

The Green Wave

Brian McClinton



ASPECTRE is haunting planet earth – the spectre of environmental annihilation. Intolerable heatwaves; uninhabitable countries; drowned cities; stagnant seas. Climate models predict that we are currently on track for a heating of between 3C and 4C by 2100. Humans would be forced away from equatorial regions and the vast majority of humanity would live in high altitude areas, where agriculture would be possible. By 2100 there will be about 11bn people, about 2bn of whom would be refugees. The 4C warmer world would be survivable, but it would be eminently poorer than the one we currently enjoy.

There are signs that these dismal prospects are finally ringing the alarm bells. Greta Thunberg (below), the Swedish teenager who initiated the school strike for climate movement, has played a part in awakening the general public to the climate crisis. In March about half a million students in 112 countries joined her call in striking and protesting. A similar event involving students from 125 countries took place in May.

Green parties across Europe have reaped the benefit. They recorded their highest ever score in the European Parliament, winning 69 seats, up 19 from 2014. In Germany, the Greens doubled their tally to finish in second place behind Angela Merkel's centre-right CDU. Opinion polls since have shown the Green Party as ahead of Merkel's. Greens also finished second in Finland, on 16%; third in France and Luxembourg; and strong performers in Belgium, the UK (12.1%) and the Netherlands (however, they only won 2 seats in the whole of central Europe).

In the local elections in Northern Ireland in May, the Green Party, though still among the smaller parties, was a big winner, doubling its representation from four seats to eight. The party's Áine Groogan topped the poll in the Botanic area. In the EU election in the Republic, the Green Party achieved the greatest electoral success in its history, with 11.4% and 2 of the existing 11 seats. In the Irish local elections the party won 49 seats. Their support in Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown stands at 20%; in Dublin city it is 15%; in Fingal it is 14%; and in South Dublin it is 10%.

The Green Party's leader Eamon Ryan (top right) argues that the party's surge (up from 4.9% in the last election in 2014) is more than just a moment. "There are few people out there who do not recognise the urgency of climate change and what we need to do", he says. Of course, there is much rhetoric around green issues and very little action. The green agenda in the Republic includes: net zero emissions by 2050; a medium-term ban on fossil fuels; shutting Moneypoint and peat-burning power stations; emphasis on public

transport, walking and cycling; radical changes in agriculture and land use; less meat consumption; afforestation; and dramatic waste reduction.

The task is formidable. Eamon Ryan points to the refusal of the Fine Gael government to stop issuing licences for gas and oil exploration and also their obstruction, along with Fianna Fail, of a move to commit two-thirds of capital spending on transport to public transport rather than roads. Ryan welcomed the Climate Action Plan, published on 17th June, but said that the Government is continuing to fudge any commitments on bringing down carbon use.

Here's the rub. Like many politicians, millions talk about the need to tackle the climate crisis, but all too often it is mere virtue signalling. When it comes to the crunch and they are asked to pay the price, they adopt the attitude that whoever pays the cost, it won't be them. And will they give up their cars, fly less on foreign holidays, use less heating and eat less beef?

The results of the recent Australian general election demonstrate the immensity of the task facing environmentalists. Droughts and record heatwaves are now a serious problem in that country. In a public opinion poll earlier this year, more than 60% of Australians said that global warming requires action now "even if this involves significant cost". In the election the Labor Party, which was expected to win, said that it would target a 45% reduction in carbon emissions by 2030. The Liberals and their coalition partners warned that this plan would entail higher energy prices. They were returned to power for a third term.

There is an even greater fear. It is that as people in rich countries become fully aware of the climate threat, they turn to politicians who deny the problem but advocate xenophobic and anti-immigration policies to keep out the refugees from hotter climes that will try to land on the shores of more temperate zones. In short, they will not vote for the likes of Áine Groogan and Eamon Ryan but for the Trumps, Johnsons and Farages of the future. It really doesn't bear thinking about. □



The Rise of National Populism

Bob Rees

National Populism – The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy
• Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin • Pelican • 2018

