

Address by Ms Emily O'Reilly,

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"Imagining the Future - An Irish Perspective"

Introduction

Many thanks for inviting me here today to address you on the rather daunting theme of 'Imagining the Future'. I am particularly pleased to be in the company of such respected and hopefully, influential, fellow speakers and I would at this point like to congratulate Céifin on the very valuable work its founders and others have done since its inception.

When I began to put my thoughts together on this topic, I imagined myself not in the future, but rather in the past, let's say twenty years ago, the year 1984 which I think many of us here today will think of as not so very long ago when most of us were well into our adult lives.

So imagine if I or someone like me had been asked to speak to you then, asked to imagine what this country might dream of being like in the year 2004. I think I might have said something along the following lines.

Imagine an Ireland where few if any of its young people felt forced to emigrate. Imagine an Ireland where immigrants instead came to our shores, seeking our permission to live here, to work and to raise their families. Imagine an Ireland of almost full employment with mainly poorer foreign workers doing the harder, messier, lower paid work, the sort of work WE used to do in Britain and America. Imagine an Ireland where the majority owned a TV set, and a stereo system, and a fridge, and a microwave and a car and central heating and double glazed windows and a mobile phone and enough money for a family holiday AND a spring break.

Imagine an Ireland where an unhappy couple or one unhappy part of a couple was allowed a dignified exit from that marriage through no-fault divorce. Imagine an Ireland where contraception was freely available to everyone no questions asked. Imagine an Ireland where the stigma of single parenthood had largely disappeared. Imagine an Ireland with a woman President, or better still, two women Presidents. Imagine a powerful, female, Tanaiste. Imagine a brace of female Supreme Court judges, imagine a female Minister for Agriculture, a female Ombudsman, a female Secretary General of a Government Department, a female Assistant Commissioner of the Garda Síochána, a female editor of the Irish Times with letters that begin 'Dear Madam'. Imagine an Ireland where the all-pervasive power and might of the Roman Catholic Church had withered. Imagine schools and hospitals run almost exclusively by lay people, imagine the transformation of once great convents and seminaries and mother and baby homes and industrial schools into apartment complexes and

car parks and stray bits of motorway development. Imagine Martin McGuinness as Minister of Education for Northern Ireland. Imagine a clutch of Sinn Fein TDs in Leinster House. Imagine Ian Paisley in Dublin for talks with an Irish Taoiseach. Imagine the choice of coffee. Imagine tall, skinny lattes, and short, robust, espressos, and cocoa dusted cappuccinos and Americanos with shots, all made by trained barristas and served in great polystyrene cups with special lids and pouring spouts. Imagine Top Shop and Marks and Spencers and Zara and Dorothy Perkins and Miss Selfridges and Next and Tescos and Sunday shopping and 24 hour, 7 day shopping. Imagine waiting lists for Hermes bags and eye creams. Imagine a second fashion floor in Brown Thomas. Imagine the Kildare by pass, and the Drogheda by pass, and the Athlone bypass and the restoration of tram lines in Dublin, and bus lanes and dirt cheap air travel and great big cars with DVDs on the ceiling and windows that go up and down when you tell them to. Imagine the ending of the plastic bag epidemic. Imagine smoke free airports and bus terminals and shops and offices. Imagine ladies and gentlemen smoke free pubs. In Ireland.

Imagine all of that and imagine what you, the audience, would have said in response. You would have said, Emily; that would be paradise. So, ladies and gentlemen, welcome to paradise.

Here we are, twenty years later, in the paradise we might have imagined at Céifin 1984 and I ask myself; why are we still whingeing? Why after that gargantuan transformation of public and private life in a direction that many of the country's most thoughtful and concerned citizens wished for, is there still an enormous disquiet about the nature of our Irish society and the sort of people we have become?

