

THE SUNDAY TIMES

ESTABLISHED 1822

Politicians must step up to the front line and restart economy

The immediate steps taken to “flatten the curve” of the coronavirus were correct and enjoyed wide support. The level of fear generated by the news emanating from Italy and Spain in March made it relatively easy for the Irish government, acting on advice from the National Public Health Emergency Team (Nphet), to close down the country’s economy, education system and social life. Reversing those decisions was never going to be as easy, but there is widespread acceptance that it must be done in carefully measured steps to ensure the sacrifices made by the public are not wasted.

From tomorrow, the first phase of a planned five-stage reopening process comes into effect. Up to four people who don’t live together can meet outdoors if they maintain social distancing recommendations; a limited number of outdoor sporting activities can take place; shops that are primarily outdoors can resume operations. Other select activities, including car repairs and opticians, can return to work. Far and away the most significant decision is the reopening of construction sites, however, which raises questions about the logic behind this first phase of reopenings.

If the intention is to take baby steps, construction should be among the last, not first, activities to resume. Somehow the government believes it is safe to allow thousands of construction workers to move back on site, but is not allowing most small shops to reopen, even though they are in a much better position than construction companies when it comes to managing movement. We are sceptical about construction industry claims that social distancing guidelines will be respected, but builders have always had the ear of government in this country, and this is one more example of their power.

Construction aside, the largely conservative attitude towards reopening the country may test the public’s patience. Indeed, there is evidence this is happening already. Since the reopening plan was announced on May 1, many people and small businesses decided not to wait for the starter gun. There is evidence all over the country of small building outfits work-

ing on pubs, hotels and creches, in clear contravention of the guidelines. The fine weather last Saturday also brought people out in their droves with little evidence of social distancing in the most popular walking spots.

Part of the issue is that the public can see the daily infection statistics for themselves and wonder why the government is not moving faster. The original belief was that it was because of the Department of Health’s failure to put in place a timely test and contact-tracing system. Tony Holo-han, the chief medical officer, denies this, stating that testing and tracing would have no effect on reopening the country. Yet, if we enjoyed a system as thorough as the South Koreans or the Germans, we would be much further down the road towards restoring normality. In assessing the right time to ease the lockdown, the Germans set a target of 4,000 infections a day. On a pro-rata basis, that would be about 250 in Ireland. Excluding the rogue figure last Thursday, the last time that 250 cases was exceeded was on May 6. Since then the daily rate has ranged between 107 and 236. The infection rate, the RO number, has been below 1 for several weeks.

The government has retained the public’s confidence to date, mainly by following medical advice. But advice is just that. At some stage the politicians are going to have to redress the balance between medical concerns and economic reality.

Irish governments have history when it comes to outsourcing their responsibilities. From the late 1980s onwards, social partnership reigned supreme, as trade unions and business groups were given the run of Government Buildings. A decade ago, the International Monetary Fund, the European Central Bank and the European Commission, aka the bailout troika, took control of the Department of Finance, giving the government cover for introducing harsh austerity measures in the wake of the great financial crash. Now Nphet has assumed the pre-eminent role in decision-making. If anyone had suggested in January that it would be a good idea to let the Department of Health and the HSE run the country, they would have been laughed out of town. Yet that is what has been happening. Now is the time for the cabinet and Dail to take back control.

Killing Afghanistan’s babies is beyond words, but not action

“They came to kill the mothers.” Those were the haunting words of Frederic Bonnot, head of programmes in Afghanistan for Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). “They went through the rooms in the maternity [ward], shooting women in their beds. It was methodical. Walls sprayed with bullets, blood on the floor in the rooms and windows shot through.”

They came to kill the babies, he might also have said. Two newborns were among those slaughtered as gunmen stormed the hospital in Kabul on Tuesday, leaving 24 dead. Eleven of the 26 women in the hospital were killed, three in labour in the delivery room. One, Hajar, was about to deliver her baby when the gunmen burst in, killing her and the unborn child. Another, Zainab, had just four hours with the baby son she had spent seven years trying to conceive, when she was gunned down. She had named him Omid, which means “hope”.

One might have thought that in Afghanistan the deadly coronavirus would concentrate minds, particularly as hundreds of thousands of Afghans poured back over the border from neighbouring Iran – one of the worst-hit places. Instead, as cases and deaths mount, it seems to have decided to fight two wars at once. But even for a country such as Afghanistan,

which has suffered 40 years of war, last week’s killings caused shock. “This country is sadly used to seeing horrific events,” said MSF’s Bonnot. “But what happened on Tuesday is beyond words.”

The attack prompted the usual expressions of international anger. The UK foreign secretary, Dominic Raab, described it as “despicable”. The American secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, called it “sheer evil”. But what will they actually do? A peace agreement signed in February was already unravelling, not least because it was between America and the Taliban and never involved the Afghan government.

The Taliban deny responsibility for Tuesday’s massacre. America has blamed Isis. But there is anger across the country that the Taliban had created a climate for such atrocities, having stepped up attacks to more than 50 a day. “The Taliban have not given up fighting and killing Afghans, instead they have increased their attacks on our countrymen and public places,” said Ashraf Ghani, the president.

It is difficult not to feel depressed about Afghanistan. Its young people want nothing more than a normal life and not to have to worry about being blown up every time they leave their home. Doesn’t a baby called Hope also deserve a future?

Nul points for Irish harmony

It is all of half a century since Ireland’s first Eurovision victory, when Dana’s win brought a brief respite from the worst of the Troubles in 1970.

The Eurovision Song Contest, established in 1956 as an effort to calm a fractious post-war continent, has been an oasis of communal silliness and harmless good humour. This made the outbreak of hostilities between two former contestants all the more unexpected.