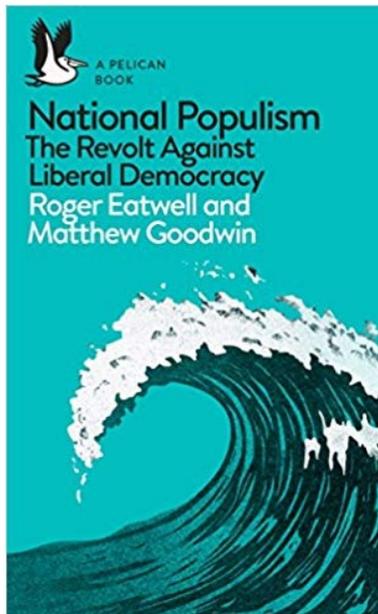
As long ago as 400BCE, when notions of democratic government were first mooted, Plato warned that, if it was unqualified, democracy would soon degenerate into immoral, destructive mob rule driven by emotion and ignorance, rapidly leading to tyranny by a despotic ‘saviour’.

The Terror following the French Revolution of 1789 is a good example of unqualified rule by the people, when the guillotine and mob killings replaced all traces of justice. Clearly there must be checks and balances in the way a workable democracy must be organised.

To be practical, a democracy must be representative, with a handful of educated mature individuals representing the interests of the masses of ordinary people. One such check limits those of the masses who should be entitled to vote: the wealthy landowners used to argue that the poor and unpropertied were not fit to vote because they were probably uneducated and even illiterate. So they gave themselves a monopoly on power based on their assumed mental superiority. The Great War demolished this myth and in the UK the property qualification was abolished when the war ended in 1918, and unpropertied soldiers who had risked their lives to defend democracy demanded suffrage for all mature male citizens.

The trouble was that most working men knew little or nothing of the workings of government, and cared even less. But if democracy is to work properly, the electorate need to be educated, reflective and informed. Yet even today, when most common people are educated and literate, they are very easily hoodwinked. Partisan news and social media, and distractions like football and fashion enable skilful demagogues to manipulate the mass sentiment of ordinary people to create an uninterested, misinformed electorate that either doesn’t bother to vote, or votes with the crowd. “*The strongest argument against democracy is a few minutes’ conversation with any voter*” (Winston Churchill). “*Democracy is the pathetic belief in the collective wisdom of individual ignorance*” (H.L. Menken).

And, as Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin argue in their book on *National Populism*, published by Pelican, during the past forty years or so, liberal democracy has evolved in ways that have further alienated the common people. The following are some of the reasons.



1. Cultural Concerns

Governments are increasingly staffed by academic graduates who are mostly well-educated, well-off, politically-correct and liberal in their views, protecting business interests that affect the economy and defending minorities such as women’s rights, LGBTs, and immigrants, but blithely ignoring the masses of ordinary working-class citizens.

This has skewed government policy-making toward the ‘haves’ and toward more liberal policies which are of little concern to the less-well-educated working classes. Politics has become volatile, fragmented and unpredictable, where traditionally left wing parties have ignored workers needs and turned to post-materialist matters like feminism, climate change and multiculturalism.

This increasingly elitist nature of liberal politicians and parties is alienating the masses, whose traditional party loyalties can no longer be depended on, and where populist demagogues have a ready audience. It is surely no surprise that poorly-educated people view mass immigration as a threat to their culture and identity (as well as their jobs), when their community is packed with strangers who do not share their language, culture, history, behavioural norms, religion, interests or morals. This is more nimbyism than racism. Workers are not unsympathetic to refugees from war-torn countries, but they see them as contributing to housing shortages, reduced manual wages and unemployment which is already threatened by mechanisation, automation and computerisation.

2. Loss of Sovereignty

There has been a seepage of power away from national governments to transnational organisations (IMF, UN, WTO, EC, NAFTA, NATO), needed to manage global affairs like trade, climate change, and refugees for example, but which necessarily override national sovereignty, and which, to suspicious working people, look like vehicles for spreading capitalism and US influence.

We live in a post-democratic world where power has shifted to unelected small highly-educated technocratic and economic elites and lobbyists, often foreign, which operate behind a democratic façade, but which seem to be contemptuous of democracy. To those masses of ordinary patriotic people (90% of whom would willingly fight for their nation), this loss of sovereignty is intolerable.

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The EEC, for example, was well intentioned, but it was introduced by stealth and developed by specialist elites who failed to communicate with ordinary people. The Maastricht treaty introduced the notion of EU citizenship but it also threatened national constitutions, so the Lisbon Treaty was dealt with behind closed doors. In the UK, for the past 20 years, the right wing of the Conservative party has missed no opportunity to blame the EC and pour scorn on it for their own shortcomings. Hence Brexit. It is undeniable that among the main factors that have led to national populism are the unbridgeable contradictions between national and global governments, markets, and regulations.

