

FORUM

Beating psychologist's ear to not give a fobail

KIDS have it easy today. OK, maybe those now in their teenage years will suffer the worst excesses of climate change. Sure, they probably won't ever be able to afford to buy a home. Alright, they are growing up in a turbulent world where the old order is rapidly changing.

But at least they have a better chance of being exempted from studying Irish for the Leaving. At least their schooldays may not be stalked by the terror of having to address the peculiarities and complexities of the native language. At least they have some chance of breaking free.

Why is the study of Gaelic such a source of consternation, fear, and loathing?

This week, the Department of Education published a report entitled 'Review of Policy and Practice in Relation to Exemptions from the Study of Irish'.

The review was completed to investigate the suspicions and anecdotes which suggested that a relatively high proportion of pupils were finding ways to be deemed exempt from studying Irish. The language is a compulsory subject in primary and secondary level education.

The review found that psychologists feel under pressure from parents to provide the basis for exemptions for their offspring. Parents look for assessments to have their children exempted on the basis that the study of Irish exposes them to peculiar stress or anxiety.

Is there a specific condition for this? Gaelic-phobia?

Apparently Gaelic-phobia can manifest itself with disturbing symptoms, including bed-wetting and a refusal to go to school, according to the report.

In some countries, childhood development is stunted by wars, famine, inter-necine strife. In the land of Saints and Scholars, there is a cohort who exhibit trauma because they are forced to study a language that is inimical to the native culture and identity.

Personally, I blame the parents — and so does the review. In some of these instances, factors relating to parents may have been a contributory factor to the pupil's negative attitude towards Irish.

Or, as the poet Philip Larkin might have put it: "They focal you up, your mum and dad."

There is another way of getting a pass on being exposed to Irish. If you can show that the pupil has spent a certain amount of time out of the country, and was therefore robbed of all opportunity to develop a grá for the cúpla focail, freedom may be waiting around the corner.

The son of friends of mine got an exemption on that basis. His parents were part of the exodus to London in the 1960s. He was born there, but the family returned to Cork before he hit his second birthday. Yet his parents managed to convince the relevant authority that the boy should be exempted because of his time abroad.

Logically, the basis for his exemption would be that he had to play catch-up on his contemporaries who had presumably yabbering away in Irish to beat the



band before they could even walk. Still, he got the nod.

His brother, who was born after the parents returned home, had no such excuse. He is doing the Leaving next year and thankfully has coped well with the childhood ministrations inflicted by the imposition of the lingo.

Why has study of the native language driven rational beings to such states of anxiety, or faux anxiety, or desperation? Why has it prompted them to plead with head shrinks to diagnose that their son or daughter is suffering from 'Exposure-to-Gaelic Traumatic Stress Disorder'?

I know not the answer, but I can certainly feel the pain. As a pupil and a parent, I have been that soldier and I can't blame my own parents.

My mother had such a grá for the language that, in sixth class, I was sent off to a Gaeltacht to live with a family and go to school as if I was one of the natives.

This was under a government scheme in which you shelled out €15 for the honour.

Somebody was sent to interview the child, and once he or she was deemed competent in Gaelic, that was considered enough proficiency to endure an extended stay in a Gaeltacht.

Thus I was taken from my metropolitan home, in the teeming suburb that is the west side of Cahirciveen, and dispatched across the bay to the mysterious and dark island of the west side of Cahirciveen. It was hell, my own private 'Nam.

My new home was a farm in the middle of nowhere (the Feothanach Gaeltacht). In school, they spoke a strange language and even spoke to girls. They even tried

“Why is the study of Gaelic such a source of consternation, fear, and loathing?”

to speak to me, but we were at cross-purposes.

Back at the farm, I saw a sheep being slaughtered in Irish. In the evening we all got down on our knees in the living room and recited the Rosary in Irish. We even played football in Irish.

The Bean an Tí was kind and understanding, or at least I think she would have been if I knew what she was saying. I came home from the war an unchanged boy and four years later did pass Irish for

the Inter Cert (the forerunner to the Junior Cert).

Later, there was Peig Sayers. If you are of an age, you know who I'm talking about. Whose idea was it to inculcate in a generation of children an association between the language and the hard and stony existence endured by poor Peig on the Blaskets? Death and poverty and pain and pestilence and rain, rain, rain, all delivered As Gaeilge, relentless and unending.