Dickie Rock represented us in 1966, and finished in fourth place with *Come*

Back to Stay. Johnny Logan won it a record three times, twice as a performer and once as a writer.

Along with the Swarbriggs, ninth in 1975, and Red Hurlley, 10th in 1976, they ought to be performing an Irish “rat pack” of Eurovision greats.

Instead, last week, it was more *Grumpy Old Men*, with Logan mocking Rock as “a legend in his own head” and Rock responding with a threat of “a box”. While peace was eventually restored, the prospect of harmony seems remote.

Eoin O’Malley
Greens can grow by focusing on a vision

Party will prosper as small partner in coalition by being in tune with voters

Ataoiseach is meant to have the “vision thing”. It’s what gets them up in the morning, and brings people with them to places they wouldn’t normally go. The vision is meant to be in tune with the times, correctly diagnosing the problems we feel, and prescribing solutions that not only work, but that people believe will work.

Whoever gets the job of taoiseach next, assuming the government formation talks produce a coalition, won’t have the “vision thing”. If media reports are to be believed, the only real dispute between Fianna Fail and Fine Gael has been about whether Micheál Martin or Leo Varadkar gets to be taoiseach first.

The draft document that Fianna Fail and Fine Gael produced as a basis for talks with smaller parties, principally the Greens but also the Social Democrats and Labour, was an open invitation to set a vision for the government. Just in case the smaller parties needed a hand, Fianna Fail and Fine Gael plundered their election manifestos for ideas: develop the cost-rental model; a single-tier health system; a green new deal; no increase in student fees; and many others. The smaller parties could have drafted the document themselves.

There are parallels in the recent past. In November 1992, after Albert Reynolds failed in an attempt to get an overall majority for Fianna Fail, it seemed his political career was over. Rivals who had been sidelined when Reynolds took over as leader of Fianna Fail were circling, sensing he was mortally wounded. A bit like in 2020, this was someone else’s election. Just as Sinn Féin captured the mood in February, the Labour Party caught it in 1992. Its platform had been the so-called liberal agenda, more openness in government, and a backlash against crony capitalism.

Afterwards, Labour leader Dick Spring had a choice of potential governments to support, but was hardly expected to pick Reynolds, whom he had spent the entire election campaign excoriating. Reynolds got lucky, though, since Spring didn’t like the Fine Gael leader John Bruton much either. Sensing this, Martin Mansergh, one of Reynolds’s policy advisers, asked his boss whether he could prepare a policy document that Fianna Fail could send to Labour if it made an approach.

Almost as an afterthought, Labour and Democratic Left sent lists of demands to Fianna Fail. They were intended only to put pressure on Bruton. Within a couple of hours, they received Mansergh’s document in response. Reynolds more or less told them they could have whatever they wanted. Mansergh had trawled the Labour manifesto and took out anything he saw as compatible with Fianna Fail’s. The document even agreed proposals

that weren’t compatible, possibly because Mansergh was on the left of Fianna Fail. Though Reynolds had proposed the privatisation of two state-owned banks, he agreed to set up a third state-owned bank to compete with the two dominant players.

The subsequent Fianna Fail-Labour partnership government introduced many policies that wouldn’t have been seen as Reynolds’s priorities, such as the decriminalisation of homosexual acts and other liberalising law reforms. It was Labour’s vision.

Now Fianna Fail and Fine Gael have issued a similar invitation to the one Reynolds sent out in 1992, but this time the small parties are reluctant to take up the offer. Labour had expressed annoyance at noises from the government that public sector pay deal commitments were untenable. So Martin and Varadkar wrote to Labour on Tuesday promising to honour those pay deals. Despite this, the Labour leader Alan Kelly again said that government formation was up to other parties. The Social Democrats got a commitment from Fianna Fail and Fine Gael to ring-fence funding for Slaintecare, one of their stated priorities. Still, the Social Democrats announced they were “not interested in the business-as-usual approach of a Fianna Fail-Fine Gael coalition”.

In fact, the draft document of the two big parties is far from business as usual. Usually government negotiations start with red lines. Fianna Fail and Fine Gael have been busy

rubbing them out, conceding on any reasonable demands, and are generally open to offers.

Why, then, is it only the Greens who are willing to talk? Well, it’s probably due to the pervasive myth that smaller parties always get punished for going into government. There are certainly many examples of this, as the Green Party knows better than most, having been wiped out in the 2011 general election after a four-year stint in coalition with Fianna Fail.

There is an assumption that Labour was hammered by its decision to go into government with Fianna Fail in 1993. True, Labour was punished when it announced the initial decision, dropping five points in the polls. But once that government was formed and it made progress on the Northern Ireland peace process and a slew of issues central to Labour, the party climbed back in popularity. In November 1994, at the height of the dispute between Reynolds and Spring about a controversy that would bring down the government, Labour was on 22% – a point ahead of Fine Gael. Labour lost support later, when it was in government with Fine Gael and Democratic Left, for reasons no one has firmly established.

Some of the subsequent Labour losses were probably inevitable after a big jump in seats. Many of Labour’s 1992 intake were shocked at their election and didn’t take to full-time politics. And when you’re in fashion politically, it’s inevitable you’ll lose some of that sparkle, whether in government or not.

Governing does contribute to losses. The “cost of governing” is the closest thing to an empirical law in political science. Around the world, governing parties lose on average five percentage points. Big parties lose too, as Fine Gael knows from this year’s election.

The cost of governing may be a price that small parties such as Labour – already on the edge of oblivion – can’t afford to pay. But it assumes small governing parties are always damaged by governing. The Progressive Democrats did well out of government; it was opposition that didn’t suit them. The party did well from setting the government’s agenda, which was usually a simple message of tax cuts. It was after the 2002-7 government, when the party wasn’t as clear about its agenda, that it was annihilated.