3. Economic Inequality

In the years after 1980, UK PM Thatcher and US President Reagan rubbished Keynesian economics, attacked trades unions, and promoted global neoliberalism. It was an overt attack on the security and well-being of the working classes. The loss of their Unions left them feeling helpless and invisible, and the deliberate decimation of manufacturing industry (in favour of 'financial services') in the UK led to a reaction against the political mainstream which Tony Blair's Labour government made no attempt to ameliorate.

Then the 2008 Financial Crisis threatened national sovereignty in poorer countries, whose governments were obliged to beg from the Troika (European Commission, ECB and IMF) for bail-outs for the clearly guilty, but too-big-to-fail banks, in exchange for severe austerity for the ordinary people, including massive cuts in welfare and new and higher taxes. Not unnaturally, disaffected workers saw this as 'unfair', and by 2015, half of them had stopped voting in elections.

Similarly, increasing income inequality (CEO's are now paid as much as 350 times as much as their workers) and insecure employment (zero-hours contracts and the like) leave those without professional qualifications fearing for the future. The compulsory free movement of labour, a consequence of EU membership, saw a massive ingress of low-skilled workers from Eastern Europe, threatening traditional jobs and pay rates, and this has been compounded by mass immigration of refugees from war-torn Africa and Asia.

Multinational business and global finance also threaten the national identity and therefore the ordinary people's unity. Their proud patriotism has lost its meaning, while the growth of neoliberal economics has increased pressure on governments to cut taxes, shrink welfare, privatise state assets, deregulate business and finance, and maintain high unemployment to depress wages, which threatens us all. And on top of that, computerisation and automation threaten the jobs, especially of manual workers.

Together, these worries about culture, economics, jobs, immigrants, Islam, multiculturalism, austerity and patriotism all interact together to make fertile ground for Pop-

ulism. It is often seen by humanists as a form of racism, extreme nationalism, even fascism. Humanists like Roger Kelly (*Irish Freethinker* No 176) are appalled by populists' wilful ignorance, their militant ultra-rightist attitudes, and their dogged seemingly irrational stances on topics such as Brexit and Trump. But I think that to accuse to them of racism and fascism is unfair. Venezuela's Chavez, and Syriza in Greece and the Spanish Podemos party are all left-wing, and bearing in mind that populists themselves are mostly those without higher education who tend to be socially conservative (i.e. valuing stability, tradition, and social hierarchies), their primary fears in this changing world are about what the future holds for them and their families, rather than about the plight of endangered species or refugees' rights. They want a change from the status quo.

Admittedly, populist leaders are mostly narcissistic demagogues known for their xenophobic diatribes against immigrants, especially Muslims, minorities, the media and established politicians, whom they call 'unresponsive elites'. Like propagandists, they claim to speak on behalf of the masses, stressing their affinity to 'us real people' (workers) versus 'them' (academics)', using 'good' versus 'evil' terminology. But they are not preaching fascism or militarism, even though they sound scary enough to liberal ears. As for their followers, all they really want is fair treatment ... because liberal democracy has failed!

It is the failure of elected left-wing political elites to recognise this that has laid the path to populism by the masses of ordinary people

When, in 1992, Francis Fukuyama famously described capitalist democracy as '*the end point of man's ideological evolution*', '*the end of history*', he was clearly wrong. It is the failure of elected left-wing po-

litical elites to recognise this that has laid the path to populism by the masses of ordinary people. Academic left-wing politicians have let them down, and populist politicians have been quick to persuade them that they belong with 'us' down-to-earth doers rather than 'those' pie-in-the-sky talkers.

Populism is not just a flash in the pan. It is already dragging Western liberal democratic politics to the right, and until the root causes are addressed, it will continue to do so. But the humanist reaction to the populists, that they are blind, arrogant, stupid racists suggests to me that humanists have not understood them. We tend to see them as wilfully-ignorant, self-destructive protesters rebelling against the system, rather than against the remote holier-than-thou liberal politicians posing as socialists who we see as good guys, but who they feel are not treating them fairly, and who 'don't care what people like me think'. They resent being lectured to by 'posh' people.