I know I am not to only one to have in early adulthood endured nightmares in which Peig is standing on the shore, swaddled in shawls, the rain bucketing down, forks of lightning streaking across Dingle Bay, her arms raised aloft, speaking in tongues to the Gods on behalf of the children of Ireland. Set us free, set us free. Kids don't know how good they have it today.

Until becoming a parent myself, I was under the impression that the language

Author Peig Sayers: "Whose idea was it to inculcate in a generation of children an association between the language and the hard and stony existence endured by poor Peig on the Blaskets?"

could flourish once the mistakes of the past were rectified, the damaged generation reconciled. Unfortunately, that doesn't appear to be the case.

Recently I told the first-born that in his pre-school days I had flirted with the idea of sending him to a Gaelscoil. He threatened to report me to Childline for historical bad thoughts.

I wish it was different but it's too late for me now. Whether it is right and proper to continue to have the language as a core and compulsory subject in school is a dilemma. To remove it would be to admit that the language is dead, that it is no longer a vital component in culture or identity. To continue in its current guise is, according to the evidence of the department's review, a cop-out. It does neither the language nor the pupils any favour: if study of the native tongue is viewed as an obstacle to be endured or avoided. Slán.



MICHAEL CLIFFORD

Use social media for impact and not 15 minutes of fame

WE all have moments that have stuck with us, and will stick with us, forever. Why those moments?

That's the interesting part, it usually reveals what matters most.

Mine was on a hot, sticky day in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. It was a Saturday morning in November 2014. I was sitting in a small room listening to a then 88-year-old woman speak. She was tall, very tall, her height at her age made her seem dangerously fragile. She spoke quietly, but firmly, in a strong Australian accent.

By the time she had finished speaking, rendering a room of Irish aid workers, journalists, diplomats, and President Michael D Higgins mute, I found myself with large, fat tears rolling down my face. I couldn't seem to make them stop. I was asked if everything was all right. Extremely embarrassed, I failed to explain myself. I didn't know what it was that this woman, Catherine Hamlin, had said to cause such an effect.

I do now. For nearly 60 years, this Australian obstetrician and gynaecologist has accepted and treated the poorest of the poor of Ethiopian women and girls, who have been injured in labour or childbirth. Girls as young as 13, would be left outside the gates of her hospital in Addis Ababa, as lepers, wearing urine-soaked clothes, abandoned by their families. If you could only see them now.

There is a medical condition known as an obstetric fistula, where a hole develops in the birth canal and it can result in incontinence of urine or faeces. It is caused by poor access to medical care, malnutrition, and teenage pregnancy. It is almost non-existent in the developed world. It is a disease of extreme poverty.

JOYCE FEGAN

In the age of social media, so much time is spent telling the world about what you're doing, where you're holidaying, where you're eating, and on Twitter especially, that witty one-liner you share for group endorsement

and still work at her hospital in Addis Ababa today. Where some could not, or would not, return to their families in rural Ethiopia, jobs were found for them elsewhere.

In 1958, Catherine and her husband Reg answered an ad in *The Lancet* medical journal, placed by the Ethiopian government, looking for an obstetrician and gynaecologist to start a medical school in Addis Ababa. In 1959, they arrived with their six-year-old son Richard, with a plan to stay for three years. As you can guess, they never left.

This week a video of a new housing development in Kansas City went viral. It showed 13 "tiny homes" built for homeless veterans. A group of locals got together and called themselves the Veteran Community Project with



Australian-born doctor Catherine Hamlin, who founded the Fistula Hospital in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, with a young patient.

the aim of tackling veteran homelessness head on. They went straight to their city council and said: "We want to do this crazy thing and we're going to be dead in the water without your support."

In 1958, Catherine and her husband Reg answered an ad in *The Lancet* medical journal, placed by the Ethiopian government, looking for an obstetrician and gynaecologist to start a medical school in Addis Ababa. In 1959, they arrived with their six-year-old son Richard, with a plan to stay for three years. As you can guess, they never left.

"This is about a city standing up and saying: 'We're not going to wait for somebody else to fix this problem, we're going to fix it ourselves,'" said co-founder of the project Bryan Meyer.

