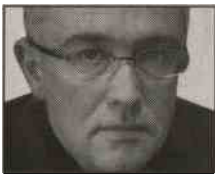




Building blocks in wreckage

The dying year has been miserable for many. Where do we go from here? This is the first in a series of articles this week in which contributors share their thoughts about where Ireland proceeds



OPINION

IF WE do as we always did, we'll get what we always got. This could actually be a time of opportunity. As the grim year passes, with its public anger and private agonies, the four-in-the-morning anxieties many of us have known, what could we do to regain our dignity?

We might start by taking a more clear-eyed look at how it was stolen. We need to move deeper than the surface narratives, true though they are (rapacious bankers, shabby standards, cheap money, bungling politicians,) and drill down to the bedrock of what it is in our society that permitted, indeed caused, such a brutalising crisis. I'm sick of being told by authority that "we are where we are" as though any of us hadn't noticed that fact. We didn't get here by accident, wherever "here" is. Understand the weapon, understand the wound.

Recently, in a discussion on RTÉ radio, a former lord mayor of Dublin phoned in to criticise Willie O'Dea TD, who had been speaking a few moments previously. Deputy O'Dea's immediate response was to say that she must be a member of an opposition political party. (She is actually a member of Fianna Fáil). The mindset was revealing of a wider malaise, a tribalism that still infects the Irish public conversation. Criticism is seen as the kneejerk animosity of the cultist (which, unfortunately, it often is). American politics has trenchant rivalry – we have seen it this year – but as the great historian Shelby Foote pointed out, their system is built on compromise; nothing can happen without it.

Compromise in Irish politics is too often seen as surrender. We don't have a two-party system; we have a set of mutual exclusions. As James Joyce wrote in *Finnegans Wake*: "Move over Humpty. Make room for Dumpty." We continue to define ourselves by subtle restatements of what we are not, rather than by assertions of what we are, or might

become.

The Oireachtas needs radical, fundamental and ongoing reform, on a scale not envisaged since the foundation of the State. All my adult life, we have been waiting for this. Decent politicians have made attempts, but far too little has been achieved. It cannot continue to be the case that a Cabinet minister earns more in retirement than he or she would earn as an opposition TD, that the Dáil is a shouting gallery, a chamber of celestial irrelevancies, that only 15 per cent of our TDs are women. Affirmative action needs to be taken immediately, by all political parties, to put an end to the dismal and cheapening fact that, when it comes to gender, our national parliament is about as representative of the nation as is the front row of a Status Quo concert.

There has been a lot of talk about the need for sustainability, but what is needed is a sustainability of the imagination. 2010 was a year in which there was much media comment about the role of the arts in Irish life. Mary Hanafin proved herself the best Minister for Culture of recent times, a listener who has spoken movingly of her own affection for the arts, and a tough advocate for them at the Cabinet table. Dublin was named Unesco City of Literature, a long-worked-for designation that will bring visitors and positive international attention. But more needs to be done by all of us who care about the arts and would like to see them thrive. There needs to be a sustained, intelligent, far more widespread and ongoing movement to stand up for the arts and point out their importance in our reconstruction. It should be conducted in all the popular media, in every school and college in the country, in every large workplace, in community centres and parish halls. The really important decision-makers are not those in authority; they are citizens, readers, listeners and audiences. New connections need to be made.

Other Voices, the festival of music organised by Philip King in Dingle, Co Kerry, for the last nine years, brought major international acts to a beautiful Irish town, filling every hotel room in the vicinity, in the dark days of early December, while providing material for a television series that will be transmitted all over the world. The acumen of King and his team in bringing together culture, new technology, innovation and landscape, is a fascinating model for where we might go. This isn't impossible, the stuff of pipe dreams; it's realising the extraordinary resources we still have in Ireland, and showcasing them with respectful intelligence and a sense of self-belief, that particular and useful quality which Irish people used to call "cop-on". There isn't a lot of it emanating from Leinster House any more. But in the country at large, it's alive. There are more forums for new ideas than ever before – arts festivals up and down the land, the internet, the blogosphere, Dublin's annual "Mindfield" event, the Kilkenomics Festival, the burgeoning of political cabaret, challenging

work in our theatres. The citizens are way ahead of the politicians on this. But political help is needed.

Nama's store of unoccupied properties should be put to use immediately. It is a national scandal that any person in this country is homeless while every town and city has empty apartment blocks, the beached wrecks of our storms of self-delusion. Walk the avenues of tenantless office blocks in Dublin's Smithfield or Grand Canal Dock and ask how can it be the case that it is cheaper for a new Irish business to rent premises in Germany? Our figures for illiteracy are an appalling disgrace. While politicians pepper their speeches with quotations from Seamus Heaney, our most vulnerable young people are denied. This is a matter of power and democratic participation. If you can't say what you want, you're never going to get it.

These things can be fixed. Change can be made. In 1936, when the State was hardly born, Aer Lingus was established and saw its inaugural flight; by the 1950s, it was flying to America. TB was eradicated at a time when the country was desperately poor and the slums of O'Casey still encroached on St Stephen's Green. Donogh O'Malley's Fianna Fáil introduced free secondary education, the most truly republican measure ever enacted by any Irish government, during an era of enormous challenge, during which the very State itself was being destabilised by events in Northern Ireland. It is entirely possible to act boldly, even when resources are sorely stretched. What is needed is leadership, political and social, from people with vision and purpose. This is already happening in local communities up and down the land, but too often, our national politicians come across as aspirants to management. It is important that they have that skill – would that more of them had – but running Ireland is not the same as running a factory or a small-town solicitor's office. Ireland needs to be an idea.