Let us assume that it was God we had entreated for all those things leaving aside perhaps those things concerned with the Church. How would God react now, in the face of that huge, Santa sack of gifts to us, to the fact that we're still not happy? We all know the old Chinese proverb about being careful what you wish for and the poison that can seep through answered prayers. That is part of the reason. It is also bound up with the fundamental law of physics that to every action there is an equal and opposite reaction or perhaps more appropriately unexpected reaction. Another reason is that perhaps the tyranny of poverty and oppression, albeit relative in Ireland's case, has been supplanted by the modern, cutting edge tyranny of wealth and freedom. A fourth reason has to do with our still faulty understanding of human nature.

Many of us if we have any developed sensibility recoil at the vulgar fest that is much of modern Ireland the rampant, unrestrained drunkenness, the brutal, random violence that infects the smallest of our townlands and villages, the incontinent use of foul language with no thought to place or company, the obscene parading of obscene wealth, the debasement of our civic life, the growing disdain of the wealthy towards the poor, the fracturing of our community life, the God like status given to celebrities all too often replaced somewhere down the line with a venomous desire to attack and destroy those who were on pedestals the week before, the creation of "reality" TV, more destructive in its cynical filleting of the worth and wonder of the human soul than anything George Orwell could have imagined.

But it wasn't meant to be like this we will protest. Divorce was meant to be for the deeply unhappy, not the mildly bored; drunkenness was supposed to be practised by the down and out and the marginalised, not the boys and girls with cars and careers and more prospects than their granny could shake a stick at.

More cars were supposed to help people get around, not force them to sit in line through the full two hours of a drive time programme at motorway exits, motorways which, incidentally were ALSO supposed to help people get around. By passes were supposed to relieve bottle necks not shuffle them forward to the next un by passed town. Portlaoise was never meant to be a West Dublin suburb.

Sunday shopping was supposed to be a convenience for the harassed worker, not a new religion. We still haven't worked out exactly what we thought 24-hour shopping was supposed to do, but still can't get over that vaguely depressed feeling we experience whenever we think of shops with lights on at 3am and more particularly, of the people who have to work there.

And yes, I suppose we did seek to curb the power of the Church but that didn't mean we wanted to empty the churches themselves, or reduce seminaries and convents to advertising fodder for the property sections. And while the nuns had their problems, it would be nice if the odd one were still around to lecture our daughters about the evils of the micro mini and the bared and nailed midriff, or to knock the odd hospital consultant into shape with the menacing flutter of a wimple. And while we greatly welcome the challenge of choosing from a choice of 179 assorted types of coffee in the morning, we didn't mean for Bewleys to go.

But let me make something clear at this point. This is not a middle-aged lament for the good old days. Or perhaps I should say it's not JUST a middle aged lament for the good old days. I may well think that Dublin's Financial Services Centre is over endowed on the tall skinny latte front, but it is still a hell of an improvement on what was there before, the poverty laced slums that were the Sheriff Street tenement buildings.

Irish women's lives have also been transformed immeasurably over the last twenty years; our children have opportunities unimaginable two decades ago; luxuries denied to all but the wealthy are now available to the masses; good political choices have been made that have broken the poverty cycles of many, many families; the stultifying cosh of the Catholic church has been removed and we at least can see ourselves in our new spiritual nakedness and use occasions such as this to ponder what we have become and what we want to become.

And what we have become, it seems to me, are participants at what we would have called in my teenage years, a free house, but this time on a massive scale. Released from the handcuffs of mass religious obedience, we are Dionysian in our revelry, in our testing of what we call freedom. Hence the staggering drink consumption, the child like showing off of helicopters and four wheel drives

and private cinemas, the fetishising of handbags and high heels, the inability of some to contribute to charity without a photographer on hand to record it, the supplanting of bog standard childhood ailments like measles and whooping cough with fat induced obesity and diabetes.

I ask the question; who or what is the real us? Were we real when we were modest in our habits, and daily communicants, and mass mass attendees, and self effacing contributors to charity, and energetic participants in voluntary work or are we real now as we either indulge in, or look enviously upon, the phenomena I have just described.