The Green Party is the only small party now brave enough to try. It might be because its members are true believers who actually want to achieve things, and know government is where that happens. At least Eamon Ryan’s party will be going into Government Buildings with eyes wide open this time. If they focus on delivering a vision, the Greens might just get the rewards.

Justine McCarthy is away

“When you’re in fashion politically, it’s inevitable you’ll lose some of that sparkle, whether in government or not”

Sarah McInerney
Crisis tears off mask of gender equality

Closed creches and lack of pay leave women to bear brunt of social fallout

They’ve been put on a boat and pushed out to sea. They’ve been abandoned.” This is how the employment lawyer Richard Grogan describes the situation of women on maternity leave who are seeking to return to work during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Speaking to me on RTE Radio 1 last week, Grogan was responding to a question from a new mother who had been due to resume her job. Her creche is closed and she has no childcare. If she stays at home, which she will, because babies take about 18 years to become self-sufficient, she will be disqualified from the jobseekers’ payment for nine weeks, on the basis that she has “left work voluntarily”.

Nor is this new mother eligible for the Covid-19 wage subsidy, which would allow her to get close to full pay, because she wasn’t on the payroll when the pandemic hit. She has rent to pay, food to buy, a newborn baby, and a government that doesn’t seem to care. And she’s not alone.

Anne Rabbittie, a Fianna Fail TD, began publicising similar such cases three weeks ago. The Sinn Féin leader Mary Lou McDonald wrote to finance minister Paschal Donohoe on April 24 asking for the anomalies around maternity leave to be addressed. Nothing has been done so far.

Grogan says there are other issues too. Many women due to return from maternity leave are being told that their job has gone or that they’ve been demoted. He predicts a “tsunami of claims” in the Workplace Relations Commission when the pandemic is over.

A self-described “hardened employment lawyer”, Grogan says he has been deeply upset by some of the cases he is working on.

It is upsetting, of course, but not at all surprising. The clear message from our political and business leaders has long been that child-bearing and child-rearing are an unfortunate necessity, to be tolerated but not encouraged. There was another depressing example of this attitude last week when it emerged that the government’s planned childcare scheme for healthcare workers, the majority of whom are women, was to be scrapped. Ministers were able to nationalise temporarily our private hospitals overnight, but after six weeks of discussion not one of them had the wherewithal to figure out a plan to mind children. They can stand in the Dail and clap for frontline health workers, but when it comes to giving practical and much needed help to the women at the coalface of Covid-19? Political tumbleweed.

The sluggish approach was to be expected, really. This is a country, let’s remember, where there is no maternity leave for female TDs. Instead, they must provide a sick cert to get time off to have a baby, as if pregnancy were

some sort of ailment. Rabbittie published legislation in 2017 to address this, providing for maternity leave for TDs. For three years, the TD for Galway East advocated for her bill at every opportunity. Meanwhile, the mostly male campaign strategists of the big political parties fretted about why they couldn’t find quality female candidates to run for election, to fulfil those pesky gender quotas. Rabbittie’s bill fell with the last Dail.

There is some good news, though. Female TDs were given the privilege of being “allowed” to breastfeed at Leinster House in 2018. No doubt the babies are very grateful.

It is during times of crisis that the mask of equality slips. We’ve seen this before: women being targeted by employers or abandoned by the government. During the previous recession, the Fine Gael-Labour coalition changed the state pension so people who had taken time off work – mostly women, looking after children – had their payments cut by up to €1,500 a year. It took six years of lobbying and political pressure to have the decision reversed. The same government also cut benefits for single parents, who are – you guessed it – predominantly female.

A report by the Economic and Social Research Institute in 2018 found it was women who bore the brunt of that coalition government’s decisions to cut welfare payments during the recession, with lone parents, stay-at-home mothers and low-income earners faring the worst.

We are now on the cusp of another crisis, and already the same pattern is beginning to emerge. Women, ever the easy targets in Irish society, are being put on a boat and pushed out to sea. Enough. It’s time to turn the tide.

@SarahAMcInerney

“After six weeks, not one minister had figured out a plan to mind children”

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Rise of independent pawns makes chessboard unstable

As if it weren't confusing enough, the Irish political chessboard got a new piece last week. It's a new faction of independent TDs, which has styled itself "the regional group" and has met the Fianna Fail and Fine Gael leaders to chat about the formation of the next government.

The regional group's convenor – though note, not leader – is Denis Naughten, a former minister who left Fine Gael in 2011 over a row about a hospital in Roscommon. Other members include Verona Murphy, who was deselected by Fine Gael because of comments she made about migrants; Michael Lowry, who was thrown out of Fine Gael because of corruption; and Peter Fitzpatrick, who left Fine Gael after disagreeing with its position on abortion.

But don't conclude that all of these TDs have only one thing in common: the regional group also includes Cathal Berry, former second-in-command of the Army Ranger Wing, who was elected by disgruntled family, friends and supporters of the Defence Forces in Kildare South.

This regional group is not a political party, of course, but merely a tactical marriage of convenience to secure more speaking time in the Dail and membership of the most influential parliamentary committees. Yet it could, in similar style to the Independent Alliance in the last Dail, act as a bloc in the next coalition government. The political price is likely to be a cabinet seat or two, plus lots of goodies for local constituencies.

This is not the only grouping that has been formed among the 21 independents returned in last month's election. There's a self-styled "rural" group, which includes the Healy-Raes, and an "independent" group featuring such disparate political figures as Joan Collins and Michael Fitzmaurice. All of these join the various sub-groups of the fissiparous far left, which takes in Solidarity, People Before Profit, Independents4Change and Rise.

