan said: “I think at a very early age he was a feminist.” I think his biographer Deirdre Purcell was more accurate in saying: “He had, in my opinion, quite a feminine side.”

Perhaps Gaybo's innate ability to reflect the public mood malfunctioned that night with Murphy. It shouldn't taint his record as a world-class broadcaster. Instead, Murphy's philosophical view on human nature seems apt. She described Casey as “a great man with some defects, as we all have”. Gay Byrne was exactly that.

Thank you, and good night,  
News Review, page 15

“  
He gleefully gave a platform to Ireland's feminist firebrands

## THE SUNDAY TIMES

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## Hot air and little else from the government on carbon tax

The budget to be unveiled by Paschal Donohoe next month will be a reflection of the minister himself: understated. With Brexit causing so much excitement, that may be no bad thing, but with four by-elections in late November and a general election to be held by next May, Mr Donohoe would have hoped to deliver something a little more electorally appealing ahead of these tests. As matters stand, the grey man of Irish politics will produce a very grey budget.

There will be minimum tax cuts, carefully targeted social-welfare increases, a few previously pledged baubles for young parents – free GP care up to age eight, free dental care for under sixes – and lots of money set aside to pay for the fallout from Brexit. There will also be an increase in carbon tax from the existing rate of €20 a tonne. It is the precise scale of this increase that is likely to be of most interest in Budget 2020. Given the economic damage that would follow in the wake of a no-deal Brexit, and the possibility of the country suffering a recession, the last thing Mr Donohoe must feel like doing is increasing a tax that will add extra penalties to users of petrol, diesel and home heating oil.

An increase in the carbon tax was built into all pre-budget analysis this time last year, but the government swerved the issue following advice from officials. The head of steam that has been built up around climate change in the interim means hard decisions are being forced on the cabinet. Ireland, one of the worst performers in Europe when it comes to dealing with carbon emissions, has committed to raising the carbon tax to €80 a tonne by 2030. A straight-line increase over that period will not affect consumer behaviour as dramatically as front-loaded increases. To make an immediate dent in our carbon-emission output, the tax would have to be at least doubled, to €40. Given the electoral considerations, that would be a brave, and therefore out-of-

character, play by the government. With Fianna Fail pushing for the easy option of a €5 increase – oddly similar to its obsession with increasing all social-welfare benefits by a fiver – it may well be that the cabinet goes for just €10 extra.

The problem with €10 is that it would still represent a 50% increase from where we are today. Provision can be made for those who are deemed to be at risk of fuel poverty, but much larger numbers of people, mainly in rural Ireland where private cars are the only means of transport, will enjoy no such safety net. Rural Ireland is where Fine Gael is struggling to connect with voters, and to sell the message of an economic upturn. The cabinet is already being accused of being Dublin-centric, and out of touch with issues beyond the Pale. Increases in carbon tax are designed to cut emissions by forcing the public to change behaviour. But when the people who are supposed to change their behaviour are not in a position to do so, trouble may follow.

It was a planned rise in tax on petrol and diesel in France that inspired the *gilets jaunes* and forced a government climbdown. Mr Donohoe signalled clearly at Fine Gael's pre-Dail gathering in Co Cork earlier this month that he is concerned at getting public buy-in to the carbon tax and will aim for a sequence of incremental increases, over the next 10 years, so as not to agitate the public. In the Dail last week, he admonished Mary Lou McDonald, the Sinn Féin leader, for her scepticism about the effectiveness of carbon tax. He told her there was “a massive body of evidence from across the world” showing that carbon taxes were essential, and yet it appears he is content to proceed with baby steps – having balked at a bold start last year – when we are already in danger of missing our Paris climate change targets.

With water-charge protests still fresh in the memory, don't be surprised if the taoiseach Leo Varadkar and his finance minister leave the heavy lifting on carbon tax to the next government.

## Mr Johnson's twin-track strategy risky but worthwhile

When Boris Johnson attends his first Tory conference as leader this week, he will want to ensure that it is not his last. The prime minister can look forward to an enthusiastic reception from members who a couple of months ago voted him in as their leader, but Mr Johnson needs to achieve more than a standing ovation.