In the age of social media, so much time is spent telling the world about what you're doing, where you're holidaying, where you're eating, and on Twitter especially, that witty one-liner you share for group endorsement.

RTÉ's *Brainstorm*, titled 'We're all celebrities now'. In it, she details how smartphones and wifi have collided to afford anyone who wants it, the opportunity to be a celebrity.

Not that we are all going to go off and qualify as obstetricians and fly to Ethiopia or go and build homes for the homeless, but it begs the question — could our time be better spent, pursuing impact instead of 15 minutes of fame? And it is not about being altruistic saviours of others, but community engagement, even if it's with your local Tí Towns group or an amateur boxing club, has been shown to help with wellbeing to end.

VIDEO · AUDIO · LIVE BLOGS · PHOTOS

Have your say on this issue at irishexaminer.com

Do we want to spend that energy and that time, impressing people or having an impact?

Humans are a social species, so inclusion in, and acceptance into a fold or a tribe are fundamental to our well-being. Social media plays into that important need.

Not that we are all going to go off and qualify as obstetricians and fly to Ethiopia or go and build homes for the homeless, but it begs the question — could our time be better spent, pursuing impact instead of 15 minutes of fame? And it is not about being altruistic saviours of others, but community engagement, even if it's with your local Tí Towns group or an amateur boxing club, has been shown to help with wellbeing to end.

Not that we are all going to have that level of impact, nor want to, but it's an important question to ask in the age of social media and instant fame: "Do I want to be known or do I want to be happy?"

The two aren't necessarily the same thing.

FORUM

The real injustice is the police response

WHAT follows is the scene from a state in a state of emergency. Just before 7pm, last Tuesday, a van pulled up on North Frederick St, in Dublin's north inner city. A group of men wearing balaclavas got out of the vehicle. The van had no registration on its front, and a yellow, British plate at the rear.

Soon after, members of the Garda public order unit appeared. They were accompanied by police dogs. The members were wearing face masks, which were later described as being fire-retardant. Why such masks were required in dealing with a bunch of young people, who had absolutely no history of violence, is beyond rational analysis.

The identification numbers of the members were not visible, certainly not in the extensive footage available of the incident. Some reports had it that the members were brandishing batons and pepper spray, but there is no evidence either way actually used.

The gardai stood guard as the balaclavas took possession of 34 North Frederick St, which had been occupied by groups of young people since late last month. These groups, including university students and housing activists, have come together under the banner, Take Back The City.

On August 28, the High Court had ordered the protestors to vacate. Now, the balaclavas, their progress protected by the masked policemen, were carrying out the order. The balaclavas removed four people from the premises and secured the building.

The sight of masked policemen facilitating men wearing balaclavas in entering premises, and in removing people, evokes images of authoritarian or even totalitarian regimes. Law enforcement agencies in such countries habitually present themselves in a manner designed to intimidate the wider public in order to suppress dissent.

One might only have imagined such a sight in this country in a state of emergency. For instance, if organised crime gangs or paramilitaries were posing a real and present danger to the functioning of the state. There is no suggestion that anybody in Frederick St had any connections with subversive or criminal groups. Any such suggestion is laughable.

Of course, there is a state of emergency at the moment, but not one in which law and order is under threat. The undeclared emergency is that 3,000 children are without a home. Further up the chain, the emergency has rendered as practically nil the prospect for many young people of ever owning a home. And for this demographic, just putting a roof over their heads, through rent, is crippling their standard of living.

That is the reality of the housing emergency. On Tuesday, a visitor to Frederick St might have seen under the impression that the country was in the grip of a different kind of emergency.

The law is the law, even when it's an ass, even in times of emergency. The owner was entitled to possession. The



Garda wearing face masks on Frederick St, Dublin, on Wednesday evening. Picture: Jack Power

gardai were obliged to ensure that peace was maintained, while the balaclavas went about their business. But what of the law that the protestors are advocating: The issuing of compulsory purchase orders for buildings that are vacant? Surely, such a law should receive serious consideration, in a time of emergency.

Ownership of private property is not an absolute right. CPOs are routinely issued to build roads for the public good. How come, despite the emergency, precious little consideration has been given to elevating the public good, at a time when children are without homes and large cohorts are shut out of home-ownership?

The law being advocated by the protestors is not even radical. It may well require a referendum, but so what? Big deal.

