

# TRÁCHT NÁISIÚNTA

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## POSTELECTION POPPYCOCK

Of all the post-election assessments that have been produced following the recent local contests, one that undoubtedly stands out is that by Fintan O'Toole in *The Irish Times* entitled 'Sinn Féin Provided Buffer Zone ...' (11 June). Mr O'Toole is known to be an original writer and is hailed by the English press.<sup>1</sup> He rarely fails in colourful invention and bizarre misconstruction.

In the journalistic piece concerned, he uses a vehicular metaphor about a shock absorber going over bumpy ground to explain his view about the role of Sinn Féin in recent Irish politics. What, you might say, is he talking about exactly? Well, it is really not just about Sinn Féin; it relates to his summing up of an allegedly basic political dynamic in our country.

He suggests that a major tension in society is between 'ethno-nationalism' and 'progressive socialism', and Sinn Féin is described as having tried to ride those two horses at once - indeed not without success up until now, he opines. The party is indeed unambiguously for the creation of a truly national republic on the island of Ireland, on the one hand, and is steadfastly committed to social equity, on the other. As for immigration, it was welcoming at a time when the inflow was modest, he maintains, and thus did not antagonise 'ethno-nationalists'.



However, the context began to change, particularly with the onset of sharply increased immigration. Sinn Féin, he says, then came to be viewed by many 'ethno-nationalists' as selling out on the issue and lost a significant element of its previous support.

At least, that is the perspective à la Fintan.

In fact, his whole framework of analysis is skewed. The real reference-points for evaluating Sinn Féin and others on the Left do not consist bilaterally of 'ethno-nationalism' and 'progressive socialism', but rather, trilaterally, of far rightism, democratic nationalism and shallow cosmopolitanism.

In particular, O'Toole's 'ethno-nationalism' ridiculously conflates far rightism and democratic nationalism, and not by accident, one suspects.

Contrary to what O'Toole would have it, far rightists were never a component of Sinn Féin support, in any form. In fact, such persons were always hostile towards Sinn Féin because of its contemporary secular and liberal philosophy.

Far rightism can be clearly characterised. It consists of a chauvinistic antagonism to non-Irish immigrants,<sup>2</sup> an atavistic attachment to conservative Catholicism and a masculinist cast of mind. As for, shallow cosmopolitan-

<sup>1</sup> One of "Britain's [sic] top 300 intellectuals.", *The Observer*.

<sup>2</sup> Irish immigrants would include returning emigrants or their children etc.

ism, it is more focused on the Europe of Brussels than the world at large and disdains the national, failing to accept the importance of Irish cultural distinctiveness; anything which does not concur with it, is caricatured as 'ethno-nationalism'.

Democratic nationalism is the opposite of the foregoing. It is internationalist, humanistic, anti-colonialist, socially progressive and culturally sensitive.

The problem with shallow cosmopolitanists is that they are historically ignorant and analytically confused. Nationalism principally arose in modern history in the form of anti-imperialist movements. In Europe, the main objects of nationalist resistance were the Russian, Austro-Hungarian, German, and British empires. Thus, the original phenomenon was national democratic and usually socially liberal. In time, reactionary forces came to use the concept of the nation in a retrograde way. This was done by asserting the superiority of one nation over another or others (e.g. Nazism). As a consequence, one had then to speak of aggressive or chauvinistic nationalism as opposed to democratic nationalism as two very different ideologies. However, the shallow cosmopolitanists deliberately fudge this difference and speak of only one nationalism as though the aggressive or chauvinistic types were the only type.

Sinn Féin is essentially a national democratic party in the broad classification of nationalisms. And, in the Irish context, that involves attachment to the republicanism of Tone and Pearse as well as the socialism of Connolly and Larkin.

So, how has it arrived at the nadir where it now finds itself?