Is not the speed at which we have jettisoned so much of our religious practice in particular suggestive of a society that was not so much spiritual as spineless, cowed by the power of the Church, observing what we observed out of fear rather than faith? The challenge in the short to medium term, I would humbly suggest, is how to take and accept this newly secular society and inject it with a value system that takes from the best of that which we have jettisoned and discards the worst. We must grub down in the national drain and retrieve the baby from the bath water. It is a challenge equal to that posed by a puzzled head scratching uber liberal commentator some years ago when he observed that he and many like him had spent years attempting to get rid of the hard rocks of fundamental Catholicism from the field that was Ireland. That, he noted, had now been done, yet all that was left was an empty, sterile, barren patch of land. What, he wondered, do we do with it now?

So let's re-imagine Ireland. Let's take it as read that our economy is going to chug along reasonably well for at least the next few years. Let's take it that we have enough retail outlets and barristas and mobile phone ring tones and botox providers. Let's examine instead what makes us truly human, what makes us 'happy', what the pursuit of the latter should entail. Let's fundamentally imagine all of ourselves on our death beds, forced as we would be at no other time, to examine our souls and the lives we have lead. A friend of mine likes to say that in order to lead a good life; we should also imagine what we would like to have said about us at our funeral. He has a checklist. That check list includes, that we were good to our families, that we subsumed some personal ambition to the needs of those around us, that we contributed at work if we worked outside the home, that we contributed to the community and that we left some child at least better off for having known us.

Most of you here will subscribe to that, but are they necessarily the values that our children are imbibing from the social, educational, cultural and political ether that they imbibe. The wealthier we become, the more the air is sucked from our collective spirit, the glitzier the dried out husk of our humanity becomes. Let us examine what lies being the pursuit of happiness. Those of us who grew up in the 60s and 70s and who were educated in Catholic schools, will have been reared with the notion that happiness is not something to be attained in this life. With the passing of that era, and the coincidental massive increase in personal wealth, we are now awash in the notion that not alone can happiness be attained this side of paradise, but that the more money you have, the more of the happiness stuff you can buy. Hence the big cars, the private jets, the Manola Blahniks, the cosmetic surgery, the botox et al. What we appear collectively to have failed to grasp is that

happiness is as serendipitous as lady luck, as ephemeral as star dust, as likely to be granted to a child perched on a gutter in Calcutta as a Hollywood star arrayed on a red carpet on Oscar night.

Money can't buy you happiness but if it is so patently true why does this modern Irish society stubbornly refuse to accept that truth. Those of you who read the Sunday Times last weekend would have got a flavour of this phenomenon of excess in a front page report in which a Dublin retailer was exulting in the fact that her outlet was now coping with a waiting list of 500 women in pursuit of a hand bag that retails at 5,000 euro plus. "It's great," opined the retailer, "for the country." Imagine that on your obituary, "Here lies Mrs X, fifth in line for a Birkin bag, and raging she wasn't first."

Let me read to you the observations of one marvellous man, a man, who in his winter years really is contemplating his life and what it has taught him and what he wants to pass on to those who will listen. The man is John Mortimer, the creator of Rumpole and the following appears in his new book, 'Where there's a will'.

'I'm writing this,' he says, 'at a good time of the year. The beech trees are covered with fresh, green leaves we are going to have a birthday lunch in the garden. My grandchildren will play in the mysterious sunken copses, disused flint pits now filled with tall and ancient trees, where I also played as a child. The daffodils will be in flower and the dogs will be jumping over them. There is every possible reason for happiness; but it's also a moment of sadness too. How many more such birthdays will there be? It's sad my mother never saw Rosie and Emily, my daughters, grow up. Although (the poet) Shelley was right about our sincerest laughter being fraught with sadness, it's the sadness, in a way, which makes happiness complete.