The optics on Frederick St were appalling. Masked gardai and balaclava-hooded men were enforcing the law — a civil matter in this instance, on behalf of the owner, at a time when the law is chronically out of step with social reality.

The initial response, from elements in the force to the ensuing controversy, was less-than-reassuring. In Thursday's *Irish Examiner*, the ebullient spokesman for the Garda Representative Association, John O'Keefe, was quoted as saying:

"The public-order unit should be especially commended for the typical response that often, correctly, attracts a prison sentence. Nobody who was at Frederick Street was charged with assaulting a gardai. Why point the protestors as the type of individuals who would assault a member of An Garda Síochána? That, unfortunately, also smacks of the kind of line spewed out when an authoritarian regime treats its own citizens with contempt. Next thing you know, they'll be branded as terrorists."

"The arrests, following assaults on gardai, show how important a presence they can be in certain situations."

Masked policemen facilitating men in balaclavas evokes authoritarian regimes

The new Garda commissioner, Drew Harris, has at least acknowledged that how things were handled demands further inquiry. And the Policing Authority has expressed its concern through chairperson, Josephine Feehily.

The word from within the ranks is that faces might have been masked because members are now apprehensive about their images being displayed on social media.

Such concerns are entirely legitimate, but, unfortunately, social media has had an impact in many walks of life. If there is an issue around safety and security of members of the force, and their families, as a result of exposure on social media, that should be addressed.

But An Garda Síochána cannot operate behind masks for a routine task, simply because they don't want their faces on social media. When, and if, we ever reach such a stage, serious questions will have to be asked about the state of our democ-

racy. We are living in precarious times. This has been illustrated across western Europe and in the USA, with the rise of a virulent form of populism. Electorally, this country has remained stable, but things are far from hunky-dory. As the tide has receded on the recession, following the 2008 economic collapse, it has become obvious that inequality is growing.

The prevailing phenomenon has its expression in this country primarily in housing. This growing inequality is largely, but not exclusively, generational.

In such a milieu, is it any wonder that there are protests to draw attention to the high volume of vacant buildings, to force the Government to inject more urgency, to highlight the injustices? Maybe the nightmare on Frederick St was a blip, a matter of somebody not realising how exactly it would appear. Time, and the next enforcement of a High Court order, may well tell.

But a perusal of recent history, not to mind that of decades and centuries ago, would illustrate how counterproductive it is to come down heavy on people who are highlighting social injustice.



MICHAEL CLIFFORD

Childcare costs are the glass ceiling for women

WHERE are all the women? What are they doing with their time? That's what I want to know.

Because they certainly aren't running the country, that's for sure, not its councils, its boardrooms, its government, its universities, its companies or its newspapers.

Women only make up 18.1% of directors of Irish-registered ISIQ20 companies. At CEO level, women lead about 10% of our companies.

In Dáil Éireann, only 22.2% of our TDs are women. In the Dáil preceding to the 2016 general election, just 15% of our deputies were women. At local council level, 21% of the country's councillors are women (and have been since the 2014 local elections), but only 16% of councillors were women after the 2009 elections.

"Ah, sure, that's probably because there were no women to vote for," you might say. You know, you could be on to something there, because, in the 2014 elections, of Fianna Fáil's candidates, only 17.3% were women.

Yet, when I turned on the radio this week, all I heard were male politicians talking about women's services, including Fianna Fáil's health spokesman, Stephen Donnelly. The same happened when I tuned into the final debate on RTE before the referendum on the Eighth Amendment. I watched two male politicians discussing whether women could be trusted to control their own uteruses. Now, in fairness to Health Minister Simon Harris, he did point out the irony of the arrangement.

But back to finding out where all the women are. Are they hiding out in newspapers? Editing articles, perhaps? No, they're not there, either, because all the editorships of our national newspapers are male. There are some female news editors, for sure, but the buck stops with the men.

Are the women hanging out in education? In the halls of our universities? Yes, actually, you can find some there; quite a lot. Women make up 45% of all academic staff at our higher-level institutions, but can hold around 75% of the professorships and about two



JOYCE FEGAN

Because our partners or husbands invariably earn more than we do, we are more likely to give up our jobs once we have children, and so we continue to be under-represented in positions of authority

thirds of the associate professorships. The biggest job of all? Taoiseach. We've had 14 of those, and, no, not a single woman to be found there, either.