The problem is indeed largely immigration, but not in the manner that Mr O'Toole un-

derstands it. Xenophobia and racism are repugnant to any democratic nationalist. But it is not unreasonable to state that illegal migrants and bogus asylum seekers should be firmly dealt with by means of restricted entry or swift deportation, as the case may be. Even with genuine asylum seekers, we should not be expected to accommodate all who wish to come to these shores when it is beyond the means of the State to deal with them without resulting in underfunding services which are required to meet the needs of the Irish people. Such accommodation should chiefly be the responsibility of the bigger and richer countries, several of which helped to create the migration crisis in the first place, with their foreign wars of intervention and other interferences, notably in the Middle East and somewhat beyond.

However, in the past Sinn Féin has not faced up to these realities. Instead, it has feebly complained about the deficiencies of past Government reactions without specifying how the situation should have been handled otherwise. Also, it has just weakly talked about 'consultation' of local communities in connection with migrant placements.

Mr O'Toole avers that even if it firms up on immigration now, Sinn Féin will not win back the 'ethno-nationalists' - which it never had! Moreover, it will, he warns, put off cocktail party 'liberals' like himself - whom it never had either! His real message to Sinn Féin is: don't change your current equivocation about immigration and so remain out of touch with the majority of the electorate, just as Mr O'Toole would like. The fact is that the political ballast in Ireland lies in the broad ground between far rightists and shallow cosmopolitanists and it is there that democratic nationalists need to meet valid concerns about immigration as well as other matters.

Of course, it is not just the issue of immigration that has produced the predicament that Sinn Féin is in. It has lost credibility to a large extent on a number of fronts. This has been building up for some time now. It treated the citizenship referendum in 2004 pseudo-progressively as xenophobic; it was opportunistic on the Seanad referendum, moving from reform to abolition when Fine Gael opted for the latter; it absurdly said vote ‘yes, yes’ in the last referenda, but we’ll fix it later if you vote ‘no, no’; it cosied up to the Ukrainian ambassador and remained silent on NATO’s machinations in her country with its threat to European peace, including Irish national security; it rejected a call for expulsion of the Israeli ambassador one day and then supported it the next; it endorsed the Hate Speech Bill and about-turned when the measure came in for incisive criticism. Many of its supporters who had begun by rejecting their party’s positions in successive referenda, seem to have ended up, after the later somersaults, by abandoning it altogether.

Sinn Féin has said it is now going to reflect and regroup. If, as previously, it just concludes that there is a problem of communication, on the one hand, and that voters confusedly directed their ire at Government through Independents, on the other, the crisis for the party will be circumvented rather than confronted. The real problem is actual-

ly twofold - deficient policy and inadequate leadership. Unless, these are sensibly addressed, a seriously holed vessel will not be repaired; it will simply sink.

That would be a tragedy for Irish politics. Sinn Féin was originally shaping up to be a genuinely progressive, nationalist, republican party that would overtake the empty rhetoric and reactionary policies, nationally and internationally, of a deeply right-wing establishment. The looming horizon is that, whatever about Harris’s current protestations, the Government will cut and run for a general election in the Autumn, before potentially losing bye-elections and while Sinn Féin is still staggering. One can only hope that the Dáil does in fact last until March ‘25 and that some repair work can be done in the intervening period.

One certainly cannot rest in the hope that there will be a swing back to Sinn Féin as happened between the last local elections and last general election. Examination of attitudinal data regarding shifting positions in various social strata, not least among the young, does not bear out the prospect of that being repeated to any extent without a fundamental overhaul at all levels in the organisation. There is a floating vote that has drifted away.

The time has come for Sinn Féin to stop being woke and instead become awake.

## **ANTI-SEMITISM & ANTI-ZIONISM**

The war in Gaza has seen atrocity after atrocity, war crime after war crime committed by Israel on a scale that far outdistances anything that Hamas did on 7 October last. The inevitable and appropriate result has been censure by UN Agencies, intervention by the International Criminal Court, adjudi-

cation by the International Court of Justice, and condemnation by many countries. It has also induced more and more nations to recognize the State of Palestine, including Ireland. The reaction by Israel is to scream “anti-semitism” at all levels, producing a prestigious list of the accused that continues to

grow day by day. However, if there is an authentic “anti” in the situation, it is anti-zionism. So what are anti-semitism and anti-zionism?

