

The truly workshy deserve welfare cuts

ONE of the great bedrocks of our society, founded on the principles of care and concern, is the social welfare system for people who lose their jobs. It is, though, a safety net so that those who lose their jobs can find new employment or, failing that, retrain to get better prospects.

The vast majority of people who end up jobless cannot wait to rejoin the workforce, and for many a return to the classroom in middle-age, while initially scary, can be rewarding.

Sadly, though, there are others who abuse the system and simply refuse to actively seek work or attend classes in new disciplines. What is particularly sad, though, is the number of young people between the ages of 18 and 24 who sit back and do nothing.

At a time of their lives when they should be showing initiative, it seems they have decided welfare is a lifestyle choice.

Now we learn that almost 8,000 of them have had their Jobseeker's Allowance cut by up to €44 a week, because they are not seeking jobs at all.

Some, no doubt, are making extra money in the black economy, and therefore can handle any such cuts with ease. And there may be others who, for reasons relating to upbringing or mental health, fall through the cracks and need more than just financial help.

There will, no doubt, be entirely predictable hand-wringing in some quarters that welfare payments are being further cut, but it is absolutely correct that such a sanction be applied to the truly workshy. No-one minds seeing their taxes going to help those in genuine need, but when carers and the parents of children with disabilities have taken the brunt of cuts up to now, it is neither fair nor justifiable that we continue to give the full allowance to those who could work, but refuse to.

Give parents a break

IN a world where we like to think of 50 as the new 40, and where many of us will not now retire until we are 68, rather than the traditional 65, it is only right that we reassess our attitudes to age in other areas of life too.

Former children's minister James Reilly is correct when he says the guidelines that say adoptive parents can be no more than 40 years older than the children they wish to look after is offensive and antiquated.

Nowadays, many men and women have biological children long after their 40th birthdays. Equally, because the age of those marrying is getting older, couples might have a very short time to learn they have fertility issues before the 40-year guideline kicks in.

Mr Reilly has appealed to his successor, Katherine Zappone, to address the issue head on. Ms Zappone knows a thing or two about equality, having been one of the leaders of the marriage equality campaign last year, and this is indeed an equality issue.

If people can have biological children in their late 40s and early 50s nowadays, there is no valid reason to deny adoptive parents of the same age an equal shot at having children in their lives.

TD's just out of tune

IT seems like a nice idea that would give the domestic music industry a shot in the arm, but Labour TD Willie Penrose's plan to introduce a Bill to make radio stations play at least 45% Irish music is misguided.

He cites the popularity of country and western outside the capital as one of the reasons for his Bill, but radio stations have a commercial imperative to survive, and advertisers want their message heard by the young with disposable income. And they, whether he likes it or not, are more likely to listen to Beyoncé Knowles-Carter than to Nathan Carter.

Yes, soaps can be trite and shallow. But poor Kylie told us something so profound about life

SHE sold her child, slept with her brother-in-law, resorted to drug-taking and then, just a few months ago, killed the father of her first-born child by smashing him over the head with a wrench.

And those are only the headline highlights in the life of Kylie Platt during her six roller-coaster years as a central figure in the soap opera that is Coronation Street.

'Not much to admire there, then,' would be an understandable reaction.

So why is it that the dramatic and bloody death of Kylie Platt, as played out so heart-breakingly on screen last week, has hit home so hard with those of us who are regular viewers of Coronation Street?

Is it because she was such a feisty character with a huge presence, her death now leaving an enormous void when it comes to the actual drama itself? Or is it because she had such great storylines? Or is it down to her comedic contribution – because, despite all the drama and heartbreak that she brought to the soap opera, Kylie was also very, very funny?

Transformed

It's all of those, of course. But it's also much more than that. For in the life and death of Kylie Platt, we see a girl who never really had a chance, a girl who acted despicably for most of her life because that was the only way she knew and yet, gradually, and in the end, what we witnessed was a young woman transformed. A doer. A hard worker. A loving wife. An adoring mother. A caring aunt. An understanding daughter-in-law. A loyal friend.

In Kylie we see what we all hope to be true of life – that people can change, that everyone is due a second chance, that, despite everything, good wins out over evil in the end. That the notion of redemption is not just pie-in-the-sky, but something real, something tangible, something noble. Who doesn't want to believe in that?

There have been many soap opera characters down the years whose departures have been much lamented.

The fantastic Hayley Cropper, also in Coronation Street. The chain-smoking Pat Butcher in EastEnders. Young Bradley Branning who fell to his death from the roof of the Queen Vic pub, also in EastEnders. The lovable Jack Duckworth, again in Coronation Street. Even Peggy Mitchell, the queen of EastEnders, whose death occurred in a brief return to the London-based soap earlier this summer.