So, where are they? Women are silently holding the very fabric of this society together.

According to our 2016 TASC (Think-tank for Action on Social Change) report, 70% of the family care work in Ireland is carried out by women. And why is that? There are a few reasons. Women, on average, in Ireland, earn 14% less than men. In some professions, this is as high as 30%. So when you meet a girl, and they get married and have a baby, and as their lives get busier and busier, they feel they made the right decision. But the odd time, between frantic school runs, endless



70% of the family care work in Ireland is carried out by women, unpaid, thus diminishing her future pension.

and you earn €2,000 a month and the creche is going to cost €1,500 a month.

"John, do you not think it would make sense, considering childcare is so expensive and I earn less than you, if I was to mind baby Lucy full-time?" Mary says: "No one is going to mind our baby as well as one of us." They both agree.

Mary and John have a second baby and a third baby, and as their lives get busier and busier, they feel they made the right decision. But the odd time, between frantic school runs, endless

washing machine cycles, and hurried grocery shops, Mary worries that her working friends will judge her for "staying at home". But she reminds herself that she is working, too, doing very fulfilling work, and just because it is unpaid labour doesn't mean it is "less than".

Meanwhile, Mary's best friend, Cathy, who works as a dental nurse for 40 or so hours a week and is married to an electrician, Mike, is worried that she should be spending more time with her two young children. But when Cathy and Mike looked at their books,

they wouldn't have had a chance of staying afloat on just the one salary.

In Irish society, there seems to be a line, that unnamed glass ceiling. Childcare costs, the lower salary, so often the woman's, is forgone, so that the mother can do the priceless work of childcare and of running the home. Not only does she go unpaid, but her pension, in years to come, will be greatly reduced, too.

Where two jobs are being kept down,

VIDEO / AUDIO / LIVE BLOGS / PHOTOS

Have your say on this issue at irishexaminer.com

there is still all the housework and childcare to do, and little time or change of reproductive rights in the Irish healthcare system has involved women being damaged." Male dominance in the Irish healthcare system was also mentioned.

It left me wondering, if women weren't busy holding the fabric of this society together, doing 70% of the primary care work in the home, and instead, had the opportunity to be on boards, in councils, in government, in university professorships and in newspaper editorships, would this scandal, or the many others, have ever happened? If our various corridors of power were more representative of the people that make up Irish society, what kind of Ireland would we have?

Because when everyone has a seat, and a voice at the table, male, female, trans, gay, straight, bi, able, disabled, young, old, working class and other, better societies get built, and not just for women, but for all of us.

FORUM

Plain speaking sits well with the voters

WORDS matter," Michael D Higgins said on the night of his re-election as president. "Words can hurt. Words can heal. Words can empower. Words can divide."

Most observers believe that what Mr Higgins had in mind were some of the words used by Peter Casey, who had contested the election. Mr Casey, as everybody this side of Mars is now aware, created a splash by lashing out at Travellers and social welfare recipients. His comments propelled him from last to second place in a field of six. He corralled 23% of the vote, with the other four runners-up all coming in at under 7%. A few days before he made his comments Casey was languishing on 2%. As it turned out, he was the only contender — apart from the winner — eligible to be reimbursed his election expenses.

One constant theme that emerged in the excavation of reasons for Casey's inflated vote is that he spoke in plain terms about what many people were feeling. This is highly debatable. His derogatory comments about Travellers may have struck a chord with some, but hardly nearly a quarter of the, admittedly small, electorate.

In the same vein drawing a kick at those on social welfare is a hardy annual on the fringes of politics.

Where he certainly did strike a chord was in how, as a prospective public figure, he spoke in plain English about matters of public policy. That is simply not done anymore.

In public life, it is now nearly mandatory to deliver every utterance in a form of language that is far removed from how people actually communicate in what you might call the real world.

This was touched on in the recently published Disclosures Tribunal report, Judge Peter Charleton noted the convoluted and PR-driven manner in which communication was undertaken between high-ranking public servants.

"It adds to the sense of public distrust in the key institutions of State," Judge Charleton wrote. "Public service is not about public relations. Plain speaking by those who know what they are talking about is the only acceptable way to address the Irish people." In politics, the situation is much worse. Saying what you feel and feeling what you say is regarded as naive or even reckless. People like plain speaking. In a world where politics and business has become obsessed with PR, the person who steps out of that bubble gets noticed.

