

# Fintan O'Toole: Real choice is not Yes or No. It is What If? or As If



*Fintan O'Toole*

*Last Updated: Tuesday, May 22, 2018, 05:00*

What it comes down to is a difference of three letters and one question mark. It's the difference between What If? and As If. Everyone old enough to vote on Friday has thought, What if? What if I get pregnant? What if my girlfriend gets pregnant? What if my daughter gets raped? What if the joy of "We're going to have a baby?" turns into the anxiety of "I'm afraid I have some bad news"? What if the longed-for bundle of joy is already dead in the womb? What if my wife gets cancer?

What If? is where we live. It is the human uncertainty principle, the life that happens when you're making other plans. We plan to have sex without getting pregnant, but life sometimes decides otherwise. We plan and dream and hope for the perfect pregnancy, but the tears of joy may turn to just tears. We want our children to be born into stable, happy homes, to have the right circumstances and the best chances, but sometimes the circumstances are wrong and the chances are mighty slim.

I don't believe a single person who will vote on Friday believes that in a real, contingent, uncertain world, the answer to What If? is a constitutional certainty

The thing about What If? is that it is a question to which we seldom really know the answer. We know what we think we would do, or we think we know what we would do. But we don't. Maybe the thing we dread – an unplanned pregnancy – would be the greatest blessing of our lives. Maybe the bad news of a test that shows Down syndrome would, if we're able for it, turn out to be a deep enrichment. For some women the best choice might be to bring a pregnancy to full term even if the baby cannot live for more than a few seconds outside the womb. Or maybe not.

All we really know is that every family in Ireland thinks, What if? What if it's my daughter? What if it's my granddaughter? What if it's my wife? What if it's my best friend? What if it's me? And we know, too, that every family in Ireland reserves the right – sometimes openly, sometimes secretly – to make choices when the What If? happens, when the dreaded circumstances come to pass. I don't believe that there is a single person who will vote on Friday who believes, in his or her heart, that in a real, contingent, uncertain world, the answer to What If? is a constitutional certainty.

But against What If? there is As If. As If is the world as we think it should be. It is the world of eternal truths, fixed principles, pure ideals, timeless virtues. When it comes to the Constitution, As If is also about all those capitalised concepts, the State, the Nation, the Republic. When the Eighth Amendment was placed in the Constitution, in 1983, it was not just one clause among the others. It was a big As If.

What it says is that we must live As If. As if Ireland were a uniquely holy place. As if being a Catholic state for a Catholic people had been a fine experience. As if we could draw a moral border around the State and contain a special kind of purity within it. As if Life itself can be written with a capital letter, a pure concept, a fixed thing that is exactly the same for a fertilised ovum as it is for a 35-year-old woman with two kids, a mortgage, a job in pharmaceuticals, a vast store of memories and desires and a secret love of trashy novels. As if there were no What If?

How self-assured do you need to be to call yourself Pro-Life, to act as if everyone who did not agree with you were not just mistaken but were against Life itself?

As If is always easier than What If? It is fixed where the other is fluid. It provides answers where the other merely prompts more questions. It is all certainty where the other is all shades of perplexity. It sticks to principles that can be asserted all the more vehemently to silence private doubts and secret qualms. It makes Ireland into a moral reservation where there are no reservations. It banishes fears, regrets, anxieties, second thoughts and third thoughts. But it is only about what we like to think. It is not about what we do.

As If will always look more noble, more high-minded than What If? Its followers can offer assurance and conviction: how self-assured do you need to be, after all, to call yourself Pro-Life, to act as if everyone who did not agree with you were not just mistaken but were against Life itself? The What If? side can offer instead only a rueful resignation to the contingency of the actual. In an uncertain world it can propose no certainties. It is all lower case, not capital letters: pro-life, not Pro-Life.

But, as [Brian Friel](#) puts it in *Translations*, "confusion is not an ignoble condition". There is no human compassion if we cannot ask "What if that were me?" There is no honesty or integrity in pretending to act as if we were something other than what we are. We cannot vote as if we had no uncertainties or hesitations, no misgivings or confusions. We can but acknowledge that in a world of doubts we should not presume to impose on others what we do not really know ourselves.