But the thing with Hayley and Pat, Bradley and Jack and, of course, the redoubtable Peggy, was that they were what they were. And that was largely one-dimensional, standard soap opera characters.

Hayley Cropper was certainly one of the most endearing personalities ever to walk the cobbles of Weatherfield, but despite her explosive transgender storyline, she was the same decent human being when she died as she had always been.

Ditto the other aforementioned characters – you knew where you were with Peggy Mitchell, or Pat Butcher, or Jack Duckworth or Bradley Branning.

However, you never knew where you were with Kylie Platt – you were never quite sure which particular Kylie was likely to walk in



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through the door of Number 8 Coronation Street at any particular time. And that was the genius of her character.

She first appeared, as Kylie Turner, almost exactly six years ago – in August 2016. Her backstory was horrendous. Raised by a drug-addict mother and abusive father, her only real friend and ally was her half-sister, Becky (who later married Steve McDonald and was, herself, one of the Street's great characters). When Kylie was eight years old, Becky left home and Kylie's situation deteriorated until she ended up in care.

Pregnant at 19 by ne'er-do-well thug and drug-dealer Callum Logan, their son, Max, was subsequently taken into care.

When she first appeared in Weatherfield in 2010, she was given a home by her sister Becky, who vowed to help her get Max back.

Redemption

Her story then ricocheted from one disaster to another – absconding with Max from his care home; selling him to her sister, who couldn't have children of her own; stealing from everyone who tried to help her; marrying David Platt after a fling with him in Tenerife despite being bribed by David's mother, Gail, on the eve of the wedding, to go away and leave her son alone. (She pocketed the £1,000 bribe and used it to pay for her wedding dress – red and black, of course – and the reception drinks and nibbles.)

But her marriage to David was the thing that was to anchor her.

Yes, there were rows and dramas and walkouts and an ill-judged one-night fling with her brother-in-law when she and David were estranged, but, fundamentally, David loved Kylie and Kylie loved David. And it was her marriage that was to be her road to redemption.

And we held our breath for her, time and time again, as she tried, still failing more often than not, to do the right thing.

And gradually, piece by piece, she began to act more maturely, to care for others, to take responsibility for her actions.

But it's only soap opera, I hear you say. And yes, it is only soap opera, a genre that is often eschewed by the great and the good, dismissed as nonsense and melodrama. And it is melodrama. But it can be melodrama that has a real resonance with reality.

Not many of us, thankfully, will ever kill the father of our child by hitting him over the head with a wrench in the living room of our home, and then bury him under the half-built extension just off the kitchen.

But Callum Logan was terrorising Kylie's family.

And on the day in question she returned to find him assaulting Sarah, her sister-in-law.

In reaching out to protect Sarah, she attacked the thug, accidentally killing him in the process.

Understanding

In recent months she had been helping and advising her niece, who was being bullied at school. Not in a way that everyone knew about – but, rather, quietly and resolutely, and with Bethany's best interests at heart.

Kylie had come to value her mother-in-law and to build a proper relationship with her after their very inauspicious start.

And she went to her death – stabbed in the street, outside the kebab shop, by one of Callum Logan's scumbag associates – because she went to the aid of her friend, Gemma, who was being assaulted by the thug.

Her dying words, in the arms of her husband, were of her love for him and their children and of her joy in how wonderful they had been together as a couple.

A loving wife. An adoring mother. A caring aunt. An understanding daughter-in-law. A loyal friend.

What's not to admire in such a person? People pretend that they don't watch soap operas.

The writer Stephen King once said that he didn't watch Mad Men 'because it's basically soap opera'.

Whether Mad Men quite fits that genre definition I'm not sure, but there are certainly those who dismiss soap opera as trivial and worthless viewing fodder.

My own father pretended he didn't watch Coronation Street and yet, amazingly, knew everything there was to know about Hilda and Stan Ogden and Curly Watts back in the day.

He fitted a pattern, however, because men, largely, are the ones who dismiss the soaps. For soap opera, after all, was originally created for female viewers, with the focus on stereotypical female interests such as relationships and children and romance.

Not on war or work, however – areas regarded as more stereotypical male interests.

And yet, as commentator Akash Nikolas once pointed out, what was Homeland but a soap opera?

Marketed as a thriller with a kick-ass female lead and a healthy dose of violent action, it is essentially a love story with a ridiculous backdrop of international intrigue that only exists to bring together or drive apart the two leads, he said.

So let's not dismiss the importance of characters just because they happen to appear in what is labelled 'a soap opera'.

And instead, let's be thankful for the life-affirming presence of Kylie Platt over the last six years.

For in the life and death of this young woman, there were many vital lessons to be learned – about the essence of love; the sanctity of family; the value of loyalty; and, ultimately and so importantly, about the enriching power of redemption.