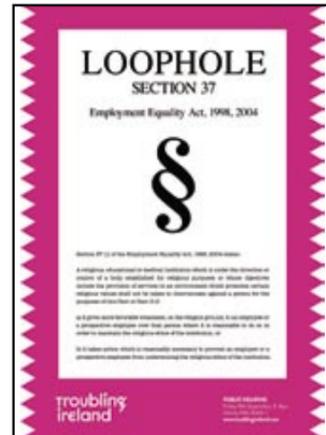


# WHITHER MOTHER IRELAND?



Treasa O'Brien &amp; Mary Jane O'Leary



Troubling Ireland posters by Susan Thompson &amp; Anthony Haughey



A conference in London about the future of Ireland produced some fascinating results. *WORDS Valerie Flynn*

**E**conomic crisis, emigration and high unemployment – we've seen it all before, But can 2013 offer Irish people a fresh start?

Artists, filmmakers, writers, historians and other academics came together late last year to find answers to that question at The Future State of Ireland conference in Goldsmith Art College in London.

Some speakers at the event questioned the assumption that there is one unified, homogenous Ireland with a shared present or future.

"We're not all in it together," filmmaker Mary Jane O'Leary told the conference, adding that austerity policies are hitting some people – those with disabilities, single parents, the poor – far harder than others and will

continue to do so.

While the Celtic Tiger years sometimes felt like a great leap forward out of the dreary past into a shiny new future of multiculturalism, prosperity and increasingly relaxed attitudes to sex, much didn't change. But we may not be as tied to the past as some people imagine.

For example, the tragic death of Savita Halappanavar in a Galway hospital has galvanised public opinion in a way that's likely to ensure the government will be held to its promise to legislate for abortion later this year.

Other speakers suggested that Ireland's future is as much about what hasn't happened as what has. Art writer Emma Cummins pointed out that the landscape here is now littered with relics of the idea of prosperity

that so suddenly disappeared – ghost estates.

"We are not," she said, "haunted by our past, but by a future that didn't happen".

"Our very recent history up to the crash of 2008 predisposed us to expect a certain kind of future which has now been exploded," historian Roy Foster agreed. "When the shower of temporary riches that apparently rained down on us in the late 20th and very early 21st centuries came to an end, there came to light a certain sense of disgust at the inadequacy and venality of the way Ireland has been governed."

So it could be that the derailing of that prosperous future contains the seeds of other, deeper changes in Ireland. One of the curious things about

the Irish response to the economic crisis has been the absence of *action*. Living in Barcelona, Irish filmmaker Mary Jane O'Leary has witnessed strikes and mass protests against austerity in the Catalunyan city. It made her wonder why Irish people have been so passive – consenting, almost – since the 2009 bank bailouts. "There was a sense of desperation about it," she says of the protests in Spain. "People already knew they had lost so much. But I could see the dignity people gain from this."

Along with London-based director Treasa O'Brien, Mary Jane is making a documentary titled *Too Good To Resist: (Un)Popular Resistance In 21st Century Ireland*, asking why Irish people are so peculiarly unwilling to take to the streets to voice their anger at the

## CUTS TO THE ARTS ARE BAD NEWS

Oxford University historian Roy Foster gave a damning lecture on the government's cuts to support for the arts and humanities, which he said were deeply hypocritical in light of the government's 'mantra' of praise of the achievements of Irish artists. In particular, he attacked the government's decision to cut back on funding for the promotion of Irish arts abroad, for postgraduate research, and to the Arts Council.

"What does all this mean for the future state of Ireland? One of the mantras of the struggling Irish government is that with our banking system destroyed, our sovereignty subsumed by the institutions of the EU, and emigration and poverty back with us as in the '80s, we can at least still 'do' culture. This has been said in a thousand speeches by politicians.

"Irish achievements in writing, art and theatre are untainted by the lies, sharp practice and criminal negligence shown by bankers, so-called regulators, political bag and envelope men, and members of the Department of Finance. This branch of Irish endeavour,

we can be proud of still – our cultural capital or creative investment.

"But the fact is that the worlds of Irish politics and Irish culture exist in untouching parallel universes. There's no sign that Arts Minister Jimmy Deenihan or his predecessors have ever tried to cross that gap. John O'Donoghue was notorious for utterly ignoring this part of his brief; Mary Hanafin clearly thought tourism trumped everything else. "The government announced that it was removing the autonomy of the boards of two great national institutions, the National Library and the National Museum and putting their governance under the control of civil servants. The same week, yet another senior executive was appointed to the board of the Irish Bank Resolution Corporation, which, as you know, is Anglo Irish Bank sustained in a sort of Dracula existence beyond the grave.

"The salary for this person is reportedly north of €500,000, making him the sixth executive of this un-dead organisation to earn such a sum – an annual €3m that would go a long way in the arts."



Roy Foster



Rubberbandits and (inset) Chris Austin Hill

## RUBBERBANDITS: THE ACADEMIC REACTION

Chris Austin Hill is a theatre scholar based in Ohio State University. He delivered easily the oddest presentation of the conference: *All My Buddies Are In Boston – The Rubberbandits' Hip-Hop Eulogy On The Tiger's Demise*.