# Fintan O'Toole: Trial runs for fascism are in full flow



[Fintan O'Toole](#)

Last Updated: Tuesday, June 26, 2018, 05:00

To grasp what is going on in the world right now, we need to reflect on two things. One is that we are in a phase of trial runs. The other is that what is being trialled is fascism – a word that should be used carefully but not shirked when it is so clearly on the horizon. Forget “post-fascist” – what we are living with is pre-fascism.

It is easy to dismiss [Donald Trump](#) as an ignoramus, not least because he is. But he has an acute understanding of one thing: test marketing. He created himself in the gossip pages of the New York tabloids, where celebrity is manufactured by planting outrageous stories that you can later confirm or deny depending on how they go down. And he recreated himself in reality TV where the storylines can be adjusted according to the ratings. Put something out there, pull it back, adjust, go again.

Fascism doesn't arise suddenly in an existing democracy. It is not easy to get people to give up their ideas of freedom and civility. You have to do trial runs that, if they are done well, serve two purposes. They get people used to something they may initially recoil from; and they allow you to refine and calibrate. This is what is happening now and we would be fools not to see it.

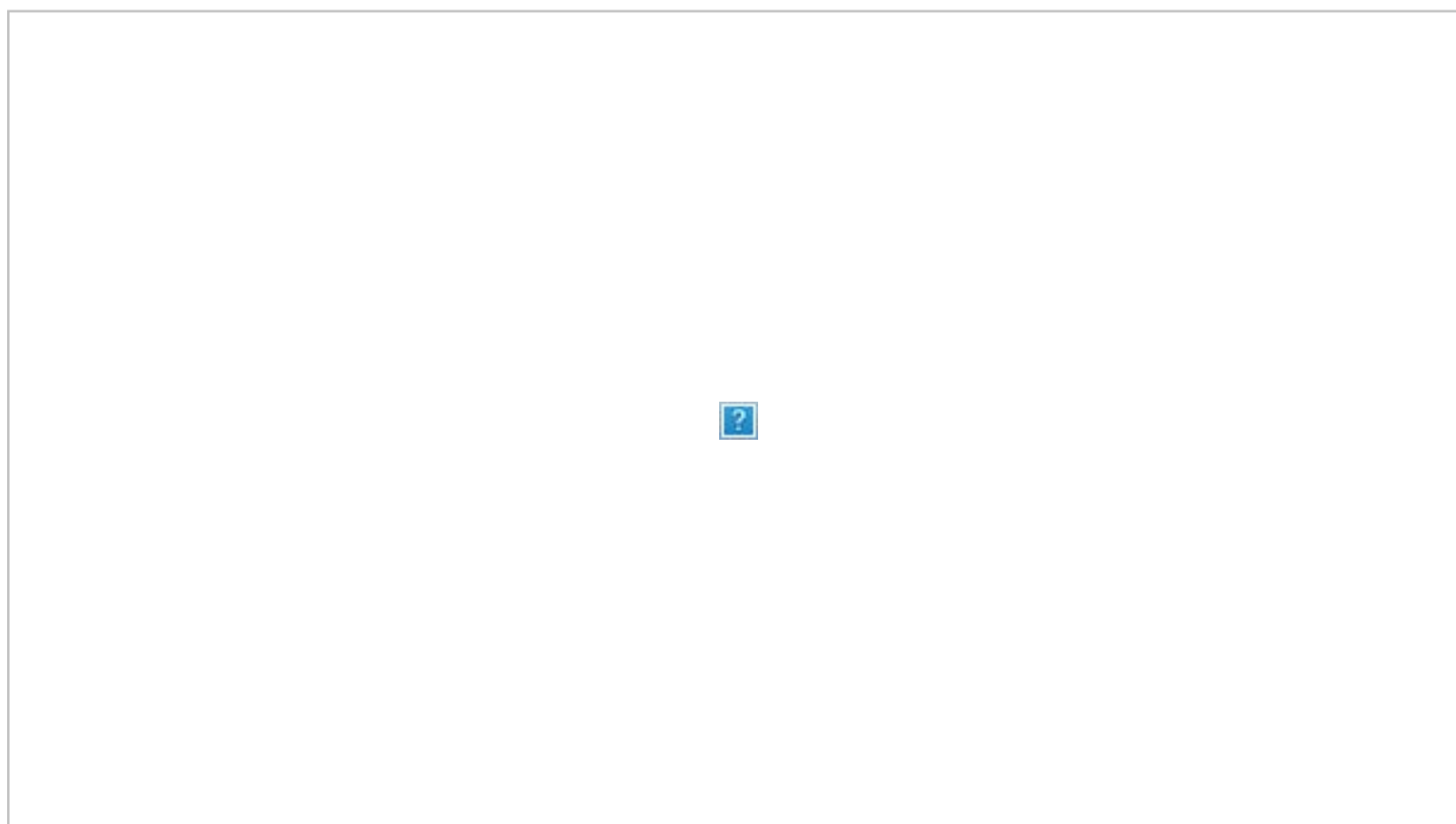
One of the basic tools of fascism is the rigging of elections – we've seen that trialled in the election of Trump, in the Brexit referendum and (less successfully) in the French presidential elections. Another is the generation of tribal identities, the division of society into mutually exclusive polarities. Fascism does not need a majority – it typically comes to power with about 40 per cent support and then uses control and intimidation to consolidate that power. So it doesn't matter if most people hate you, as long as your 40 per cent is fanatically committed. That's been tested out too. And fascism of course needs a propaganda machine so effective that it creates for its followers a universe of “alternative facts” impervious to unwanted realities. Again, the testing for this is very far advanced.