In these times of change, it boils down to a growing educational divide between the masses of insecure working people and those other masses of relatively well-educated middle-income people who enjoy the attention of the elitist politicians who are drawn from their ranks. But we should recognise that we humanists are also mostly university-educated and financially secure, and populist voters aren't. □

Obituary for Sinn Féin?

Daltún Ó Ceallaigh

THE results of the local and European elections on 23 May 2019 are a disappointment for Sinn Féin but, despite the gloating of some elements in the media, they are by no means a disaster. Mark Twain once said about a premature obituary of him: reports of my death are greatly exaggerated. One might paraphrase here by stating that reports of the imminent demise of Sinn Féin are somewhat optimistic. When one keeps a cool head in analysing the data, proportionate conclusions paint a different picture.

First of all, the turnout for these elections was typically low at around 50%. Secondly, people are aware that they are electing candidates who have very little power at either level concerned.

There is thus all the difference in the world between a local or European election and a general election insofar as people know fully well that they are not electing a new government. The elections in question consequently provide an opportunity for protest votes and can be useful in that respect in providing an outline of the concerns of the electorate. However, the last opinion polls on the question of a general election have still to be kept firmly in mind when assessing where we are at as regards underlying party support.

Everybody has agreed that the outstanding feature of the recent elections was the support recorded for the Greens. This can be seen as both a simple protest vote and the expression of a genuine concern about a fundamental issue for the whole of humanity vis-à-vis climate change. It was probably particularly influenced by international reports of late which forcefully highlight the seriousness of the situation and it was further brought home in a very direct way by the demonstrations in



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this and other countries by the school-going population. However, it would be facile to assume that the Green Party will thus maintain the same level of support in a general election, especially because that leads to government formation and there is much more than climate change that one has to have a policy on. Nonetheless, the impact on the next general election will surely have to be that all parties address much more seriously the question of climate change, and that is a good thing.

When all the data is then taken into account, the position is that the three largest parties remain as Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and Sinn Féin. In the local elections, Sinn Féin (at 10%) is four points ahead of both the Labour Party and the Green Party. In the European election, it is ahead (at 12%) of the Labour Party by nine points and the Green Party by one point.

In 2011, the structure of Irish politics was radically altered when Fine Gael became the largest party, followed by Fianna Fáil and followed again not far behind by Sinn Féin. In the latter instance, this involved the displacement of the Labour Party in the context of the landscape transforming from one principally consisting of 2 1/2 parties to one thus being mainly constituted by 3 parties of near to equivalent size. We now also have the state of affairs whereby the conservative parties (Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil) make up about 50% of the electorate whereas for most of the post-war period they could claim around 70%. By now, this overall structure appears to have become definitely established. As for the last opinion poll about a general election, which was taken just before the May 23 elections, SF was recorded as having up to 19%.

When all is said and done, therefore, it is unwise to confidently assert that Sinn Féin has suffered an underlying permanent reverse. And, in considering Sinn Féin, humanists should also remember its progressive stances on same-sex marriage, abortion and liberalisation of divorce. It is also firm in its generally secular attitude to Irish society and the outlook that religion should be a private matter. There were atavistic elements within it, but these have recently cleared out to form a new party called Aontú.

For the Left in general, the most significant question that seems to have been missed as regards these elections is why conservatism (i.e. FG & FF) remains so strong in Ireland at around 50% of the electorate, even if it has declined from around 70% in most of the post-war period. Contemplation of that fact is of more relevance than a possibly temporary setback for Sinn Féin. □

Paradoxes of Humanism

Bob Rees

WHEN a person holds an irrational opinion, he must occasionally defend that opinion against reasoned criticism from others. The harder he finds it to defend, the more he must rationalise that the opinion is right, in order to protect his own self-esteem. The more ridicule he faces, the more dogmatic his opinion will become. Thus irrational belief begets greater belief, a well-known phenomenon called the *Escalation Effect*, where religious passion becomes religious fervour in the face of criticism, and a tentative Brexiteer will become ever more determined when challenged.

Those people who came to humanism for predominantly emotional (as opposed to purely rational) reasons may be subject to the same phenomenon when trying to justify their stance logically.