If we could travel back a century to the era when Yeats, Lady Gregory and Synge proved the point that the artist and the entrepreneur always start with an act of imagination, who would have been in the room as the conversation was taking place about what kind of society we might be? Women and men interested in politics and economics, for sure, and others interested in the notion that the word "republic" might signify something more meaningful than a typographical decoration on a stamp. Yes, there were bigots too, and sectarian dinosaurs; and dead patriots have mattered too much. But it is too often forgotten that the emblem of one part of our revolutionary movement was no banner of hatreds but a torn fragment of the map of the sky. In that conversation, there were people who felt that a starry plough was an invitation to look up from Wilde's gutter and actually think of ways of climbing out of it.

There would also have been people interested in sport, and there should be again. There is nothing like the GAA anywhere in the world, an organisation with a presence in

every corner of its country, sustained by local volunteerism and a passion for excellence, capable of attracting 50,000 supporters any weekend. There is so much creativity, commitment and courage in Ireland, in the work done by carers and people who start businesses, in the achievements of musicians and artists and film-makers, in the dedication of many of our religious, of several denominations, to the marginalised, the lonely, and the poor. Every day of the week, citizens of this place are looking out for one another. Witness the extraordinary work of the hospice movement and the healing being done by One in Four. The country is broken but somewhere in the wreckage are the blocks we need to start building again. Rhetoric, yes, but a society needs a narrative. Otherwise its symbols are empty.

There is still, it seems, one subject in Ireland that continues to play a public role in our discourse. Breda O'Brien wrote in a recent article for this newspaper that "it would be a shame if religion was excluded from the national conversation". With respect, I disagree.

Religious belief is surely at heart an intensely private matter. It has shades, differences of emphases, personal subtleties and mystery, and for many of us, it changes from day to day, or certainly from year to year. That's the way it's been since Job wrote his book. Even one of the disciples doubted. I have seen no attempt to denigrate the importance of faith to those who believe. But an unquestioning obedience to ordained religious is one of the reasons why Ireland became a European capital of child-rape. Not the only reason, of course, but an important factor. There is not much to be said for certain Irish bank executives just now, but if a

teller was robbing the customers in Galway he wasn't quietly moved to Dundalk, the better to continue his crimes.

A society that turned an eye from the savage abuse of the young enters a realm of moral amnesia where any injustice is tolerable. Banking scandals and other failures are almost nothing compared to the viciousness with which vulnerable Irish children were treated. Breda O'Brien finished her article by averring that it would be a pity if "one conformist ideology replaced another". But that is not so in every case. Ms O'Brien would obviously agree that on the subject of the absolute refusal to cover up child sexual abuse, and to countenance the punishing and silencing of those who endured it, a conformist ideology is precisely what is needed, if such a pejorative term must be used. Other countries call this the law. Perhaps only in Ireland, and only by a very few, in whose number I do not include a journalist of Breda O'Brien's integrity, could it be seen as a dangerous encroachment of ultra-liberalism. Our mode of thinking about injustice truly needs to change. That is something no government or party can do. "We should be careful of each other," Philip Larkin wrote. "We should be kind/While there is still time." Too often in Ireland we have failed to be careful, and the kindness, if it comes at all, has come late.

It used to be the case that many of us drank alcohol and then drove. Thankfully, there is now a wide acceptance – a conformist ideology, if you must – that drinking and driving is wrong. Irish parents used to slap their children as a matter of course. Now, happily for all of us, that is rarer. The point is that a functional society needs a set of shared values around which it can cohere, but that

that nexus of ideas can change. It is changing now. The division in Ireland will soon no longer be between those who believe in God and those who do not, or between those who attend one place of worship and those who attend another, but between those who demand to live in a republic less cowed by authority in all its power-seeking disguises and those who continue to feel, in the face of all evidence, that power is safe when unaccountable. The respectful repatriation of religious belief to the private, spiritual sphere would be a sign that our society is maturing, even in these extremely painful times, and that we can aim higher than the wish to live in a slum with a casino attached and a plaster saint in every alcove. We may, or may not, have to face a maker one day, clothed only in our weaknesses and betrayals and self-exculpations, but in the meantime we might rediscover the more immediate magistracy of conscience: the affinities we owe to one another, as citizens of this still beautiful place, in all our diversity of doubt.

Joseph O'Connor's novel *Ghost Light* is published by Harvill Secker. It has been chosen as Dublin's "One City One Book" novel for 2011. A radio special of *Whole World Round*, the acclaimed stage show he presents with Philip King, will be broadcast at 3pm on RTÉ Radio One on New Year's Day, featuring guest performances from Sinéad O'Connor, Steve Cooney, Andy Irvine, Scullion, Eimear Quinn, Caoimhin Ó Raghallaigh and Ciara Sidine

TOMORROW: Maureen Gaffney

**JOSEPH
O'CONNOR**



Upbeat melody: Imelda May performing at ***Other Voices*** in Dingle, Co Kerry. The series will be transmitted all over the world and is a creative Irish example of how culture, technology, innovation and landscape can be combined to point a positive way forward.