"Change" has been a non-stop mantra since votes were counted on February 9. The return of such a bewildering array of independents prompts the question as to whether a "change" to the electoral system should be considered too. For

it is surely anomalous to see election candidates present themselves as non-aligned independents, posing as regional champions and exploiting local grievances, only then to band together and form political groups to secure preferment in the Dail and even in Government Buildings. The Irish electoral system – of proportional representation in multisect constituencies – supports and even promotes this trend. At the general election, the five-seat constituencies of Tipperary, Kerry and Galway West all returned two independents each.

If this trend continues, you could foresee a general election in the next decade in which voters return a Dail with five or six parties of about 20 seats each, and up to 40 independents. This may be highly representative of voters' wishes, but it will make the task of government formation almost impossible.

Currently, no two parties in the Dail have enough seats to command an overall majority of 80. Fianna Fail and Sinn Fein come closest, with 74. Remarkably, Fianna Fail and Fine Gael combined are eight short. So, already, three parties or groups are needed to form a government. After the next election, that could rise to four. Such coalition arrangements are inherently unstable. Anyone who wants a peek into our political future could look across the sea to Spain, which had two general elections within six months last year, or to Israel, which had three.

One way of introducing more political stability is a threshold system, used in countries such as Germany, Poland and New Zealand. This could mean that a party has to win a specified minimum number of votes – it's 5% in Germany – or get no representation in parliament. That's one demand you won't see on the lists of "red-line issues" being banded about Leinster House by the flotilla of independent groupings. After we endure up to three months of government formation talks, or a second election in 2020, it's a notion that might gain traction.

In the meantime, the mandate given to the next electoral commission should be to reduce five-seat constituencies. That would at least require independents exploiting local grievances to win far more first-preferences to be elected.

Honesty about coronavirus will stem the spread of panic

Unlike the coronavirus, there is a vaccine to deal with rumour and paranoia: it is called transparency. This is something the government should keep in mind, as it prepares Ireland for the seemingly inevitable arrival of Covid-19 cases. Conspiracy theories flourish in an information vacuum, particularly in the social media age. So the health minister Simon Harris and his advisers should be well aware of the danger of adopting an overly restrictive approach to sharing information about the virus's spread.

The Republic of Ireland has so far just one confirmed case of Covid-19, but there is already anecdotal evidence of "panic buying" in supermarkets, some of it probably fuelled by a series of interviews on RTE Radio's *Liveline* last week, which verged on the hysterical. How will we react when the country finally has confirmed cases here, as it surely will?

Last week, Mr Harris and his health advisers refused to divulge details of the flight and public transport used by a woman infected with the coronavirus who travelled from Dublin airport to Belfast. They also refused to present a compelling case for not releasing this information into the public domain. The public learnt that the woman flew on Aer Lingus only when the airline informed its staff that cabin crew on the flight had gone into self-isolation. Surely all passengers on the flight, and those who shared the

same train or bus as the infected woman, deserve the courtesy of knowing. Irish Rail has said it is in the dark about whether the woman even used its service. This approach has led to claims, albeit grossly ill-informed, that the government is concealing vital details about the coronavirus from its citizens.

This has been exacerbated by the circulation of images on social media of someone dressed in a protective boiler-suit outside a Dublin hotel. It was a classic example of fake news; the building was not even a hotel. Yet, given the paucity of information being released about the only confirmed case on the island, it was difficult to reassure people that they were being kept fully in the loop.

There is a fine line between sowing panic by giving too much information, and providing the public with the necessary reassurance that all reasonable measures are being taken to keep them safe. As the epidemic curve climbs, scientists are working hard to understand Covid-19. It is expected there may be a treatment drug this year, and a vaccine by 2021. Meanwhile, the tactics of social distancing and self-isolation seem to be working.

To see off this pandemic with the fewest possible casualties, health authorities need assistance from informed populaces that accept the reasoning for the sacrifices they are asked to make, and never succumb to panic.

Minister's bravery is infectious

Greater love hath no man than this, that he should be prepared to go on a prime junket and be feted like a *Love Island* winner in a foreign capital, in brave defiance of a killer virus, for the sake of his country's tourism industry.

Yet it's unlikely former TD and acting minister for transport, tourism and sport Shane Ross will get the credit he deserves for offering to take one for the team and travel abroad for St Patrick's Day.

As someone who had previously been ready and willing to travel to North Korea to reason with Kim Jong-un – a man known to feed family members to wild dogs – in the interests of world peace, Mr Ross's valour is not in doubt.

If his selfless offer is accepted and he is indeed despatched to bring optimistic tidings and bowls of shamrock to foreign climes, the people of Wuhan city could probably use some good news by then.

Justine McCarthy Covid-19 is an alarm call we can't ignore



There's no room for complacency in an increasingly interconnected world

Good intentions are made to be broken. When the economy crashed in 2008, it triggered an explosion of domestic vegetable gardening. People more accustomed to ordering gambas al ajillo with a sea-scented crisp white took to planting potatoes and tomatoes in their herbageous borders for fear of a global food shortage. Once the threat receded, most of these veggie plots were transformed back into profuse displays of tone-on-tone hydrangeas with the sole purpose of looking good enough to eat, if not quite edible.

Existential threats tend to blow hot and cold, mimicking human nature – or, perhaps, vice versa. I remember vowing, on returning from covering the devastating 1990s famine in Somalia, to never again utter the words "I'm starving", only to find myself lapsing back into the habit faster than one could say: "Chips on the side, please." The same pattern has been discernible in the schools' climate strike days, as the original rivers of passionate young people scared witless about the planet's destruction have waned to a relative trickle.

When stock markets sputtered and stalled in 2008, raising the spectre of another Wall Street crash with despairing businessmen jumping from New York skyscrapers, there was much discussion about the need for a new economic model. That discussion disappeared along with the homegrown spuds as soon as business boomed again. Since then, not even the threat that our consumption-driven, ecology-damaging, globalised lifestyles will culminate in humankind's annihilation has roused sufficient dread to make us radically mend our ways.