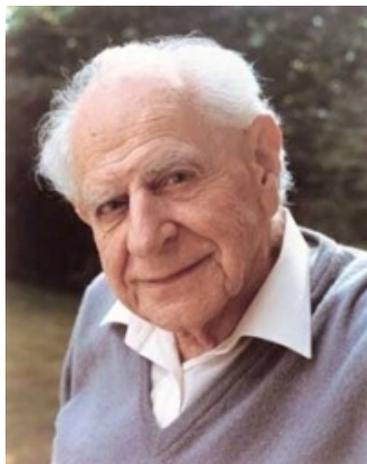
There is also the *Echo Chamber Effect* which occurs when a group of people with similar beliefs debate topics of mutual interest amongst themselves. By definition there is never a dissenting voice in such a group, and so they collectively convince themselves that their opinions are right, as they tend to over-confidence and extreme views. This might happen in a political party conference or in a social media chat group, and it is also something we humanists should be aware of at our meetings.

Consider a left-leaning secular humanist who campaigns actively for equal human rights for everyone everywhere, regardless of race, nationality, gender, age or whatever. But at a humanist meeting, his genuine concerns about the practical problems presented by global overpopulation, militant Islam, excessive immigration, quotas for women/blacks/gays and similar problematic consequences of human rights for everyone everywhere may be misinterpreted by his politically ultra-correct peers in the echo chamber as conservative, even fascist! He

may have been an active champion of equal rights for all LGBTs, but now that they have equal rights he may see no further point in marching in Pride rallies, again attracting opprobrium from the humanist echo chamber.

Humanists believe that we should be tolerant of whatever fanciful religions, crazy political affiliations and weird cultural practices our neighbours choose to live by, providing they don't interfere with the rights of others. But if we promote unlimited tolerance even of those who are intolerant, and if we are not prepared to fight to defend our tolerant society against those who are intolerant, then we, along with tolerance itself, will be defeated. Paradoxically then, for the sake of tolerance, we must be intolerant of the intolerant.

The same goes for freedom, in the sense of the absence of any legal constraining force. Such freedom is subject only to the law of the jungle, and clearly, it leads immediately to the enslavement of decent tolerant people by the strongest, most brutal bullies. This paradox of freedom applies equally to economic affairs, where widespread deregulation of financial institutions has already led to outrageous inequality and financial straits for the masses. To protect our freedom, then, we must pass laws constraining it.



These paradoxes attracted the attention of the 20th century philosopher Sir Karl Popper (famed for his notions about scientific truth, pictured below). He agreed that “*freedom defeats itself if unlimited*”, and he saw the necessity for legislation to limit our freedoms in order to protect them. But he saw another problem: “*Unfortunately, politics and the legal system are the servants of the ruling class*” (another Karl, Marx, had earlier pronounced the inevitability of class warfare). ‘The ruling class’ quickly reduced the pressure just enough to avoid confrontation, by passing such piecemeal laws against their own freedoms as were needed, for example, to limit workers’ hours, recognise trades unions, provide for workers’ sickness and disability and even to introduce progressive taxation.

We have depended since on the goodwill of our rulers to provide *ad hoc* laws to limit our freedoms in order to protect them, but also to limit their own powers using constitutional checks and balances, thus effectively protecting themselves against the possibility of a populist revolt against the ruling elites.

Popper similarly argued that “*He who teaches that not reason but love should rule opens the way for those who rule by hate*”. Most, but not all, humanists would agree that we should be guided by reason over emotion, no matter how well-intentioned that emotion might be. Similarly “*It is our duty to help those who need help, but it cannot be our duty to make others happy, since this does not depend on us ... the greatest happiness principle can easily be made an excuse for a benevolent dictatorship.*” (Popper).

It seems that the road to Hell is paved with good humanist intentions. Clearly, our enthusiasm and idealism must be tempered by practical caveats, if we are to avoid the unintended consequences of the paradoxes of our humanist stance. □

Where do We Go from Here?

Tom White

...in Northern Ireland?” The words of the big man himself, Rev Ian Paisley, back in 1976. That was before he entered “Never, Never, Never” land in 1985. By the time he made his inaugural speech as First Minister of Northern Ireland in 2007, he believed that “Northern Ireland has come to a time of peace, a time when hate will no longer rule. How good it will be to be part of a wonderful healing in our province.”