The prime minister's ambition this week is to ride two horses. On Brexit, his aim is to maintain the tough approach that secured him the leadership of his party. That means leaving the EU on October 31 and refusing to request the extension demanded of him by the Benn Act, even if he has failed to secure a deal. Whether this can be achieved or not, it has opponents of a no-deal Brexit worried enough to be contemplating tightening up the legislation. It has the rest of the EU convinced that an early no-deal Brexit is a strong possibility. For Mr Johnson, faced with the damage the Brexit Party could inflict on him in a general election, this tough stance is vital.

His government is also working on the broad outlines of a deal. Two years ago the EU was in favour of a Northern Ireland-only solution, or backstop, to maintain an open border on the island of Ireland. Theresa May's government, alert to objections from the Democratic Unionist Party, called for an all-UK customs territory, but still did not win DUP backing.

Now the government appears to be shifting back towards an island of Ireland solution. Having already floated the idea

for food and agriculture, the proposal would be extended to industrial goods. Customs would be an important sticking point, particularly for a government eager to strike trade deals, but could probably be managed with a system of rebates and tariff adjustments for goods imported to the rest of the UK but destined for Northern Ireland. Whether such a deal could fly with the DUP and Tory hardline Brexiters remains to be seen. It would be regarded as a sellout by Nigel Farage, the Brexit Party leader. The government would be relying on the country's weariness with a never-ending Brexit process to persuade enough MPs to back it.

The second strand of the prime minister's approach is to demonstrate that under his leadership the Conservatives can become, once more, a one-nation party. It is why he is desperate to be able to move on. It is not a lost cause.

Sir Nicholas Soames, who has every reason to be bitter about his expulsion from the party, praised the British government's wider agenda last week and said the Conservatives were still his “natural home”. Even Philip Hammond, the former chancellor, wrote yesterday that after an orderly Brexit the party can “come to its collective senses and reconfirm its mission as a broad-based centre-right party with wide appeal”.

The danger in trying to ride two horses is that you fall off. We will see in the coming weeks whether Mr Johnson has the skill.

## How can we fill the Xposé void?

Barely had the country recovered from news that the Bernard Shaw pub in Dublin will close before it emerged another cultural icon is doomed. Virgin Media is dropping Xposé, its fashion and lifestyles digest, after 12 years. Since magazine-type shows age in dog years, Xposé has in effect been running longer than The Late Late Show, nudging “national treasure” status.

Where are Irish women to turn in search of deathless gems from red-carpet premieres, updates on the new season's heel height or the latest in eyebrow

technology? Just as Dublin's hipsters will have to find somewhere else to source Aperol spritzes, fashionistas must look to foreign channels for their Kardashian fixes and glimpses of Victoria Beckham's collection. Xposé's distinctive theme tune will no longer summon women of all ages from their labours, at close of day, to bond over Brazilian waxing techniques.

Those cherished customs that make our culture indistinguishable from every other western society are disappearing before our eyes.

Justine McCarthy  
If Greta bothers you, how do you think she feels?

## Adults' denigration of Thunberg is a clear case of shooting the messenger

The canvas bag was white, the words written on it were black. “Girls just want to . . . be heard,” they said. The girl from whose shoulder the bag hung as she alighted from the Dart on Wednesday morning looked only slightly older than Greta Thunberg.

“I like your bag,” I said, as our paths converged. Her face lit up like Croke Park's floodlights. “Thank you,” she said, and went on her way, books poking out of the bag. A girl with an appetite for knowledge.

Thunberg's 16-year-old head is bursting with knowledge. Her sin is that she doesn't conceal it. Sugar and spice and all things nice are what little girls are supposed to be made of – not opinions, and certainly not cataclysmic prophecies. Girls should be frivolous and smiley and fetching. What to do with this grim little Swedish earth-changer? Well, shoot her, of course. It's a tried and tested tactic: if you don't like the message, shoot the messenger.

The assassins' weapon of choice is her autism. “Psycho-child,” they call her. “Evil-eyed,” they pronounce. She says that her Asperger syndrome is a superpower because it imbues her with a zest for detail. Maybe WB Yeats felt the same about his autism. Ditto Archimedes, the Greek mathematician, and Hans Christian Andersen, George Bernard Shaw, Beethoven, Virginia Woolf, Mark Twain and Alfred Hitchcock. Did anybody scorn Al Gore's climate crusade on the grounds that he has autism?