### ANTI-SEMITISM IN HISTORY

Anti-semitism in the West is most associated with Christianity. The Christian redeemer/saviour, Jesus of Nazareth, was executed by the Romans at the behest of the Jewish establishment in Judea and, although he was a Jew himself, became a martyr for Christians, while the Jews generally were then vilified as his murderers. He is also a icon in Islam, but not regarded as divine; instead he is viewed as a prophet. Nonetheless, the Jews are still classified as having been hostile to him.

Yet, anti-semitism did not begin with Christianity, later to be perpetuated within Islam.

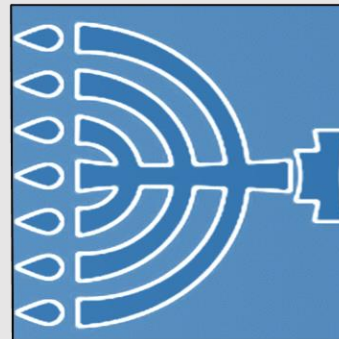
The first recorded instances of anti-semitism go back to the 3rd century BCE in Alexandria. Manetho, an Egyptian priest, wrote scathingly of the Jews and his themes were thereafter repeated by other writers throughout north Africa and eventually in Greece. It seems that Jewish clannishness and self-proclamation as the chosen people did not endear them to many in the communities in which lived. Also, their refusal to acknowledge any gods other than Yahweh created much hostility in the prevailing polytheistic societies. Of course, the Jews were not unique in their experience of racism. Allophobia (fear of the unfamiliar ‘other’) could attach to other groups as well from time to time.



It was when Christianity became established as the State religion of the Roman Empire in

the 4th century CE that things really hit a downward spiral for them. Matters became worse and worse in post-imperial Europe and reached a medieval nadir during the period of the crusades between the 11th and 12th centuries. By the 7th century their plight had already been added to by the emergence of Islam and the fundamentalist strains thereof which had no time for Judaism.

Coming up to the Renaissance, religious orders such as the Franciscans and Dominicans promoted anti-semitism with fiery and emotional preaching. When the Black Death arrived in the 14th century, even this was largely blamed on the Jews. With the onset of the Reformation, Martin Luther was excoriating about the Jews; he proclaimed: “we are at fault in not slaying them ...”. It was to be another (Austrian) German in the last century who took him at his word. Russia played its part vigorously in persecuting



Jews and gave us the word ‘pogrom’ as a description of their killings and expulsions. Another word that is associated particularly with

Jews is ‘ghetto’ which involved them in being effectively quarantined in many cities. The acme of persecution was of course the holocaust in which the Nazis eliminated six million of Europe’s seven million Jews. The spirit of that slaughter was probably no different from that entailed in previous instances of anti-semitism; its distinction was the use of industrial methods to achieve a mass murder beyond anything that had gone before.

Ireland was naturally affected by the various Christian influences referred to. In the last

century in particular, there were a number of limited outbursts of anti-semitism. First of all, there was the Limerick Boycott of Jews (sometimes inaccurately termed 'pogrom') inspired by the Redemptorist priest, John Creagh, which was atavistically a protest against the killers of Christ.

In the 1940s, Oliver J Flanagan was elected to the Dáil for a monetary 'reform' and anti-semitic party. He distinguished himself in his maiden speech as follows: "There is one thing that Germany did, and that was to rout the Jews out of their country. ... Where the bees are there is honey, where the Jews are there is money." The latter sentiment reflected the common myth that Jews were all financial exploiters, a notion probably deriving from the fact that many of them did specialise in credit and banking, itself a spinoff from the Christian ban on usury.

On to the Seventies and Deputy Stephen Coughlan of the Labour Party, looking backwards, speechified approvingly of Father Creagh and his activities. As a result, he narrowly avoided expulsion from his party.

However, the foregoing were exceptional and not typical manifestations in Ireland. Generally, Irish society has been quite hospitable for Jews. They have served with distinction in Parliament, held Lord Mayorships and been members of Government.