There is no doubt that Paisley was a complex man whose views evolved over time. But Ireland, north and south, has a complex and often tragic history. In the North, generations of sectarian strife; in the South, the two main political parties have little differences in their political and ideological outlook, but still mistrust one another because of the stance their respective great-grandparents took in the civil war that quickly succeeded the war of independence and resultant partition. As Irish men and women – and even Ian Paisley accepted he was an Irishman – we share at least two things in common: we love being right (in our own opinion anyhow) and we’ll argue (occasionally at gunpoint) with anyone who thinks we’re wrong. In other words, we’re several distinct tribes who inhabit a green, rainy, stunningly beautiful and occasionally unruly wee island. So, 43 years on, where exactly are we, and where do we go from here, North and South?

There’s a new woman on the block these days, and her name is Naomi Long, leader of the Alliance Party. The media scrum at the EU election count centre in Magherafelt heralded the entrance of the new leading lady. She looked delighted, she looked humane, she personified everything that Northern Ireland can and should be. Whilst politics at Westminster was in a state of meltdown over Brexit, Northern Ireland suddenly seemed a place of calm serenity. The DUP congratulated Ms Long, Sinn Féin congratulated Ms Long, the official Unionists looked shaken and stunned. The tectonic plates were shifting. Three women MEPs representing Northern Ireland. Well, this feminist groupie thinks that’s just wonderful!

Meanwhile, the Green Party were making giant strides in the local government and EU counts in Dublin, thereby terrifying beef and dairy farmers west of the Shannon. The Healy-Rae TDs from Kerry, who wear cloth caps and wellies even to the bathroom, were soon out defending the right of small farmers in rural Ireland to cash their EU cheques, drink several pints of stout in pubs and drive home afterwards without being arrested by the Gardai or harassed by Green Party activists.

Fortunately, Ireland’s international reputation was rescued when Mairead McGuinness was re-elected as the quiet, dignified spokesperson of Irish interests on Brexit. The

sooner Mairead and Naomi get together for a wee chat on mutual concerns, the better for us all.

Brexit and the Northern Ireland border are inextricably linked. If the border hadn’t existed, it is likely that Brexit would have already taken place in March 2019. Sooner or later, some bright spark politician in Britain will spot that connection; the Irish Border has stymied an agreed Brexit; Northern Ireland costs the UK billions of pounds per year and is holding up Brexit. That’s inconvenient if looked at in a dispassionate fashion. The Union between Great Britain and Northern Ireland is dependent on two majorities – a majority in Northern Ireland who vote for that Union, and a majority of people in Britain who accept the right of Northern Ireland to be included as part of the UK. The people of GB have never been consulted on that issue. A referendum would be an interesting process. The DUP need to be very careful not to offend political opinion in London too much; with the demise of Mrs May, they may well already have.

When Sky TV polled customers in the Republic in February whether they wanted a United Ireland, the “yes” response was 73%; but that’s equivalent to asking children if they’d like sweets for Christmas. The pertinent question should have been: “which is more important to you, Irish Unity or peace in Northern Ireland?” How would that vote go, North and South? 90% plus for peace?

Who wants the Irish border? It was put there in the first place to stop a North-South Unionist – Republican civil war, but almost immediately caused another Civil War in the South. It has been a destabilising feature of politics in Northern Ireland from the word go. Elections in NI have rarely been about bread and butter issues – just sectarian head-counts. Unionists didn’t want a border: they wanted the whole island to remain British. Irish Republicans never wanted the border and still hate it. And now Brexiteers in GB are being boxed into the European Union by the same emergency compromise border deal that was cobbled together in 1921. Everyone needs time to get their heads around the complexities of the current crisis.

The first thing that a new British Prime Minister has to deal with is sorting out with Europe and the Dublin Government new arrangements regarding the Northern Ireland border, arrangements that must comply with the terms of the Good Friday Agreement. Perhaps the solution that suits all parties best is that NI becomes a self-governing protectorate of GB, the EU and ROI, administered from London, but remaining in the EU. That would actually place Northern Ireland in a unique and privileged position in terms of international trade; the economy would take off on both ends of our island. Irish unity will happen some day, but surely the first sensible essential steps towards that is when the walls of mistrust between communities are finally dismantled. That process must start from the grass-roots up, but it has yet to get off the ground. When neighbours can finally speak rationally and with compassion to one another, great things can happen. If Ian Paisley can change his mind, anyone can.

Whatever the future, I am proud of the young people who voted for change and a brighter, saner tomorrow. May they succeed where previous generations have failed. “Young people of Ireland, I love you”... now, who was it said that? Maybe some oul mate of Ian Paisley? □