## Moral boundaries

But when you've done all this, there is a crucial next step, usually the trickiest of all. You have to undermine moral boundaries, inure people to the acceptance of acts of extreme cruelty. Like hounds, people have to be blooded. They have to be given the taste for savagery. Fascism does this by building up the sense of threat from a despised out-group. This allows the members of that group to be dehumanised. Once that has been achieved, you can gradually up the ante, working through the stages from breaking windows to extermination.

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It is this next step that is being test-marketed now. It is being done in Italy by the far-right leader and minister for the interior [Matteo Salvini](#). How would it go down if we turn away boatloads of refugees? Let's do a screening of the rough-cut of registering all the Roma and see what buttons the audience will press. And it has been trialled by Trump: let's see how my fans feel about crying babies in cages. I wonder how it will go down with [Rupert Murdoch](#).



Children and workers at a tent encampment recently built in Tornillo, Texas: the bleeding process has begun within the democratic

To see, as most commentary has done, the deliberate traumatising of migrant children as a “mistake” by Trump is culpable naivety. It is a trial run – and the trial has been a huge success. Trump’s claim last week that immigrants “infest” the US is a test-marketing of whether his fans are ready for the next step-up in language, which is of course “vermin”. And the generation of images of toddlers being dragged from their parents is a test of whether those words can be turned into sounds and pictures. It was always an experiment – it ended (but only in part) because the results were in.

#### **‘Devious’ infants**

And the results are quite satisfactory. There is good news on two fronts. First, Rupert Murdoch is happy with it – his Fox News mouthpieces outdid themselves in barbaric crassness: making animal noises at the mention of a Down syndrome child, describing crying children as actors. They went the whole swinish hog: even the brown babies are liars. Those sobs of anguish are typical of the manipulative behaviour of the strangers coming to infest us – should we not fear a race whose very infants can be so devious? Second, the hardcore fans loved it: 58 per cent of Republicans are in favour of this brutality. Trump’s overall approval ratings are up to 42.5 per cent.

Fox News mouthpieces outdid themselves in barbaric crassness: making animal noises at the mention of a Down syndrome child, describing crying children as actors

This is greatly encouraging for the pre-fascist agenda. The bleeding process has begun within the democratic world. The muscles that the propaganda machines need for defending the indefensible are being toned up. Millions and millions of Europeans and Americans are learning to think the unthinkable. So what if those black people drown in the sea? So what if those brown toddlers are scarred for life? They have already, in their minds, crossed the boundaries of morality. They are, like Macbeth, “yet but young in deed”. But the tests will be refined, the results analysed, the methods perfected, the messages sharpened. And then the deeds can follow.

