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# Next taoiseach can find Brexit role for Mr Kenny

The taoiseach's meeting with President Donald Trump on Thursday exceeded all expectations. It was also marked by two newsworthy events. The first was the revelation that Mr Trump has been invited to visit Ireland. That had not been signalled in advance and, naturally, sparked outrage from the same people who were opposed to Enda Kenny meeting the American president in the first place.

Mr Kenny, as we argued previously, was perfectly correct to continue the tradition of meeting the American president to mark St Patrick's Day, ignoring the juvenile claims from those who stated that the taoiseach's presence in the Oval Office would be seen as an endorsement of "Trumpism". It was no such thing.

Brendan Howlin, the Labour Party leader, was given a platform by RTE to attack Mr Kenny's performance in America. Mr Howlin, desperately seeking relevance, was way off the mark. A less partisan politician would have accepted that the taoiseach made a strong case in Mr Trump's presence for the fair treatment of illegal immigrants and emphasised the importance of the relationship between America and the European Union. Whether it makes a difference, only time will tell. What matters is that Mr Kenny said his piece.

The other significant event was the controversy generated when Mr Kenny seemed to renege on his vow to set out a timetable for his departure as taoiseach once his St Patrick's Day duties had been completed. Mr Kenny made this promise to his parliamentary party last month, in the wake of the controversy that arose following his misleading statement to the Dail about a conversation he never had with Katherine Zappone, the children's minister, concerning garda whistle-blower Maurice McCabe.

Speaking to the media ahead of his departure from America on Friday, he said he would not announce any retirement plans until political uncertainty in Northern Ireland is addressed and the EU's negotiating stance on Brexit is agreed. That was definitely not in the script. Given the uncertainty surrounding the timing of both the issues highlighted by Mr Kenny, it is hard to conclude other than that he is toying with his would-be successors, reminding them that he remains the big beast in the party.

Mr Kenny runs the risk of turning the Fine

Gael succession race into a divisive, and electorally damaging, political circus. That is a pity because even if Mr Kenny is no longer taoiseach there is no reason why he should be put out to pasture.

In the months since he announced that he would not lead Fine Gael into the next election, a number of commentators, including Conor Brady in this newspaper, have questioned the wisdom of allowing such an experienced politician to slink off into the sunset given the challenges we face — particularly from Brexit.

Theresa May, the British prime minister, is set to trigger article 50, the formal process that will signal the start of two years of negotiating between the UK and the EU on the terms of departure. Ireland will be precluded from doing side deals and will have to negotiate with the British as part of the 27-member-strong EU team.

It is no exaggeration to argue that Ireland's interests in the outcome should be close to the top of the agenda. This country will have the only EU land border with Britain post-Brexit; the two countries enjoy stronger business relationships with each other than they do with any other EU member state; and Ireland and Britain are joint guarantors of the Good Friday agreement, the peace deal that brought an end to the violence that destroyed Northern Ireland for three decades. Those who believe Mr Kenny's negotiating skills and personal relationships will be a vital part of that negotiating process have a valid point. However, it is not an argument for keeping him as taoiseach.

Fine Gael, languishing in the polls since last year's electoral drubbing, is in urgent need of a new face on the poster. Whether that is Simon Coveney or Leo Varadkar — other candidates barely register with the public — there is no reason why either man would not offer Mr Kenny a cabinet position, such as foreign affairs minister, with specific responsibility for ensuring that Irish interests are protected in the Brexit negotiations.

Would Mr Kenny want such a role? He was thought to harbour ambitions to become president of the European Council but, with Donald Tusk reappointed to the role for the next 2½ years, that door has closed. Moving down the pecking order from taoiseach to cabinet minister would be unusual but, with Brexit at the top of the agenda, it might just be the perfect end to Mr Kenny's long career.

# Too soon to celebrate Europe's Dutch treat

There was a collective sigh of relief across Europe at the defeat of Geert Wilders and his Party for Freedom in the Dutch general election. Mark Rutte, the Dutch prime minister, saw his party lose seats but celebrated a victory over "the wrong kind of populism". The EU can enjoy the 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome this week without Mr Wilders as the unwelcome guest at the feast.

