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## **The Arrogant, the Ignorant, the Unscripted and the Eloquent**

A lifetime ago now I was well on my way to becoming a political junkie thanks in large part to my late father whose passions also ran to gardening and sports. Twenty-two plus years of watching, and listening to, the red state-blue state drivel that passes for political discourse in the U.S erased any vestige of an addiction. Or so I thought. Then last weekend I found myself at home in north Roscommon engrossed in media coverage of both the by-elections and the protest against water charges.

Saturday did not begin with promise as I perused Liz O'Donnell's self-serving and patronising commentary in the Irish Independent. After praising the Coalition's 'undeniable progress' in pulling us back from a bankrupt brink she proceeded to dismiss independents as an inchoate and occasionally 'bizarre' bunch, a 'kink' in our democratic DNA that, fortunately, real politicians do not take seriously. Liz sleeps secure in the knowledge that 'incoherent' independents are no great threat. For my part I sleep secure in the knowledge that Liz and her PD pals, those purveyors of the unfettered neo-liberal orthodoxy that fuelled the property boom and severely damaged the Irish economy, are also no longer a threat.

Saturday's evening news on RTÉ was dominated by numbers - those that marched and those that counted. While estimates of the attendance at the anti-water charges march in Dublin differed greatly between broadcast and social media, the consensus opinion was that the government should be worried. No doubt buried in budget preparations I suspect nary a ministerial eye was batted unless, perhaps, traffic in and out of certain government buildings was adversely impacted. Marie Antoinette's name was invoked by Unite's Brendan Ogle in describing Tánaiste Joan Burton and her asinine remarks about water protesters and smartphone ownership. The analogy was a weak one but Brendan has relied on it before (in commenting on a 2008 Sarkozy visit) and Joan has heard it before (in relation to her written response to a homeless family earlier this year).

Independent Michael Fitzmaurice, backed by Luke Ming Flanagan, won the vacant seat in my home constituency of Roscommon-South Leitrim. It ought to have been Fianna Fáil's turn to be chagrined as they had high hopes for their candidate, Ivan Connaughton, but in interviews Micheál Martin evidenced no undue concern, either for his fate or that of his party, claiming in effect that it was Ming's seat to lose, not Fianna Fáil's. No doubt his nemesis

Éamon Ó'Cuív has an alternate view of reality as perhaps, now, do some of Martin's front bench.

Fitzmaurice, turf-cutting campaigner and councillor, was more than eloquent when I heard him interviewed. His way with words was detailed by Miriam Lord in a splendid Monday sketch in the Irish Times, a piece accompanied by a picture of an ebullient Fitzmaurice hugging Sinn Féin's Martin Kenny who had finished fourth. Fitzmaurice spoke simply, with passion and a little of the poet, primarily about Government neglect of rural Ireland and the scourge of emigration. In passing he mentioned the funeral of a Sean Parker who had been interred in Fitzmaurice's home village of Glinsk earlier in the week. Parker had died penniless in England and the community had banded together to return him home for burial. The occasional imperfectly formed expression only reinforced Fitzmaurice's authenticity, and the unscripted nature of his remarks served but to highlight the blandness of earlier contributions from the major parties. Someone should have woken Liz.

Water was Sinn Féin's downfall in Dublin South-West. Paul Murphy, the Anti-Austerity Alliance candidate, ran and won almost solely on the issue, exposing Sinn Féin hypocrisy in the process. Michael O'Regan, in a largely positive profile published in Monday's Irish Times, ran with the headline that Murphy had been a 'radical' since his student days. All of ten years. Please. Come back in another thirty when, and if, Dublin's newest TD has truly earned the mantle of radical like, say, a Dennis Skinner, the British Labour Party MP who has occupied a seat on the 'Awkward Squad Bench' in the House of Commons since 1970.

Fiach Kelly's Monday analysis in the Irish Times pointed out what had become obvious - Sinn Féin is vulnerable on its left. Noting a Sinn Féin TD's measured response to an interview question on the withholding of water payments, Fiach repeated Denis O'Brien's assertion that the party would move towards the centre the nearer to power it came. Stephen Collins, in his column the following day, mirrored his colleague's opinions that Sinn Féin had been outflanked by what he termed a 'militant' Socialist Party, and that they saw themselves as a party to government in the near future. Stephen gloated just a little at Sinn Féin's predicament. That, combined with his assertion that Fine Gael and Labour had 'wrestled the economy back into shape' and his characterisation of water charges as being, like property taxes, an inevitable fact of life, will have no doubt met with approval in Coalition circles. Nothing then that need have woken Liz.

Elsewhere in Monday's paper, Noreen Bowden, former director of the Emigrant Advice Network, wrote most eloquently on the need to postpone RTÉ's decision to shutter its longwave radio service in light of the impact on Irish in the UK, particularly those vulnerable

elderly who don't have internet or satellite access. RTÉ is apparently unwilling to divulge the savings to be realised from severing this last link but I suspect they pale in comparison to the millions remitted home over many years by the UK's Irish community. RTÉ's cavalier attitude calls to mind Wilde's definition of a cynic as 'a man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing'. In light of recent government commitments to Irish emigrants the irony of the proposed action by our public broadcaster cannot surely be lost on anyone. The contrast between RTÉ and the good people of Glinsk could not be more stark.