# Opinion & Analysis

## Fintan O'Toole

### The moment I discovered what I felt about abortion



When I was 18, I knew nothing about anything and even less about abortion. I had never really thought about it. I suppose I had a vague feeling that it was a bad thing, to be contemplated only in extreme circumstances. And then in summer 1976 I had to discover what I felt

about abortion. It took me all of 30 seconds. Very few people in my part of the world went to university. I was a student in UCD. This lent me an aura of sophistication and knowingness that was laughably distant from the truth. But because of it, a male friend my own age called in and asked me to go with him to his house. His mother

and father were in the sitting room with his sister who was, I think, 16. She was pregnant and she had made up her mind that she did not want to have the baby. Did I know how to go about arranging to have an abortion in England?

What was I supposed to do? Get up and storm out in a show of moral outrage? Or sit there and squirm and stammer out the quite truthful answer that I knew sweet damn all about any of this stuff? Or try somehow to be of use, to help the girl get this thing done so that after the school holidays, she could just turn up in class like everyone else, study for her Leaving Cert and get on with her life?

#### Hidden instincts

It's at moments like this, when you find yourself under pressure to make a choice you are not prepared for, that your hidden instincts reveal themselves. Sitting on the couch looking at that girl, two things were immediately obvious. One was that this was not about me or my feelings at all – it was about her. And the other was that the part of her that was most important here was not really her body. It was her mind, her free will, her right to make the decision she had come to. I just knew that I'd be a pompous little prig if I walked out. And I just knew that I'd be a miserable little coward if I hid behind my ignorance.

I didn't have the information she wanted but I was in a position to get it, to find people who could talk to her and help her get to a clinic in England. I knew absolutely that if I did this, it would make me morally complicit in the arrangement of an abortion. A small part in the facilitation of a murder makes you a murderer. If this was a baby killing and if I helped even a little bit, I would be, then and now and forever, a baby killer.

This was not, moreover, what anti-abortion people like to call a hard case. There was no suggestion that the girl had been raped. She was in the bloom of youthful good health and there was no reason to think that she could not have a glowing pregnancy and a happy delivery. There was not even a melodramatic scenario where shamed and scandalised parents were about to fling her out on the road and warn her never to darken their doorsteps again. Her parents were good people – they loved her and respected her and would have supported her in any decision she made. If she had wanted to have a baby and keep it, I had no doubt they would help her and welcome her child.

But she didn't. This was the simple, salient fact in that sitting room at that moment. She wasn't weeping or pleading. She was calm, controlled, determined. She had a mind and she had made it up.

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I just feel glad that, naive as I was then, I knew enough not to be sanctimonious about choices I would never myself have to make

She needed help, not to make her decision, but to carry it through. And it actually did not occur to me for one instant that it was my business to do anything except try to make a difficult situation for her a little easier if I could. Why? Because the alternative was unthinkable: that this girl be forced against her will to go through a pregnancy she did not want.