The problem with most existential threats is that they are too theoretical or remote to intrude upon our daily lives – and, besides, they seldom come to pass. Just ask Fine Gael why only 1% of voters considered Brexit a primary concern when they went to the polls last month.

Now, however, the world faces a real existential threat – not some theoretical bogeyman pored over by eggheads in scientific laboratories, but a real and present peril. Unlike the worst consequences of climate change, Covid-19 is not confined to endangered tribes marooned amid the burning Amazonian rainforests or far-flung Inuit hamlets surrounded by melting ice caps. The virus has invaded the world's biggest economies, starting in China and rapidly spreading to America, Japan, the Middle East and Europe. Even the usual deniers are eerily silent.

Covid-19 is the alarm call the global village cannot ignore. Its gallop around the world is changing the way we live our lives more swiftly than a million Greta Thunbergs and Green

Party manifestos ever could. Already, it is putting the brakes on international travel as governments advise against non-essential business and leisure flights. No more weekend shopping jaunts to New York or golf with the mates on the Costa del Sol.

Within days of northern Italy's emergence as a region of contagion, airlines' share prices began tumbling. Ryanair, Aer Lingus owner International Airlines Group, EasyJet, Lufthansa and Air France-KLM were all hit.

The aviation sector was not alone. There is concern right across the hospitality sector. Exports and imports have taken an early drubbing. Associated British Foods, which owns Penneys and Primark, has said factory production delays in China may cause supply shortages on this side of the world. There are obvious implications for internet shopping with goods, bought and returned, whizzing around the globe. Fast fashion may become the new fashion victim.

Social life is feeling the effects of Ireland's containment measures with the cancellation of the Ireland-Italy rugby match in Dublin next week and uncertainty about whether the St Patrick's Festival, the start of Ireland's tourism season, will go ahead. In the area of education, secondary schools' foreign trips are in jeopardy, while incoming students are shelving their travel plans. A group of 20 Japanese students from Tsuda University in Tokyo due to arrive this month for a two-week field trip at Maynooth University cancelled on Thursday.

Albert Einstein said the world as we have created it is a process of our thinking, and the only way to change it is to change our thinking. Covid-19 may be what forces us to change our thinking.

Watching Australia burn hasn't changed us or our world, nor have frequent storms, floods, heat waves, hurricanes or tornadoes. Nor have rising sea levels, the demise of coral, increasing

climate-change displacement and migration, or warnings that the world has a dozen years to save itself. We have long been aware that our individual carbon footprints bring our planet another step closer to the edge, and still we have not reduced them.

With the arrival of Covid-19, complacency is no longer a choice. We must act. The world's interconnectedness has many benefits, especially in furthering medical, scientific and communications innovation. Many of these inventions will help humankind in its battle with this new virus.

Where we have gone wrong is in modelling our global village as a platform for rapacious, profit-maximising individualism, to the detriment of self-sufficient communities that resonate with our environment.

At an event marking the centenary of the International Labour Organisation in Dublin last September, the president Michael D Higgins spoke of the need for a new connection between ecology, economics and citizens. He advocated a redefinition of the "political economy discourse" to embrace what he has called "a shared moral resonance".

In common parlance, the alternative to the present code is a whole new ethic that requires more bicycle lanes and railway lines; renewable energy co-ops and community banks; ditching plastic waste in favour of reusable practices such as refilling toiletry containers in pharmacies; and resetting our minds to place less emphasis on greed and more on need.

As countries talk about shutting schools, offices, factories, places of entertainment and even their frontiers, that shared moral resonance is emerging as the key to salvation from Covid-19. Individuals are being asked to take personal and interpersonal responsibility to help stop its spread, by self-declaring and self-isolating. This is the antithesis of the globalisation ethic that only the strong survive.

We are not the only ones in trouble. Wildlife and sea life are diminishing before our eyes. More than one million species are in danger of extinction, according to the United Nations. Ireland has recorded one of the biggest international declines in its bee population, with inevitable repercussions for biodiversity. Trinity College Dublin is considering planting its front lawn with wildflowers to attract insects. Leinster House should do the same, as should all state buildings with outside space. And why stop there? Maybe urban farms on their rooftops, too?

Covid-19 may prove to be containable and treatable sooner rather than later, but it will change us. We can no longer turn a blind eye to how the world is changing around us. Nor can we continue to refuse to change with it. justine.mccarthy@sunday-times.ie

“We can no longer turn a blind eye to how the world is changing around us”

Sarah McInerney Weinstein ruling is no cause for celebration



The #MeToo movement was the right solution to the wrong problem

It was good that Harvey Weinstein was convicted of rape and sexual assault last week. But it was not great, wonderful or seismic, and certainly not proof that the world is changing. In fact, the euphoric reaction to the conviction of one of Hollywood's most powerful producers proved only one thing: we expect men who abuse women to get away with it.

Weinstein, let us remember, was publicly accused of abuse by more than 90 women. Six of them took to the stand to testify about his pattern of predatory sexual behaviour.

Miriam Haley and Jessica Mann gave particularly distressing evidence. Haley said Weinstein held her down on a bed by her wrists, yanked a tampon from her body, and forced oral sex on her. Mann said that when she tried to end a consensual relationship with Weinstein, he raped her, screaming: "You owe me one more time."

Still, the world worried there would be no conviction, because of "complicating factors". There was no evidence of physical injuries, the women had not reported the assaults immediately, and some of them, including Mann, stayed in contact with Weinstein after the attacks.

It is good that the jurors showed an ability to see beyond the black and white, into the shades of grey where rapists hide. It is good, and it is progress. In an educated society, it is also the least we should expect. The fact it was cause for celebration is a grim reflection of what has gone before.

What it does not mean, unfortunately, is that the world has changed.