As with the rejection last December of the far-right Norbert Hofer in the Austrian presidential election, voters have stepped back from the brink of extremism. For concerned Europeans, the set will be completed by a rejection of the National Front's Marine Le Pen in the French presidential election and by the re-election of a centrist coalition, under Angela Merkel, in Germany in the autumn.

It would be a massive error, however, for Europe's leaders to conclude that Brexit and the election of Donald Trump were examples of Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism, and that their voters are broadly happy with the way things are. Nothing could be further from the truth. Indeed, Europe's high unemployment and glacial post-crisis recovery in living standards gives EU voters more cause for an angry rejection of the status quo, not less. The defeat of Mr Wilders in Holland — though his PVV

party came second — had as much to do with the fragmented, multi-party nature of the country's political system as it did a vote of confidence in the mainstream.

The question is whether Europe's national leaders, and the presidents of the European council, commission and parliament, have the understanding, and the vision, to respond. For the EU's citizens, concerns about globalisation and the disappearance of traditional industries and occupations have been compounded by the malign impact of the eurozone. Germany has prospered; most other countries have not.

The EU's "rules are rules" approach led to Britain's vote to leave. A recognition that freedom of movement does not work in an EU where wages vary so widely could have made a difference. Mrs Merkel's great gamble, her open-door policy on immigration from the war-torn Middle East, exacerbated by Schengen, is giving way to a desperate attempt to bring control to the EU's borders. Above all, after 60 years, the EU has to start to recognise that there is no elite more remote and out of touch than the European elite in Brussels.

If Europe fails to rise to the challenge, it is hard to have any confidence that the EU will be around to mark the Treaty of Rome in another 60 years, or even in 20. The lesson to be drawn from this year's elections in Europe is that popular discontent persists and is largely justified. And unless the EU reforms, it will die.

# St Patrick's wife airbrushed from history back home

St Patrick had a wife called Sheelah, according to old Irish folklore, and in pre-Famine times her feast day was celebrated with great merrymaking on March 18.

Even up to relatively recent times, it seems, the Irish had no problem with the idea of a bishop having a wife, and Irish communities in Newfoundland and Australia continued to celebrate Sheelah long after she was quietly sidelined at home. Indeed, Atlantic Canadians still refer to a late winter snowfall as Sheelah's Brush, in her honour.

So why has her name been airbrushed so effectively from our own history? The

tightening grip of the Catholic church on this country in the late 19th and early 20th centuries may account for the denial of Sheelah's very existence. There is even a rumour she was subject to a public inquisition, to test her claims, mediated by a popular "saoi" of the day.

She was humiliated before a raucous crowd of assembled accusers, who taunted her for inventing a relationship with the bishop, and scoffed at the notion that the rotund young man by her side, who was wearing a mitre, sporting a giant beard and banishing snakes, could possibly be St Patrick's son. She was then exiled to the new world, and never heard from again.

# I idolised my big sister, but society cast her out when she got pregnant

She was my big sister and I idolised her. She was wild, beautiful and wilful, with the elocution of a diva. "My name is Berenice," she would insist, emphasising the polysyllables. "Ber-e-nice".

Having her to myself on the country bus from Cork city one evening, after her day's work as a beauty therapist, was thrilling. She talked to me as though I were grown up too. Modernity oozed from her, in a grey Revlon uniform, the vivid pink of her bri-nylon polo-neck matching the colour on her lips, but I felt an unnameable dread when I noticed her sticking-out tummy.

That night, raised voices came from the kitchen — a rare event in our all-female household — followed by the slam of the front door, and silence. Somehow, we knew we should not ask.

Soon after that night, my other two sisters and I went back to boarding school in the city, where the Ursuline nuns dedicated themselves to moulding "young ladies". Our mother visited us every Sunday, as she did religiously for 13 years, sitting in the car for hours under a canopy of ever weeping trees. Only decades later did Adrienne, Gina and I realise that each of us had felt cast down by the shadow of Bessborough, the nearby mother and baby home.