#### Good life

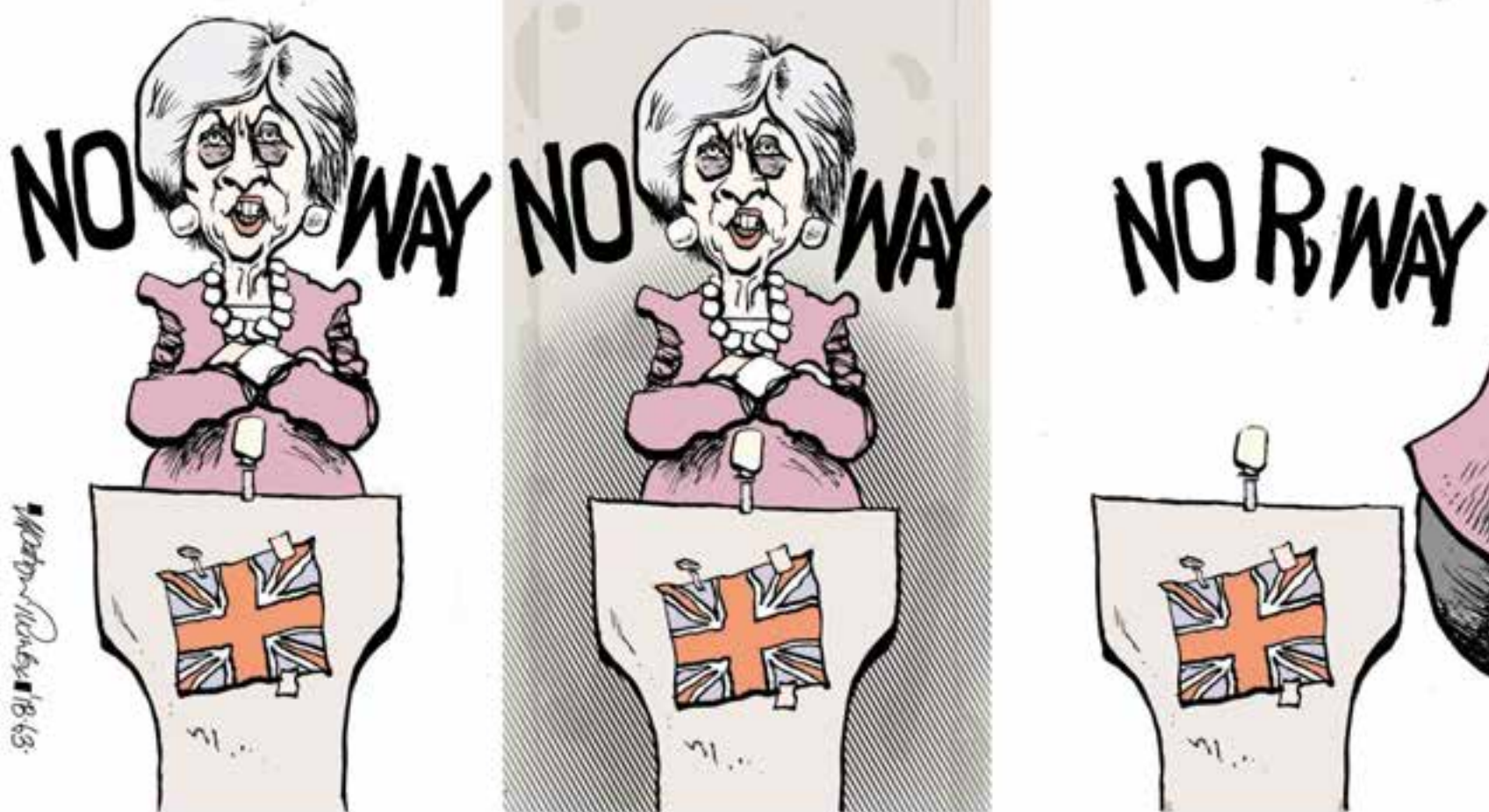
I told the family I would be back the next day with the phone numbers they needed. I went in to UCD next morning and got the numbers and went back to the house. Her father answered the door and I gave him a piece of paper with the information on it. I never talked to the family again about what happened. I just know that the girl was not pregnant that summer, that she was back in school in the autumn, that she got her Leaving Cert and went on to have a good life.

Actually that's not quite true. I do know something else: that girl is not a murderer. She is not a baby-killer and neither am I. I don't wake up in the dark hours haunted by the ghost of a child killed by a hitman whose phone number I delivered. I just feel glad that, naive as I was then, I knew enough not to be sanctimonious about choices I would never myself have to make.

SINGLE MARKET?

CUSTOMS UNION?

SO WHAT WILL THE FINAL DEAL BE LIKE?



## Decision time on further European integration



### Ronan McCrea Opinion

Are common tax rates a price worth paying for being in a strong euro zone core when the next recession hits?