While all eyes were on the jury deliberations in New York, here in Ireland, in just the past six months, the following rape case convictions

came before the courts: a man who forced his wife upstairs at knifepoint before raping her while their child slept in another room; a Wicklow man who raped a nine-year-old girl when he was 17; a man who plied his teenage foster daughter with alcohol before raping her; and two men in Leitrim jailed for seven years for raping a woman who had blacked out at a house party.

Across all ages and all classes of society, from the pinnacle of Hollywood to the rural wilds of Leitrim, every hour of every day, men are hurting women.

The #MeToo movement was an important development in acknowledging this. It was empowering to see women stand up and say: "Enough." Unfortunately, it was the right solution to the wrong problem.

“When and why do men begin to see women as objects or playthings, to be used and discarded?”

Of course, calling out abuse is important. Punishing abusers is crucial. Changes need to be made in how rape trials are conducted.

Society needs a better understanding of sexual assault and coercion. All of this is true. Hunting down and convicting rapists, however, is not going to solve the problem. Instead, we urgently need to investigate what is happening to our boys.

Men are not born bad. As the mother of two small boys, I know they begin life innocent, loving, empathetic, caring and kind. At what point on their journey to adulthood do so many men turn to cruelty, callousness and violence? When and why do they begin to see women as objects or playthings, to be used, hurt and discarded?

Sometimes we dance around the periphery of this issue when a case has truly shocked us. When two 13-year-old boys killed 14-year old Ana Kriégel in Lucan, there was much hand-wringing about the role of violent pornography in shaping one of the boys' attitudes to women and sex.

When evidence of callous, dehumanising text messages emerged in the Ulster Rugby rape trial, it prompted a discussion about toxic masculinity in sport. But then the debate subsides, nothing changes, and our courts continue to fill up with sickening cases of rape and sexual assault.

If we believe that men are not inherently programmed to rape, humiliate and hurt women – and I do – we must ask why so many are doing it. The conviction of Weinstein was good, but there are plenty more Weinsteins to come. If we want wonderful, or seismic, or world-changing, we must identify the cause, as well as the cure.

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It will take more than the new deal to make Stormont work

The new Stormont deal – to be known as New decade, New approach – may be a comprehensive and generous package from the British and Irish governments but its success will depend on a new attitude to power-sharing among Northern Ireland's disputatious political parties.

Reforming the assembly and the executive's structures will go only so far, unless politicians are prepared to work together in good faith. Although the deal contains structural reforms, they stop well short of turning Stormont into a mini-Westminster, where any ruling coalition can fall without bringing down the institutions of government. Change on that scale would mean ending mandatory power-sharing, and Northern Ireland is not remotely ready for that.

The deal does not prevent another collapse if one of the two largest parties walks out for either genuine or self-serving reasons, as Sinn Féin did three years ago. Nor can it prevent a party ignoring or frustrating the wishes of its executive partners, as the DUP was felt to have done.

There are mechanisms to extend the time another collapse would take, and which would be used by parties to resolve their differences, but this will be pointless if such efforts are not sincere. The veto known as a petition of concern is to be limited to "exceptional circumstances", but these have not been firmly defined.

Key aspects of the deal will certainly test the DUP and Sinn Féin's relationship. On languages, the office of the first minister and deputy first minister will have to approve plans by the Irish and Ulster-Scots commissioners. The DUP has told its supporters this is a unionist veto. At Sinn Féin's press conference announcing its endorsement of the deal, party president Mary Lou McDonald denounced "in the strongest possible terms" promises made by the British and Irish governments to the DUP on flags and promoting the identity of Northern Ireland, a place Sinn Féin still will not name. Bizarrely, Ms McDonald claimed these parts of the deal are not recognised by her party – early cherry-picking even by Stormont's standards.

The three smaller parties – Alliance, the SDLP and the UUP – are re-entering the executive having been in opposition. Stormont did not acquire an official oppo-

sition until 2016, and their supporters may have mixed feelings about smaller parties abandoning that role. However, their involvement in the executive could help to stabilise the DUP/Sinn Féin relationship. Sinn Féin was particularly unhappy with scrutiny from the backbenches and lack of nationalist political cover, feeling vulnerable to the SDLP on issues such as welfare reform. Opposition parties also tore the DUP apart over the Renewable Heat Incentive scheme.

The deal promises enhanced powers and funding for the official opposition and allows parties to enter opposition up to two years after an executive is formed. At present, executive and opposition must be established simultaneously. This means if the DUP and Sinn Féin do not work together or behave themselves, an opposition party can walk out and use its inside knowledge to hold the executive to account. The threat of this could be more effective than opposition itself.

Last month's UK general election left Sinn Féin and the DUP in no doubt that the people of Northern Ireland want devolution restored to address the chronic problems in health and other services neglected during years of political limbo. New Decade, New Approach promises an extraordinary increase in funding to deal with these problems. Billions of pounds are on offer for everything from hospital waiting lists to police recruitment to much-needed infrastructure.

These push and pull factors give the two main parties strong reasons to return to government. Yet they do nothing to heal the rancour and mistrust between them that brought Stormont down three years ago. It will be easy to agree while spending an enhanced budget that solves most practical policy difficulties. When the next orange versus green argument inevitably arises – bilingual road signs are already a point of contention – money will not be enough. Real willingness to co-operate and compromise will be required. With no immediate sign of personnel changes at the top, those leading the DUP and Sinn Féin face a steep learning curve.

Republicans were far from blameless when they said Stormont needed to be rebuilt around respect, but their observation was correct. If respect is not forthcoming now, something else will have to be built in Stormont's place.