In the same breath with which her detractors call Thunberg a “demonic pigtailed puppet”, they accuse her parents of “child abuse”. How self-blind is that? One can only suppose that, when all your focus is on the target, there's no time for self-examination in the mirror.

Last week a UN report said the world's oceans were getting warmer, more acidic and less productive. If we don't stop polluting the planet, sea levels could rise by more than a metre before the end of the century. Coastal communities could be obliterated, along with the fish in the sea. This report, by 100 expert authors from 36 countries and containing 7,000 scientific references, should be dominating the global news agenda. Instead, we get pictures of Thunberg scowling at the US president Donald Trump in New York, and polemicists thundering that she should be in school. Jesus wept.

Mass extinction is on the horizon. We may be in the final decades of survival. Thousands of animal and plant species have vanished. Yet humans are obsessing about a teenager who can do no right in adults' jaundiced eyes. She couldn't possibly be writing those speeches herself, they say, while at the same time claiming her speeches are childish lacking in nuance. Her face is expressionless, they say, but

her scowl at Trump was apparently immature. Her eyes are “cold”, yet when she fought back tears at the UN, they decry her for being emotional and hysterical.

So back to school with her, they say. Odd, that. Google “rich people who quit school” and you'll find reverential lists of illuminati. Quentin Tarantino, Richard Branson and Walt Disney all dropped out when they were about Thunberg's age. Charles Dickens left school at 15. Their non-conformism is celebrated. So what is it those lads had in common with each other but not with a teenage girl who has got the world talking about human destiny?

The message that most grates with the Thunberg character assassins is the one that goes “grow up, adults”. She is the manifestation of an inverted generation gap. Children are the new adults. Trump, the most powerful person on the planet, mocks her on Twitter. While world leaders behave like big babies, throwing their toys out of the pram from Washington to London, children are demanding they start acting their age. While Trump and the British prime minister Boris Johnson major in lies and cynicism, she speaks plain truth.

Thunberg was absolutely correct to say that earth's rulers are preoccupied with money and economic fairytales. Their response? They sneer at the children for being frightened – and they blame Thunberg for that too. She's a “scaremonger”, they say, as if

the facts were not sufficiently stark to terrify anyone. Only the congenitally obdurate can look at the future and not quake. Besides, which is scarier? A girl spelling out the fateful facts of climate destruction? Or the president of America mocking her?

This reaction is not the exclusive chorus of diehard climate-change deniers. Those people will not be convinced pollution is killing us until they find themselves clinging to a tiny atoll while a fluffy white angel strums a harp on a hovering cloud. Worse are the people who acknowledge humankind is destroying its habitat, but still insist on patronising the messenger, drowning her message.

Reports about the destruction of our planet are coming fast and furious now. The Irish branch of the Environmental Protection Agency published a report last week showing breaches of air-quality levels and revealing that 1,800 people die prematurely from air pollution here every year. So what did the lofty denizens of the Seanad have to say about planetary damage after returning from their 10 weeks of holidays? “I cannot let my first utterance in this house at the commencement of this session go without expressing my deep concern for [Thunberg],” said independent senator Gerard Craughwell. “That we are using a child to further the cause of climate change and sitting back quietly and watching a child break down in front of the world's media is absolutely disgusting.”

When Mary Robinson, as president of Ireland, sobbed at a press conference about the famine devastation she witnessed in Somalia in 1992, her tears changed the course of international foreign policy. The only one who thought ill of her tears was Robinson herself. But she's over that gendered shame now.

Thunberg is not the first teenager with the audacity to take on the status quo. Malala Yousafzai deservedly won the Nobel Peace Prize for challenging the Taliban and spreading the gospel of education for girls. Though just 12 when she started, she was not subjected to the same vilification as Thunberg. Of course, Yousafzai came to public attention because she was shot in an attempted assassination on her school bus, but her salvation was that she was not challenging the integrity of western world rulers.