The utter mess of the Brexit process has confirmed the correctness of the Irish Government's decision to emphasise our status as a loyal EU member. The difference between the EU's concern to defend Irish interests in the negotiation process and the dismissive attitude towards Northern Ireland's interests by the UK government could hardly be starker.

However, the fact that Brexit is going so badly for the UK should not distract Ireland from the reality that there are very important choices to be made in relation to Ireland's future role in the EU once Brexit has taken place.

The Irish Government has been putting significant effort into strengthening the key relationships that will underpin our future role in the EU. Funding for learning French and German has been increased, and a major upgrade in Irish-German links was announced recently.

However, strengthening relationships does not avoid the reality that Ireland will have to choose sides in some key debates around the future of the EU. For example, how much further

integration will Ireland support? Will it support a multispeed Europe in which groups of member states decide to integrate more intensively while others choose not to. If there is a multispeed Europe, will Ireland, as a euro zone member, be part of the intensively integrated group?

There are some areas where Ireland is clearly keen to resist further integration. Most notably, efforts to crack down on tax avoidance by multinational firms have been seen as a threat by the Government.

However, Ireland will need allies in this fight. The minimal levels of tax paid by multinationals that are often tax resident in Ireland is rightly seen as a serious problem.

Ireland has received an enormous amount of political support from EU institutions and our fellow member states in the Brexit process. While this support has been sincerely motivated, it is also true that in politics nothing is free.

It would be difficult for Ireland, having received such support, to block moves on taxation unless it is part of a decently-sized block of states adopting a similar attitude.

#### New allies

In looking for new allies the Government has made it clear that it sees itself as most closely aligned with the group of northern countries such as the Netherlands which are keen on maintaining an open trading relationship with the world rather than countries such as France which have traditionally been more protectionist.

However, the countries of this northern group such as Finland, the Netherlands and Germany are the states that have adopted the strongest positions against measures such as euro bonds or the establishment of a euro zone budget.

Germany appears to have cooled on Emmanuel Macron's proposal for a

modest-sized euro zone budget to be used to even out economic cycles despite some previous indications of support from Angela Merkel.

As a relatively wealthy state Ireland is likely to end up as a net contributor to any euro zone budget, so opposition to establishing such a budget is understandable.

On the other hand, the Irish Government would do well to consider the bigger picture. Establishing the euro meant that there is one interest rate for a range of different countries with different economies. This means that often the euro zone-wide interest rate will be too low for booming countries and too high for struggling countries.

In successful currency unions such as the US, spending by the federal govern-

ensure that the euro zone structures perform better than they did in the last crisis has eased. However, this complacency may be misplaced.

Certainly, there are many more structures in place than there were in 2008. But the euro zone is still a half-built house. It will be much more difficult to establish structures when Europe's economy is in recession than it will be now that times are good.

A successful euro zone is very much in Ireland's interests. A collapse of the euro zone would cause losses to Ireland much greater than the loss involved in being a net contributor to a small euro zone budget that could be used to flatten out economic cycles.

#### Last crisis

Collapse of the euro zone in the next recession should not be discounted. States are still heavily indebted from the last crisis, and interest rates remain so low that there may not be scope for interest rate cuts to stimulate the economy once things slow down.

In addition, populist parties that have flirted with leaving the euro are in a powerful position. The populist Five Star movement looks set to take power in Italy, and in last year's French election we were just a few percentage points away from a hard-right hard-left run-off between Marine Le Pen and Jean Luc Melenchon that would have seen France possibly leaving the euro.

For a long time Ireland has been able to dodge key questions about the depth of integration it is willing to sign up to. With the UK gone and the euro zone facing key decisions, Ireland will have to take some important decisions.

We are certain that we are committed to the EU, but need to think seriously about what kind of union we want it to be.

Ronan McCrea is a senior lecturer in law at University College London

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ment helps to compensate for this as states in recession will pay less in tax and will receive more in spending.