Taoiseach faces increasing pressure for February poll

Such is the head of steam that has built up around the idea of a general election in February, that it will come as an almighty anticlimax if the taoiseach, despite all the indications to the contrary, eventually delays polling day until nearer Easter or even beyond. The odds on Leo Varadkar making it to May, his preferred date, have lengthened considerably. The feeling among the independent TDs who have kept the minority Fine Gael government in power is such that the dissolution of the Dail this week seems inevitable. The Labour Party and the Green Party, both of which expect to improve their representation in the next Dail, are adding to the pressure and calling on the taoiseach to go to the country immediately.

The prospect of a no-confidence motion in Simon Harris, the health minister, in early February has concentrated minds. Of all the government ministers, Mr Harris would be most deserving when it comes to losing office. Even with Fianna Fail abstaining, the mood of independents in the Dail is such that the government would almost certainly lose that confidence vote, creating the worst possible circumstances for a general election.

Mr Varadkar will not want to let it get to that stage, so a pre-emptive strike seems obvious. Calling the election this week will allow the nation to go to the polls on

February 7, although a delay of one week cannot be ruled out.

Mr Varadkar did have an opportunity to call a snap election in the aftermath of Boris Johnson's successful Brexit vote in Westminster, but chose not to take it. In addition to benefiting from successfully lobbying in Europe to protect Ireland's interests on Brexit, a pre-Christmas election would have avoided the seasonal overcrowding in hospitals. As predicted, stories about hospital trolleys and waiting lists have been dominating the news since the turn of the year.

Fine Gael will still promote its work on Brexit and the restoration of Stormont as significant achievements, but it's likely the election narrative will concentrate on health, housing and, to a lesser extent, homelessness. All these areas are certainly worth debating; so, too, is rampant public spending and Fine Gael's abandonment of promises to institute meaningful tax cuts. The prevailing centre-left ideology among the Irish political class is such that these financial issues will struggle for attention, however. More is the pity. Public spending is out of control and Irish taxpayers, as our columnist Cormac Lucey explains in *Business today* (Economic Outlook, page 4), are being fleeced. It's about time one of the big parties took a stand on these issues.

Jury is out on Poles' position

A Supreme Court judge was despatched to Warsaw yesterday to march in a silent demonstration in support of Polish colleagues. While the sight of a judge in a protest march is indeed a novelty, this is not the first time the Irish judiciary has expressed concern about the independence and fairness of the Polish legal system.

Two years ago the judge Aileen Donnelly suspended the extradition of a suspected drug trafficker to Poland,

citing "systematic" violations of the judiciary's independence. While the Supreme Court reversed her decision, it too found "troubling" evidence of political interference.

The separation of powers, and avoidance of political meddling in judicial business, is a basic constitutional principle. But it ought to work both ways. After all, how would we feel if the Polish government took to our streets in support of Shane Ross's Judicial Appointments Bill?

Sarah McInerney
We've allowed abuse to be compounded with neglect

Death of campaigner Shane Griffin highlights failures to protect children

Three weeks ago, Shane Griffin wrote the last tweet of his life. "It's OK to feel a little shite, folks," he told his 1,467 followers just before Christmas. "It's OK not to feel 'festive'. It's OK not to feel OK."

The 33-year-old Social Democrats campaigner knew what it was like not to feel OK. At the age of five, he was repeatedly sexually abused by a man his mother had met while she was recovering from a nervous breakdown. When the gardai began to investigate, the young Shane was terrified that the man would come to kill him. So he slept with a kitchen knife under his pillow. The man was convicted in 1994 – a rare example of Shane getting the protection he deserved from the adults around him.

That year, a local garda came across the then seven-year-old boy cycling around Newbridge at 10pm. The officer brought him home, and found the backdoor open. Shane's three-year-old sister was in the kitchen on her own, wearing only a T-shirt. "Her feet were filthy," the garda wrote in his report, entitled Suspected Neglect of Young Children. "There were footprints of what appeared to be excretion around the floor of the kitchen and the house was in a filthy condition... Her mother was asleep."

A care order was granted for Shane. At first, the little boy found some kindness in care. In an interview with *The Irish Times* in 2016, he remembered his first foster mother lifting him out of the bath with a big towel. "It was so fluffy and warm," he said. "It was something new, that I didn't have at home. It was kind of my first good memory."

There were to be few more. By the age of nine, Shane had experienced five different foster placements. Security and permanency – fundamental needs for any child – were denied to him by a system that was supposed to provide care.

He decided to take matters into his own hands, and wrote a pleading letter to a judge handling his case. "Please let us come home to our mammy," he wrote. "She is the only one who cares about me, who wants me even when I'm good or bad. Nobody wants me, and I just want to die."

Shane told the judge he had been hit in one of the care homes. In another placement, he wrote, a foster parent had picked him up by the neck and threatened to punch him. "I'm frightened of being in care," he wrote. In the middle of one page, in large letters, he wrote: "Please help us."

The help he wanted never came.

Throughout his childhood, Shane was moved to at least 19 care homes. One placement ended when he wet the bed, and his foster father hit him so hard that his nose began "pumping blood". When he acted out, he was moved. The more he was moved, the more his behaviour deteriorated.

When he was 16, Shane went back home, where his mother – by now a chronic alcoholic – was unable to look after him. He met an older man who befriended him, groomed him and sexually abused him. He convinced Shane to prostitute himself.

Still, the boy refused to be crushed. He got an apprenticeship as a plumber, then a degree in social studies, and became a social care worker. He did a lot of therapy, and met some of his abusers, determined to make peace with his past.

His passion was to give a voice to vulnerable children trapped in the system, whose screams for help disappear into a void. He took up a role as advocacy manager for the Care Leavers' Network, and became a father. Every day he

battled demons from the past. On the morning of December 31, 2019, Shane lost that fight. Last Saturday, his tired soul was laid to rest.

Two days after he was buried, a newspaper reported that Tusla, the child and family agency, is returning thousands of child welfare reports to healthcare workers because they were not submitted online. Tusla launched an internet portal two years ago, to allow welfare officers to file remotely, but only about 20% of HSE staff have internet access.