There is a story about a devoted fisherman, in love with the sport, who went to sleep and found himself, on a perfect day, fishing in a clear stream. Every time he cast he hooked a fine salmon. After this had happened a dozen times in succession he asked the gillie where he was. Was it, perhaps, heaven? No, he was told, it's hell. Happiness too often or too regularly repeated becomes misery. And here perhaps we're getting near to what happiness is for me. Happiness is a by-product. If it's sought for deliberately, desperately it's elusive and often deceptive, like the distant sight of an oasis.'

So what, towards the end are Mortimer's values they are despite his fame, despite the memories of his stellar career as barrister and author, despite his wealth, despite all those material things, it is the simple joy of his garden, of his children and of his grandchildren, of ritual, that resonate in the final chapters of his book as of his life. In his book, Mortimer also takes us through many of his own epiphanies, life lessons that guided him through to the melancholic, but ultimately fulfilled state in which he now exists.

All of us have those epiphanies; the trick is to recognise and to use them. The national trick is to pray for a national epiphany that will kick start us into a view of life and how it should be lived that doesn't start in the car park of Liffey Valley and end in the inner mall of Blanchardstown.

I have had a number of those epiphanies, not all of which I have acted on but some of which I would like to share. I had an epiphany when I caught myself and two of my daughters kneeling in front of a two metre shelf length of facial cleansers in the new monster Tesco's in North Dublin, paralysed by the great God of market choice.

I had an epiphany when, in the busyness of my work life last month, I failed to notice a little piece of paper in the window of my littler daughter's classroom announcing the Junior Infants Halloween hat competition thus ensuring that she went to school on the appointed day with a hastily wrapped piece of newspaper around her head while the children of the more engaged mothers outdid Philip Treacy with their millinery.

Ella, God bless her, didn't even notice, and she walked around on the hat parade like the late Queen Mother at Ascot. I never would have risen to the three foot tall Cat in the Hat structure hat one mother produced, but I had still missed out on the pleasure that will never be repeated of getting down on the floor with my Junior Infant child and imagining and attempting to make a wonderful hat. My loss. Lesson learnt.

But those are personal stories. What are the epiphanies we should imagine here today for this country, and how do we do it this side of our dotage, before hanging, so to speak, concentrates our minds.

It would be good if we recognised the new religions of sex and drink and shopping for what they are and tiptoed back to the churches. It may not even be necessary to believe, it may be sufficient just to remind ourselves of some of the universal truths about charity and decency and how to live a good life, all of which are contained in the teachings of the major religions. It would be good to regain our sense of the magic of ritual, of the year marked by rites and rituals, not the seamless, joyless blending of undifferentiated weekdays. It would be nice to get the summer over before the Christmas displays begin.

It would be good to insert ourselves into the lives of our community, reawaken our sense of what we can contribute but also what we can receive, the preciousness of belonging, of being caught up in something stronger than your own individual self.

It would be good to discipline our children by disciplining ourselves, to realise the risks of jaded appetites, of needs too quickly and too elaborately met, of lives made too cynical, too aware through the imposition of distorted adult views of what constitutes happiness, to realise also that the new impoverished are not those without the DVDs and the latest Play Stations and mobiles and the private cinemas and the cut down Fendi bags but those perhaps, who have them and who have got

them without the slightest personal effort, every wish and expectation delivered upon without striving, without time to dream, without that peculiar joy known as delayed gratification.

What we also need to do as a country rapt in love as we are with market forces and consumer products is to begin again to speak the word that increasingly dare not speak its name in this thrusting, strutting, alpha male society- poverty. It still exists, in the literal sense, in the sense of individuals and families existing on bread and chips strung out on stress and worry, their feelings of isolation and inadequacy made all the worse by the apparently effortless garnering of wealth and decent lifestyle by those around them. Twenty years ago, poverty was just as nasty, but made more bearable perhaps by a cultural acceptance that it was part of what we were. Now the term 'loser' commonly used, piles psychic pain onto the literal pain of being poor.