Gina, the youngest and the athlete, remembers running past the door every Wednesday for her cross-country training and how it "gave me the heebie-jeebies". Sometimes, from the basketball courts, you could see bent shapes in the far distance, working in the fields. When I wrote in this newspaper some years ago that a nun had instructed me not to look at those women, I received a vexed letter from the convent branding it "a lie".

It is no lie. Bessborough was a parable for any female tempted to sin, or be sinned against. Just as the Bon Secours nuns were asked to run Tuam's mother and baby home, Cork's Bishop Cohan had invited the Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and Mary from France in 1922 to cater for the new state's "fallen women". As is now known, Bessborough was

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temporarily shut down by the Department of Health in the 1940s after 100 babies died out of the 180 born there in one year. As is also now known, children in Bessborough were used for vaccine trials while their mothers were sent out to cut the lawn by hand, on their knees. This was the Ireland of 98% Catholics, 90% of whom went to mass every week.

In 1974, the taoiseach Liam Cosgrave voted against his own government's defeated bill to allow married couples to buy contraceptives. In Seanad Éireann, a papal encyclical banning contraceptives, *Humanae vitae*, was reverentially read into the record. Cork's formidable bishop Cornelius Lucey declared that no Catholic had the right to disagree with the church's teachings. There was not a single day-nursery in the whole of Co Cork, Ireland's biggest county.

That year, too, our mother stopped visiting for weeks on end. Later, we learnt her absence was because she had gone to stay with Berenice in England, where she was waiting out her pregnancy while privately arranging to have the child adopted. Berenice never lived in Ireland again after that. One Sunday, our mother told us in the car under the weeping trees that she had gone to South Africa. I felt my heart break, imagining her alone in a steaming jungle full of prowling beasts, and thinking I would never see her again.

Our mother made these plans out of love for the four of us. She had lost her husband, the love of her life, eight years before when God's invisible hand reached down and squeezed his heart in a vice grip, snatching him from this world. Widowed at 39 with four daughters, aged from 10 to one, she knew the shame awaiting us once tongues started wagging. So she chose the second option on a particularly Irish menu: either send Berenice to a mother and baby home or to England, so that

she could come home a virgin once again. Except she didn't come home and our family was splintered for ever.

For the next 38 years, my mother kept a photograph of the baby in her purse. She had written his name on the back in her careful hand, and the legend "one week old". She never stopped pining for her firstborn grandchild. My

sisters and I never saw our nephew. A shroud of secrecy hung over us all.

Six years ago I received an email. "Forgive me if you're not who I think you are," it began, "but I think your sister is my mother." His name was Duncan Carr — Duncan McCarthy Carr, Ber-e-nice's child. Adrienne, Gina and I spoke to him on the phone that Sunday, our joy dimmed only by having to tell him it was too late; his mother had died three days after her 51st birthday. He said he would come to Dublin the next Sunday.

Adrienne and I drove to the nursing home where our mother was living with Alzheimer's, confined to a wheelchair and unable to speak. We told her Duncan had found us, that he sounded lovely and that he'd had a good life so far. "Isn't it wonderful, mum?" said Adrienne, "It is," our mother said, uttering her only words in two years. Less than 48 hours later, she was admitted to hospital and started to die.

Last week on RTE Radio, a man said it was the children in the mother and baby homes he felt sorry for, because the mothers just had to deal with gossip and shame whereas the babies died.

Regardless of the fact that many mothers lost their lives too, there were different kinds of deaths caused by society's reduction of love to a filthy, four-letter word. Judgmentalism killed families.

I told Duncan I would not write this column if that were his wish. He said, in a crystal-clear English accent, that I must. "Other than my two children, I'd never met anyone who was me until I met my aunts."

When he came to Ireland, he brought a letter Berenice had written him when he was born, to be opened on his 18th birthday. She said she loved him, she was sorry, and she hoped he would understand one day.

I knew her lost child understood better than many of us in this country when Duncan said to me last week: "Why can we be so cruel to those most in need of a trusting hand?"