This is applicable not as it always was. Go back to 1984, when John Waters interviewed then leader of the opposition, Charlie Haughey.

"I could instance a load of fuckers whose throat I'd cut and push over the nearest cliff, but there's no percentage in that," Haughey told the interviewer.

Haughey thought he would be slaughtered for exposing a primal instinct. It turned out that people were reassured that a senior politician had a pulse. Would anybody in politics today speak so



candidly? If so would he or she get slaughtered by the media in today's environment?

One recent example of how politics has been captured by PR is available in the person of Leo Varadkar. When he began in politics, Mr Varadkar was regarded as a breath of air. He was candid. He called things as he saw them. As a result he was, at times, controversial but he didn't rein in his natural impulse to speak out.

When he got into government he retained the maverick streak for a while. Then, on assuming the leadership of the party, he wrapped himself in cotton wool and produced the now infamous Strategic Communications Unit.

The unit quickly began to drown in its own spin, attracting controversy and feeding into the notion that Mr Varadkar was now prioritising spin over substance. The plain-speaking Leo of old began to come across as somebody who had acquired the zeal of the convert as far as spin was concerned.

The Strategic Communications Unit is no more, but its dedication to spin can be seen in every breath drawn by every government figure before a camera. As Judge Charleton observed, this kind of stuff contributes to mistrust in public institutions.

The seduction of spin in politics would be no more, but its dedication to spin when living high on the hog, but when many

“Saying what you feel and feeling what you say is regarded as naive or even reckless

feel left behind in the economy, the failure to communicate plainly and honestly exacerbates alienation.

Donald Trump exploited that situation expertly in campaigning for the US presi-

dency in 2016. Following his election, many voters suggested that one of his great strengths was he sounded "authentic". Mr Trump is about as authentic as the fake tan which matches his hair colour. But that doesn't matter to voters. What matters is that he sounds authentic compared to most other politicians. He speaks in ordinary language, using plain English, unscripted and, at times, emotional. As such he was able to present himself as the anti-patter, anti-politician politician.

During the recent presidential election campaign here, Peter Casey hit on the same nerve with a section of the electorate. For those who feel left behind by the

Taoiseach Leo Varadkar voting in the presidential election. When he first got into politics Leo was seen as a maverick, he was candid, but he quickly became regarded as prioritising spin over substance. Picture: Leah Farrell/RollingNews.ie

economic recovery he was speaking plainly. His comments were crude, exploitative and factually inaccurate.

What mattered to many who voted for Mr Casey, though, was that he sounded authentic.

Mr Casey is no Donald Trump. He won't make any impact on national politics, not least because he doesn't really know anything about politics. But one lesson that can be extracted from his five minutes of fame (or infamy) is that there is a want out there for politicians who speak plainly and are not afraid to address difficult issues.

Going down such a road would not be easy in today's environment. Doing it in a manner that is not exploitative would take a bit of work. But a continuation of the current trend to wrap everything up in PR speak is going to further erode trust in politics. You can't put it more plainly than that.



MICHAEL CLIFFORD

Offering helping hand to tackle our poverty complex

WE GIVE hampers to the poor at Christmas, and drop coins, maybe even a silent note, into choirs' collection buckets. But, when it comes to social welfare and hardcore poverty, that's where our humanity falters and our generosity mutates.

As a country we need to talk about "welfare". We need to talk about the latent disgust of the poor that's becoming more and more evident and that simmering hatred towards anyone on the fringes.

Here are three conversations I've either been party to or eavesdropped on recently.

"I'd love to get a free house," he said, "look at them over there in their pyjamas at midday." This man, as is practice in these kinds of conversations, was shouting off. No one replied to his unsolicited remarks. There were no open questions. His view was the gospel.

"I go to work all day, I pay my taxes and my mortgage, and sure look, there's no need to work when you can just get a free house," he said, pointing to a gathering of neighbours standing outside a new (and temporary) social housing development.

This man is someone I know to be kind, decent, and supportive, yet he had a serious issue with people living in social housing (which is not rent-free). With a moment's observation, he had their whole lives worked out. For all he knew, these women worked nights, weeks-on and weeks-off, or had a child with a severe disability.