In a previous job, I had a sub-editor colleague who, self-deprecatingly, would imagine arriving home in the evening. “Daddy, what did you do today?” he'd say, in his little daughter's voice. “I drew lines, pet.”

Some day a child may well ask a parent: “Daddy, what did you do when Greta Thunberg warned the adult world her generation would never forgive them for destroying the planet?”

“I posted a crazy face on Twitter, pet.”  
justine.mccarthy@sunday-times.ie

“Which is scarier? A girl spelling out the facts of climate destruction? Or the president of America mocking her?”

## Larissa Nolan

## Coppinger shouldn't sex up the class issue of rent



## Flirty texts from landlords must not be allowed to obscure the housing crisis

Ruth Coppinger is making a habit of staging publicity stunts in the Dail. Last year the Solidarity TD produced a lacy thong to protest against “routine victim-blaming going on in Irish courts” due to “rape myths”. Predictably, the sight of sexy knickers in the chamber caused a stir; it even made headlines around the world. How awful that Irish women were being shamed for wearing lingerie.

Except they weren't. A defence barrister – female – had referred to a complainant's underwear during a rape trial in Cork. “You have to look at the way she was dressed,” said the senior counsel. “She was wearing a thong with a lace front.” The comment was an aberration; archaic and absurd. It was not routine.

Coppinger's latest sensationalist campaign is being trumpeted as an exposé of Ireland's “sex for rent” culture. In fact it's more of a low-end #MeToo: Landlord Edition. Buying into it requires believing that most Irish women are so timid they lack basic assertiveness, and that most landlords are sexual exploiters in waiting.

Producing printouts of WhatsApp messages, Coppinger told the Dail that the housing crisis had created a “perfect storm for predatory landlords”, and it was “very dangerous” to give them such control over “vulnerable” women and children. “Sex for rent is becoming a reality for a lot of tenants,” claimed the TD.

However, when I studied the WhatsApp messages provided as evidence of sex-for-rent, to me there was very little in them. None of the case studies showed anyone being coerced into a form of prostitution at a time of extortionate rents.

One of the women who came forward was moving out when a landlord propositioned her.

A screen grab of the conversation indicates he asked her to come and live with him for free, instead of leaving, if she fancied him. Another woman said that a landlord told her, after she viewed a two-bed house for rent, that she would be favoured over other applicants if he could “call up whenever”. But sex wasn't a currency: he was going to charge her more than €2,000 a month. The favour was in securing the place.

Another complained because a live-in landlord had done her laundry and complimented her figure and dress size. Other correspondence showed a playful exchange that read like the script from a soft-porn movie. “Apologies if my tongue is loose tonight with the aid of six beers and my fiery testosterone

hormones,” texted the landlord. “Hope you don't [sic] understand.” To which the tenant replied: “It's cool, no worries, goodnight.”

What struck me was how intimate the interactions were. I've rented in Dublin for 20 years and I have never sent emojis to a landlord. My communication is professional and kept to a minimum, which suits both parties. Messaging can be open to misinterpretation, or misread as inviting.

Because how do you know where the line is? Is it fine if you're attracted to the landlord – but harassment if you're not? Mr Salary, a short story by Sally Rooney, details the sexual tension between a young impoverished student living rent-free in the house of a wealthy man. When they end up in bed, she asks: “When will we know if this is a bad idea or not?”

The aim of Coppinger's campaign is admirable, but her approach is wrongheaded. She is right to raise awareness about how women – single mothers in particular – are most at risk of poverty, and have borne the brunt of a housing crisis that has destroyed the social fabric. But the #SexIsNotRent stunt is an over-reach at a time when the reality is much worse than a few titillating texts. It risks undermining our focus on the seriousness of a crisis that has left 10,000 people, mostly mothers and children, in emergency accommodation and many others close to mental collapse.

What socialists call petit bourgeois gender politics is a diversion that takes the focus off the core issue, which is class. We don't need printouts of phone messages to further hype up a situation that is bad enough as it is. In her zeal to highlight the exploitation of women, Coppinger is in danger of inadvertently exploiting them herself.

“What struck me was how intimate the interactions were – I've never sent emojis to a landlord”