This means Tusla officers wade through the reports they get in the post; thick stacks of paper, packed with details of children being harmed. They pick out the most egregious ones, those they categorise as "abuse". This means the reports of child neglect – you know, neglect, such as a three-year-old wearing only a T-shirt and walking around barefoot in faeces – those cases are not examined immediately. Instead, they are sent back in the post to the welfare officers who have no internet access, with a request they be submitted online.

This farce is taking place under the laughably titled Children First legislation. It is a story that received no attention last week; we were all too busy discussing a war from 100 years ago.

Three days after Shane was buried, another newspaper report revealed delays of up to 10 years in investigating and prosecuting cases of online child abuse, because of a lack of resources. In one case of suspected abuse, a device was seized by gardai in 2011 but not examined for three years. When they eventually got around to it, investigators found an image of an indecent assault on a child. For three years, that child had been left at the mercy of an abuser. Screaming into the void.

This story did not get much attention, either. We were too busy obsessing about whether the general election might be on February 7 or 14.

In St Conleth's Church in Newbridge last Saturday, as mourners gathered to pay their final respects to Shane, one of his poems was read from the altar. "We all put up a front from time to time; who are we kidding when we're mush inside. So take a step back and ask this to yourself: do you need to ask for some help? If you know me, you know what I speak. Tap me on the shoulder, I'm here if you want to speak."

To the end, the little boy who never had his voice heard sought to reach out to others, and listen to their pain. How many more like Shane are shouting now? He is no longer here to listen. It is time we all did a better job, in his place, and in his honour.

@SarahMcInerney
Justine McCarthy is away

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His passion was to give a voice to vulnerable children trapped in the system, whose screams for help disappear

Conor Brady

Irish police caught on wrong side of history



Bitterness and ignorance is behind the demonising of the RIC and DMP

The row over the "deferred" commemoration of the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) and the Dublin Metropolitan Police (DMP) disclosed disquieting, even alarming, bitterness and ignorance. Irishmen who served in these forces have been labelled as murderers and torturers. One caller to RTE's *Liveline* likened them to the SS. Conversely, others sought to represent the RIC and DMP almost as benign institutions that provided much-needed employment for Irishmen.

The truth is that the police operated as the strong right hand of the British administration in Dublin Castle. Something short of 100,000 men served in the various forces and reserves, most of them – including my grandfather – drawn from rural Catholic backgrounds. The officer corps mainly comprised wealthy Protestants.

This policing model was exported from the Phoenix Park depot around the British Empire. The rank and file were recruited from the indigenous population, while officers came from Britain and Ireland. It was cheaper than maintaining overseas armies. And it proved generally effective in keeping rebelliousness in check.

The notion of the RIC as an armed, alien garrison, set among the people, detested and resented, is to some degree a myth, serving to justify the campaign of violence and boycott inflicted upon them and their families in the War of Independence.

By then, most of their "barracks" were ordinary, unfortified dwelling houses. Most Peelers were well integrated. Many were Irish speakers or accomplished in traditional Irish music, dance and culture.

As the recently founded GAA spread across the country, many of its proponents were RIC men or their sons. Indeed, District Inspector Thomas McCarthy was a member of the

founding committee that met in Hayes hotel in Thurles in 1884.

RIC men were often regarded as good matches for the daughters of farmers, tradespeople or shopkeepers. Pay was meagre but steady. A constable could retire on a reduced pension after 20 years' service. Many a small farm was kept going by RIC pensioners who were still young enough to work the land, and whose small monthly stipend might pay for the education of younger family members.

Those who served in the RIC and the DMP in 1916-22 had joined at a time when the notion of an armed struggle for independence was almost unthinkable, since the majority of the Irish people were not greatly resistant to living within the UK. For example, Rebel Cork of 1920 had rejoiced just a few years earlier in the soubriquet "Loyal Cork".

I interviewed many RIC men in their old age while researching Irish policing history. That their job might require them to take arms against their fellow Irishmen had scarcely entered their heads. The role of the constabulary in the post-Famine evictions, in the Land War or in suppressing the Fenian

rising of 1867 – in so far as they thought about it all – was a historical irrelevance. Ignorance was bliss.

By the early 20th century, almost all of the force's work had to do with civil matters. There was little crime. Officers generally patrolled without firearms. Discipline was good. But once activated to confront what Dublin Castle dubbed "the Sinn Féin threat", the RIC initially proved itself energetic and effective. Michael Collins understood it had to be absolutely broken if his war effort were to succeed. Collins greatly admired the RIC's discipline and tenacity, and saw it as a model for the new Garda Síochána.

Hundreds of RIC men and a few DMP officers were victims of the ensuing violence. Many of the killings were without honour. Men were shot at their homes or at church. Three former constables were murdered in their hospital beds in Galway. And as often happens with humans, some members of the RIC proved homicidal and brutal, as did some IRA men. Prisoners were tortured and murdered, and their homes destroyed. Some of those RIC killers were probably psychopathic, while others were actuated by revenge.

For the most part, RIC and DMP men sought simply to survive and to preserve their humanity. Some resigned. Others emigrated – an option not open to all. Some assisted Collins's campaign by providing intelligence. And there were many instances of the RIC or DMP saving lives, sometimes with timely warnings or by restraining Black and Tans or Auxiliaries from their murderous excesses.

There can be few Irish families without a connection, however distant, to RIC or DMP relatives who found themselves on the wrong side of history. These were Irishmen who, for the most part, were neither saints nor demons. Regrettably, last week's controversy reduced their story to a narrative that was simplistic, bitter, dangerous and self-serving.

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Michael Collins greatly admired the RIC's discipline and tenacity and saw it as a model for the garda