His mind, of course, never went there. Aside from his one-second analysis and sweeping judgment, the only real facts he had pertained to his own life. He and his wife both work, sometimes they don't, have children, they run to and from GYA's chess and training, and they have bills to pay. He is a classic case of the "squeezed middle", living out the aftermath of the recession. He compared his entire picture, in an instant, to a snapshot of a stranger's life.

The second conversation I eavesdropped on. It was at a local swimming pool one afternoon. There was a group

JOYCE FEGAN

The idea that being poor is somehow the byproduct of bad personal choices, as opposed to, say, badly designed government policy, is a lazy, sloppy cop-out

of women waiting for their children's afterschool swimming lessons to finish up. Again, a lone voice, in a larger group, plays the "I'd love to be able to get a free house" card.

"They can't be turning down houses when they're looking for free ones. Grand if you've loads of kids and you're being offered a one-bed, but otherwise? Seriously," she said. Her statement didn't provoke any engagement. The bell rang and the kids were ready for their showers.

This "turning down houses" angle is an interesting one. You hear snippets of one story on the news headlines and you assume all 10,000 homeless are at it. There is no room in the headlines to explain about non-existent bus routes, school spaces, friendships made, and lack of work in the ghost town of this



"When it comes to poverty, the solution lies not in condemning the poor but challenging our politicians who bailed out banks and continue to under-tax multibillion-dollar corporations that call Ireland home," writes our columnist.

"turned-down" house. Handy soundbites are great for coffee chat, but short on detail and terrible for nuance.

The third and final conversation which I was a part of was over WhatsApp. The person in question leads a very comfortable life, thanks to hard work on their part and a good early footing in life.

The phrase "welfare state" was thrown out. "Let's all live like the Italians. Socialism. Free stuff for everyone," they wrote. "A third of the budget goes to welfare spenders."

The hatred of people in receipt of social welfare was sudden and surprising. Again, this is someone I know to be kind, generous, and caring, but unlike conversation number one, this person was not of the "squeezed middle". In the end, there was no discussion

to be had. They had the gospel, according to themselves.

Ironically though, that 30% or so of the budget going to social welfare touches off everybody's lives, including all three of those mentioned above.

If you're an elderly parent or a disabled child, you can get the carer's allowance. If you have a baby, you get maternity benefit and children's allowance. If you're sick or disabled and unable to work you could get disability allowance. If you're past the age of retirement, you can get the State pension. You get the picture.

Hate is such an easy game to play. When we give out about "welfare" in this country, we are speaking from a place of hate, discrimination, and self-righteousness. But if you care to look under the

hood, you'll see a plethora of human stories. You might even see your own. Did you or someone close to you lose a job in the recession? Were they acquainted with the social welfare slips? When you're out for your walk, do you ever see that guy in your local town, the one who had the fall and must now use a wheelchair for life? Did you hear about the 61-year-old father of three and marathon runner who lost his sight at 50 and had to give up work?

Do you know what it's like to run a household with only one parent, who constantly tosses the coin between working and not working, between doing all the childcare themselves and going out to work part-time? Were you reared in a house where education was so far down the priority list because there was only room for alcohol and

VIDEO · AUDIO · LIVE BLOGS · PHOTOS



Have your say on this issue at irishexaminer.com

drug addiction between those four walls? Or have you heard of the house where education is the be-all and end-all, but with annual college fees creeping up over €3,000, the dream might be beyond grasp?

THE idea that being poor is somehow the byproduct of bad personal choices, as opposed to, say, badly designed government policy, is a lazy, sloppy cop-out. Poverty is multi-faceted.

And the idea of personal responsibility, as a solution to all our economic woes, is an idyllic one. Of course, in any system, there are cracks that get exposed by a small few. But when it comes to poverty, the solution lies not in condemning the poor but challenging our politicians who bailed out banks and continue to under-tax multibillion-dollar corporations that call Ireland home. But it's a lot easier to give out about "pyjamas at midday" than it is to wrap your head around government policy, isn't it?

Within our shared humanity, there is the potential for both empathy and discrimination. At a time of rising hatred, we need to, at the very least, arm ourselves not with ignorance but with fact, if being the best version of ourselves is what we're really about.