Apparently the Limerick duo are quite trendy right now in scholarly circles. Hill, who is American, was introduced to them at another academic conference. So what makes a serious academic want to write about two lads from Limerick with plastic bags on their heads?

"All of my work in theatre," Hill explains, "comes down to the question: what does a piece of art tell us about a time and a place and a people? As much as we want to think this song [Buddies In Boston] is just fun and clever

and good craic, it isn't. I've called it a lament on the demise of the Celtic Tiger. In the song they're talking through the future state of Ireland – about how Ireland is so different to how it was a couple of years ago."

Hill reckons Rubberbandts are part of a noble tradition of Irish satire. "I've got grand theories about their song 'Black Man' as their exposé of the deeply entrenched xenophobia of Ireland in general, and rural Ireland in particular. Most of their fans are going to like the music and like the beats and like the jokes – but there's so much more there."

Is that not just an academic condescending to people, saying, "I can get something here the common or garden fan doesn't?"

Hill laughs in agreement.

"I'm just wondering if a large number of their fans are looking hard enough. When 'Horse Outside' was just breaking, [Limerick TD] Willie O'Dea went on Joe Duffy and defended them and his ultimate defence was that the songs were 'just good craic'. We can talk about drug culture and club culture in Limerick and dismiss it because it's 'just a joke'.

"That's the beauty of comedy – you can get away with a hell of a lot more than you can with any other approach. So I think it's time that academics took a look at the Rubberbandits because there is a tradition in Ireland of comedy as a means of approaching cultural capital – the Rubberbandits are right in the middle of that."

You heard it here first!

direction the country's course has taken.

It's not the first time Irish filmmakers have wondered why Ireland seems to be stagnating when social change is gathering momentum elsewhere in Europe. In the late '60s, journalist Peter Lennon came home from Paris to document Ireland's stultifying traditionalism. O'Brien and O'Leary cite his famous documentary, *The Rocky Road To*

*Dublin*, as an important starting point for their own investigations.

Among the theories about Irish inaction are that emigration has extracted many discontented young people from the country, and that social partnership – the pay deals periodically struck between employers, the government and trade unions – defused potential tension between workers and the state.

They also want to examine

whether the clientalist nature of Irish politics has prevented the kind of state-wide solidarity that would underpin a serious protest movement in Ireland.

The two filmmakers are aware that Ireland's loss of sovereignty is contributing to the dispiriting sense that resistance really is futile.

"Who do you protest to in Ireland now? It's the EU and the IMF – you can't vote them out," O'Leary rues. See [facebook.com/zgood2resist](http://facebook.com/zgood2resist).

## THE MESSAGE

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No Right to Die campaigner disagrees with that proposition. There is, however, a strange logical leap involved in the conclusion which Judge Kearns draws. It is as if he is unaware that, according to the official figures, about 500 people commit suicide in Ireland every year.

"It would be impossible," he states, "to ensure the aged, the disabled, the poor, the unwanted, the rejected, the lonely, the impulsive, the financially compromised and emotionally vulnerable would not avail of this option in order to avoid a sense of being a burden on their family and society."

It is as if he had been asked to adjudicate on whether or not people should be invited, as a matter of course, to decide when to end their own lives. The stark reality is that those listed by the Judge – the impulsive, the financially compromised, the emotionally vulnerable – already have the option of committing suicide and a proportion of them use it. Some fail. Others are not recorded as such. But denying an individual like Marie Fleming the right to assisted suicide is a different matter entirely.

All of the evidence is that the availability of assisted suicide is not something that generally shortens someone's life (though in Tony Hicklinson's case it probably would have). On the contrary, if a person feels that he or she can wait, past the point when it is possible to commit suicide personally, in the knowledge that assistance can legally be given by a partner or a loved one, then that is likely to prolong the life of the individual. It also greatly improves the quality of life for however long the individual does live.

Either way, particular religious scruples should not come into the issue. On a philosophical level, it is fundamentally incontrovertible that people have a right, which can only be taken away from them by the use of a straight-jacket, to decide to end their own lives if that is what they want.

It is the mark of a civilised society that, to the very greatest extent possible, it will do everything to create a community of genuinely equal citizens, and put the best imaginable support systems in place in terms of health, education, welfare, sustenance, accommodation and so on, in order to minimise the incidence of the kind of alienation that can trigger suicidal feelings and actions. And where people are demonstrably vulnerable or marginalised, then in a decent country, efforts will be doubled and redoubled to try to remedy whatever circumstances might lead to individuals or groups feeling sufficiently lonely, isolated or worthless that these feelings become the cause of suicide.

But a society of equals must also recognise that what people call the gift of life is one that others – for reasons of their own that they may believe are perfectly clear and rational, or that they have come to only after a long period of weighing up what the future might hold for them – for better or worse, want to end.

This is a debate that is only starting.