### ZIONISM

By the late 19th century, many Jews had come to the conclusion that a homeland needed to be created for them. This idea then fused with religious dogma embodied in a strand of Judaism which held that they had a god-given right to the 'promised land' of Israel (i.e. Palestine). In 1881, a movement emerged in Eastern Europe called the Lovers of Zion (the latter term being a Biblical synonym for Israel). Its various elements united three years later and, in 1887, the

first Zionist Congress was organised. This led to the Zionist Organisation led by Theodor Herzl. From then on, the previous efforts at some Jewish settlement in Palestine were intensively added to. Some European imperialist politicians were only too glad to be rid of Jews and, in 1917, Britain's Foreign Secretary, Arthur Balfour (no lover of Jews himself), issued a Declaration in favour of a "national home for the Jewish people" in Palestine.

By 1918, the Ottomans had been expelled from Palestine and replaced by Britain. The first British Administrator for the area remarked that the Jews could serve the same purpose there as had the British in the Ulster Plantation. In 1948, the UN voted for a plan to partition Palestine into Jewish and Arab polities. It should be noted that the United Nations of that time was consisted of only 56 States as much decolonisation had yet to take place. That compares with the 193 members today. A total of 33 votes were cast in favour of partition, preponderantly coming from Europe, the Americas and Australasia (3 of the pros from elsewhere amounted to 'fellow travellers' of the 'West' - South Africa, Liberia and the Philippines). Fighting immediately broke out in Palestine and, when a ceasefire was reached, the Israelis ended up with more territory than the partition provided for. This was accompanied by mass expulsions of Arabs from their homes in what was to be the new polity of Israel which was proclaimed as a Jewish State for the Jewish People.

It can be seen, therefore, that the whole Zionist enterprise, aided and abetted by imperialism, was a sectarian, fundamentalist, act of intrusion, dispossession and plantation. Thus, it is valid to challenge the legitimacy of the Israeli State. However, it is for the democratic representatives of the Palestinian Arabs to decide what is acceptable to them



as a solution to the ongoing crisis in historic Palestine. It would be perfectly reasonable to call for a united, democratic, secular State with equal rights for Jews and Arabs. But, if a two-state agreement is endorsed by both sides, then it is not for anybody else to challenge that. The problem is that it looks increasingly unlikely to be the prospect for an end to the conflict, not least because of Israeli intransigence and persisting dreams of Zion ‘from the river to the sea’, with more and more Jewish settlements on the West Bank trying to advance them.

**THE PRESENT CRISIS**

What the world is now faced with is a rogue, terrorist Israeli State perpetuating crimes against humanity by means of mass killing and destruction and the use of starvation of a population as a means of war. It is a foul and obscene assault on the men, women and children of Palestine.

And every time, Israel is called to account for its barbarous actions, it and its supporters shout “anti-semite” as a way of trying to bully democrats into remaining silent for fear of being labelled racist or nazi. But like all bullies, they must be stood up to and told very firmly that they are in fact the racists and latter-day nazis. Indeed, they are a disgrace to the memory of the holocaust in

doing in substance to Palestinians what the Nazis did to them. And it is to be remembered that all Jews are not zionists and backers of Israel. In truth, many Jews throughout the globe have courageously deprecated what is being done in their name and will have no part in it.

In Ireland, the task of all progressives is to stand by the Palestinian people and denounce the sectarian Israeli State. It is a laugh to hear it called the only democracy in the Middle East when it is in reality a ‘Jewish Democracy for a Jewish people’. And when we are told that Jews in Ireland are feeling insecure because of our nation’s position on the conflict and that there is anti-semitism here, one must ask - where is the evidence of Irish anti-semitism? We know of no case before the courts of aggression towards Jews or attacks on their premises. Is it more that some Jews are ashamed of what is being done under the rubric of Judaism and others are actually zionists who collaborate in

the slander that to be anti-zionist is to be anti-semitic.

Ireland knows all about religious sectarianism, imperialist racism, and mass starvation. That is why we will stand to the last by our brothers and sisters in Palestine.



**PALESTINE 1948**