Because the EU budget is tiny, and is not linked to the economic cycle, the euro risks causing prolonged recessions. Because European economies are doing well at the moment, political pressure to

## An antidote to populism and fundamentalism



### Philip McDonagh Rite & Reason

New research project on religion and peacebuilding being initiated at Maynooth

A consensus on European values and a wholesome confidence in the future of Europe are further away now than 15 years ago. A similar psychological slippage has occurred at the global level. Richard Haass of the US Council on Foreign Relations puts it like this: "There are fundamental trends afoot that, all things being equal, work against order."

In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis states that "doomsday predictions can no longer be met with irony or disdain". Risk factors include global environmental degradation and the development of new aggressive capabilities, including cyber capabilities, for which we have no "rules of the road".

The world needs new insights that will engage us at the level of our conscientious convictions and reveal the connections between one issue and another.

The Edward M Kennedy Institute at NUI Maynooth, supported by St Patrick's College, Maynooth, is making a contribution by leading a research project on religion and peacebuilding within the framework of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

Our focus is on societal norms and social cohesion. At a workshop last week, a group of scholars laid out a programme of future work with the help of practitioners from OSCE, the EU and UN structures.

The premise of our inquiry is that public service, entrepreneurship, our willingness to obey the law, our capacity to reform the law, and mutual trust at home and abroad – all are influenced by our character and our understanding of the world.

#### Pursuit of peace

Religion plays a role, either positive or negative, in Northern Ireland under Brexit, the dangerous conflicts in the Middle East, India between secularism and Hinduism, the pursuit of peace on the Korean peninsula, debates in Europe about migrants, and the competition for votes in the US.

In the sphere of multilateral diplomacy, there is now a trend towards making the religious factor more transparent and comprehensible. Managing the interaction of a secular state with the religious confessions has many different aspects, and we need to identify promising practices from around the world. In receiving and integrating

migrants, the commitment of religious actors to social justice makes all the difference; governments need to partner with the religious confessions in providing public goods.

Concepts, having some of their roots in a religious understanding of the world, can help uncover new sources of political energy and consensus – concepts such as the unity of the human family, reverence for nature and for life, Mahatma Gandhi's civil resistance or *satyagraha*, freedom of conscience, fraternity and friendship, trust, hope and reconciliation.

When I was Irish ambassador to Uzbekistan, my wife and I visited the synagogue in Bukhara. In the 19th century, Bukhara was home to a school of Islam that contributed significantly to social cohesion and inter-religious understanding in Central Asia and Russia.

In the 20th century, the atheistic Soviet state abolished religious education. Today, improved religious education in Central Asia is important to avoid a vacant cultural space to which extremism might seep in from neighbouring regions.

A respectful dialogue between reason and religion is an antidote to populism and fundamentalism.

#### Wisdom and commitment

Is there a lesson here for Europe? President Emmanuel Macron, in a speech on April 9th at the Collège des Bernardins, asks the religious confessions to bring "to the service of the republic" their wisdom, their commitment, and their freedom to speak out; in the background is the important article in the EU treaties (article 17, TEU) on dialogue with the religious confessions.

The EU's Fundamental Rights Agency is developing a "shared space" for human rights activists and religious actors. Secretary general António Manuel de Oliveira Guterres, in July 2017, launched a Plan of Action for Religious Leaders and Actors, which highlights their role in "building peaceful, inclusive, and just societies".

There is scope for a paradigm change globally and at the regional level, starting from the reality that markets need a political context and a culture of trust that they themselves are incapable of producing.

Painstaking committee work on the immediate issues is indispensable and must continue in Brussels, Vienna and elsewhere. But to reason together, advancing the dialogue on values, Europe – the wider Europe – needs a parallel forum, open to other stakeholders, with a broader agenda, and operating at a slower rhythm: our client is not in a hurry.

Philip McDonagh has served as Ireland's ambassador in several postings. Currently he is adjunct faculty at the Edward M Kennedy Institute for Conflict Intervention, Maynooth, and Distinguished Global Fellow at the Centre of Theological Inquiry, Princeton, in the US.

On Thursday, April 26th, at 7.15pm he will speak at St Mary's Church, Haddington Road, Dublin, on *Pope Francis and Religion in the Public Sphere*