It also exists in the spiritual sense as I have outlined. It exists in our failure to date to imagine a wealthy country that strives for more than the satisfaction of needs we never knew we had until the multinationals created demand. Political debate too often is about personalities, cultural debate currently revolves around the physical siting of a theatre rather than the role of theatre and music and poetry in breaking down the poverty of spirit I have spoken of. Piping Mozart into the sound systems of our junior schools, teaching marginalised adolescents how to play a musical instrument, seeing art as central to our lives and our spirit rather than a luxury extra accessed by the few would do much to improve our civic life. Let's debate that and worry not about the Abbey.

There is moral poverty; the staggeringly swift creation of a society in which we are increasingly neutral in our judgements of all sorts of objectively bad behaviour, be it infidelity, the abandonment of families, loutish behaviour on the sports field, under age sexual behaviour. Those who indulge are, bizarrely, more likely to be feted than condemned. Punch someone's lights out, wreck your head with Class A drugs, and you're more likely to appear on a chat show than a court bench.

A young female pop star comes to Dublin and puts on a graphically sexually explicit show in front of a theatre packed with sub teens, brought along, incredibly, by their mothers and fathers. One commentator described such displays as the mainstreaming of the pornographic imagination; what was previously top shelf is now at gym slip level.

I am conscious as I read this that little if any of what I am saying is new. The wealthy are frequently vulgar and prone to showcasing that which they have accumulated. That was as true centuries ago as it is today. Tolerance levels for all kinds of behaviour wax and wane depending on societal norms, the role of the churches, the historical context, and a myriad other factors. The poor really will always be with us, and human greed will triumph, like a dodgy stock option, when the higher virtues are suffering a bit of a slump.

So why do we even bother discussing it? Why not sit back and wait for tides to turn, stop banging our heads against the brick walls of smugness, complacency and massive self-satisfaction that are all around us? The answer lies in what I have struggled to explore a bit over the last twenty

minutes-our humanity, the belief that sometimes people want to do better, be better, and thinks of people other than themselves. The deeply, heartfelt hope that our children will have better lives, and in the context of this shiny new wealthy Ireland, that that better life has to do not with the accumulation of stuff, but with an awareness of the true meaning of a rich life, of a life where the pleasures of love, of companionship, of reading, of art, of sharing one's gifts, of seeking to attain ever higher understanding of the mysteries, beauties and even ugliness that surround us, are really all that matter.

In the context of what John Pilger may talk about, many of these problems of our age, may seem like so much trivia, the aesthetically unpleasant downside of a vulgar, decadent western lifestyle, the pious handwringing of those who also benefit from that decadence. But how we are as a people, how we treat each other, and particularly how we treat our most vulnerable, informs our relationships with other cultures, other countries. It can inform issues of foreign policy, of international aid, and every area where we interact particularly with countries that cry out for our help.

Self absorption, the relentless pursuit of the material, hardens our hearts, closes us off to those who need to share our gifts. It can happen on a personal level, it can happen on a national scale. But equally those small personal epiphanies can also begin to impact nationally, and we should be as conscious of the trickle up effect as the trickle down, of the impact of mass individual actions, mass individual decisions to re engage, to re discover the spiritual, re discover each other and examine and take on board the truth of what makes us fully human.

Last night, my hat wearing Junior Infant daughter was chanting the chorus of a little song that may sound mawkish in this grown up adult setting but has a resonance nonetheless. She sang, "And in this world of darkness, we all can shine a light, you in your small corner and I in mine."

I am loath to imagine concrete things for the next twenty years. The supermarkets are already full to bursting. Let me imagine instead the creation of a new discourse, where a safe place is created to talk again about values, about the spiritual, where the political class summons the courage to shift its focus even slightly away from the purely economic and focuses instead on what else that really matters, what the people they serve need for a full and generous minded life quite apart from tax breaks, toll roads, and airline terminals. Let us imagine the spirit of Céifin as the dominant one, let us imagine nothing less than the decentralisation of the national soul from Dublin to Ennis.