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MANY MOTHERS LOST THEIR LIVES TOO, BUT THERE WERE DIFFERENT KINDS OF DEATHS

# Church must accept the fathers with a son to have a ghost of a chance

It is ironic that Bishop Eamonn Casey should pass out of this world just as Pope Francis opened up the issue of clerical celibacy, in terms that have not been publicly articulated before by the Vatican.

It was perhaps even poignant that, as the details of Casey's fall from grace 25 years ago were being rehearsed across the media, commentators were parsing and analysing what Francis had said in an interview with the German newspaper *Die Zeit* about the possibility of ordaining married men as priests.

What the Pope said was significant, even if it was carefully circumscribed. He is not about to offer the priesthood a matrimonial carte blanche.

He told his interviewer that the church might have to consider ordaining married men to discharge priestly duties in remote regions, where the shortage of vocations has left congregations without a full-time pastor. These could be *virī probati*, he suggested, men of proven commitment to the church, perhaps already engaged in its work although not ordained.

There are, indeed, many places where there is effectively no functioning priesthood. However, they are not all in remote parts of the Third World. Some are in our own cities and towns.

The revelation in 1992 that a bishop of Galway and Kilmacduagh had been involved in a relationship with a distant relative, Annie Murphy, and was father to her 17-year old son, is regarded as the beginning of the end of the authority of the Irish Catholic church, especially in relation to sexual morality. People who had been threatened with hellfire for any breach of Catholic teaching on sex began to realise that they had been conned.

Any plea that Casey's violation of his vows was a rare exception



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was outweighed by other instances of clerics fathering children that came to light, notably that of Michael Cleary, the so-called singing priest who had a son with his housekeeper. Cleary even shared a platform with Casey in Galway during the visit of Pope John Paul II to Ireland in 1979.

The Bishop Casey revelations also marked the point at which the bottom fell out of vocations to the priesthood in Ireland. An already downward trend accelerated sharply.

When Pope John Paul descended on Ireland, there were 400 young men in training for the priesthood at Maynooth, with perhaps another 500 seminarians in smaller colleges around the country.

Five years after the Casey revelations, there were little more than 200 priests in training altogether. In 2015-16, there were about 80, all of them at Maynooth.

The Association of Catholic Priests has vividly described the crisis in its ranks, with priests being subject to "huge mental and physical pressure" because of age, "resulting in a decline of energy and enthusiasm; isolation; ever increasing workload; ever increasing demands of ministry; low morale; despair as vocations decline so massively; little free time; ill health; and a lack of confidence in dealing with difficult emerging social issues in parish work".

The crisis is manifest now in almost every parish, with infrequent masses, churches closed for much of the time, and a great reduction in traditional devotional exercises. In some parishes, mourners are asked to "double up", sharing requiem masses with other bereaved families.

The archbishop of Dublin, Diarmuid Martin, has acknowledged that the church cannot continue to provide the services expected of it from a rapidly ageing priesthood, and he has sought

to extend the role of lay persons to compensate. The fall-off in vocations is not solely because of celibacy, but it is a big factor.

Young people today are no less idealistic and no less willing to commit themselves to the service of others than were previous generations. They will work enthusiastically for aid agencies and volunteer groups. They will brave deserts and oceans to help others. But they will not live a life that requires them either to abandon the natural human urge to physical intimacy and love, or to be unfaithful to a solemn vow.

Eamonn Casey was an idealist too. He was open-hearted, courageous and socially aware. He was not one of the fire- and-brimstone brigade. But he will always be remembered for his supposed weakness or flaw — the fact that he made love to a woman, created a new life with her, and then effectively denied the relationship along with his own child.

It is surely wrong that someone who sought to do good should have been obliged to hide much of his humanity, and that he felt it necessary to conceal the truth of his life.

If Casey had been allowed to marry, it is unlikely that he would have been any less successful as a churchman, that he would have denied his children, or that he would have misused money contributed to the diocese by his flock.

An increasing proportion of Catholics recognise that, if their church is to function in the future, a new pathway to the priesthood has to be put in place. Similarly, women will have to be admitted to full ordination. Pope Francis will approach these propositions cautiously and incrementally.

It seems likely that if Casey were still an active force in the Irish church, he would support them.

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