

RETHINKING THE REPUBLIC

Fintan O'Toole and the Irish Crisis

IT SEEMS CLEAR that the Eurozone crisis has been stabilized, for the time being, on terms dictated by Brussels, Frankfurt and Berlin. The price that has been paid to preserve the single currency and sustain a dysfunctional banking system hardly needs recounting here: from Athens to Dublin, mass unemployment remains a crippling burden. Yet, to paraphrase Tolstoy, all bail-out countries are unhappy in different ways. Greece has witnessed the stormiest opposition, with the emergence of Syriza as a potential, if fragile, counter-hegemonic force. In Spain, years of street protest have begun to leave their mark on the political system, and there is a gathering storm over Catalan independence. Rolling strikes in Portugal have seen public-sector wage and pension cuts blocked by the constitutional court. In Ireland, however, where the economy has been bled dry to reimburse the bad loans of British, French and German banks, resistance has been muted. Cabinet ministers have boasted of their ability to impose 'remarkable' cuts in public spending without provoking social unrest.¹ For their part, European officials have repeatedly held Ireland up as an example of good citizenship to its unruly counterparts on the Eurozone periphery, much to the delight of local media outlets.

But if mass protests have been comparatively few in Ireland, it is not for lack of spirited polemical broadsides against its ruling elites by native writers. Pre-eminent here, in terms of impact and visibility, has been *Irish Times* columnist Fintan O'Toole, the country's leading public intellectual. Published in the immediate wake of the crash, O'Toole's *Ship of Fools* (2009) was a coruscating attack on the crony culture and bubble economy fostered by Ireland's political leaders, soon followed by *Enough*

Is Enough (2010), another onslaught on the myths of the Republic, which proposed a comprehensive reform programme with fifty action points. Is there any writer in another EU—or OECD—country who has produced such a comprehensive indictment of the ruling establishment's record, in such damning detail and in such sparkling prose? O'Toole's latest works form part of a cycle dating back to the 1980s that testifies to his formidable range as a social commentator. In seeking to explain the 'Irish exception', it may thus be helpful to explore O'Toole's writing in more depth: what distinguishes the critical character of his work, what causal explanation does it offer of his country's predicament, and what light can it shed on Ireland's post-crisis trajectory?

Life and times

Born in 1958, O'Toole spent his early years in Crumlin, a working-class housing project on the fringe of Dublin's inner city, one of several constructed by Fianna Fáil in the 1930s as part of its slum clearance programme. Built on the cheap, the new district was largely devoid of social infrastructure, with the revealing exception, as he later recalled, of 'a magnificent granite police barracks overlooking the estate, easily Crumlin's finest building until the permanent church was erected'.² O'Toole's father was a bus conductor with a passion for literature whose hero was George Bernard Shaw; his schooling came from the Christian Brothers, a clerical fraternity whose traditional diet of mawkish nationalism and social conformity was sharply at odds with the temper of the times:

While the students of Paris were on the barricades, and my father and the other busmen of Dublin were on strike, I was reading in *Our Boys* about Maurice, who got a nice girl, joined the Saint Vincent de Paul Society, and became a good boy: 'He was getting on better with his boss. Before, he had always been pushing for more pay, or looking for easier work, or something. But now he didn't mind getting the toughest job—and the dirtiest—and he was always willing to change his shift to suit someone else.'³

O'Toole took his degree at University College Dublin, arriving in the mid-70s when the campus ferment of earlier years had already begun to

¹ Harry McGee, 'Public service reforms have been "remarkable" claims Howlin', *Irish Times*, 14 January 2014.

² Fintan O'Toole, *Black Hole, Green Card: The Disappearance of Ireland*, Dublin 1994, p. 119.

³ Fintan O'Toole, *The Ex-Isle of Erin: Images of a Global Ireland*, Dublin 1997, pp. 84–5.

subside. The political and social landscape that confronted O'Toole as he began his career in journalism was easily the most conservative of any country in Western Europe. Long-established reactionary power structures had crumbled in Spain, Portugal and Greece, with left-wing parties and militant unions spearheading resistance to dictatorship, and generational revolt transforming national cultures. In the Republic of Ireland, however, the twin pillars of conservative hegemony, secular and clerical, appeared to be unshakable. National politics still followed the pattern established in the early years of the state, with two right-wing parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, often harvesting more than 80 per cent of the vote between them, while a small, anaemic Labour Party struggled to break the 15 per cent barrier, occasionally serving as a coalition footrest for Fine Gael. This 'two-and-a-half' party system derived from a split in the movement for national independence over the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921: the pro-Treaty camp emerged victorious in a brief civil war, and ruled the Irish Free State for its first decade. Their political vehicle, *Cumann na nGaedheal*, later rebranded as Fine Gael, retained the mark of its origins as a party of clerics, businessmen and strong farmers.

Fianna Fáil, on the other hand, had become the principal home for anti-Treaty holdouts by the end of the 1920s, and cultivated a much more populist image, winning support from farm labourers and the urban working class. Yet on taking power for the first time in 1932, the party would follow the main lines of economic policy laid down by its opponents, tinkering with the ultra-conservative Free State rather than transforming it. All but ten of the years between 1932 and 1981 saw Fianna Fáil in sole possession of government office. There was little room for explicit class politics in this configuration. A modest economic boom in the 1960s boosted industrial militancy—for a time, the Republic had the highest strike rate in the developed world—and briefly emboldened the Labour Party to advance its own claims, promising to break the conservative duopoly. By the time global recession had plunged the Irish economy into steep decline from 1979 onwards, such impertinence was a fading memory: Fine Gael–Labour coalitions would alternate with Fianna Fáil during the 1980s, both presiding over deep cuts in public spending, high unemployment and mass emigration.⁴

⁴The emergence of new political forces towards the end of that decade—Progressive Democrats on the right, Workers' Party on the left—suggested that the two-and-a-half party system might finally have reached the end of its unnatural lifespan.

A second distinguishing feature of the Irish scene was the powerful hold of a ferociously authoritarian church over the Republic's social and cultural mores. Gramsci once claimed that 'nobody attaches himself to Catholicism as a norm of life, even when calling himself a Catholic. An integral Catholic, one, that is, who applied the Catholic norms in every act of his life, would seem a monster.'⁵ It was the peculiar, monstrous achievement of Irish Catholicism that it should have attempted to do so and succeeded for a time, at tremendous psychological cost to vast swathes of the country's population. Over the course of the nineteenth century, a rigidly puritanical code was grafted onto a peasant society that had traditionally been far more relaxed in its approach to religious observance. This became one of the defining attributes of the new Irish state in the decades after independence. By the 1970s, the Church's grip was being contested by brave liberal and feminist vanguards, who challenged the prohibition of divorce, abortion and contraception. In the following decade—energized by the papal visit of 1979, which attracted a third of the population to gigantic outdoor spectacles—defenders of Catholic power launched a counter-attack against social liberalization. The 1980s were dominated by a bitterly contested war of attrition between the clerical-conservative bloc and its secular opponents. A constitutional ban on abortion—already proscribed by law—was imposed by referendum in 1983, while attempts to legalize divorce were beaten back in a plebiscite held three years later.⁶

To compound the mood of national pessimism, the long-running conflict in Northern Ireland showed no sign of burning itself out. Another legacy of the struggle for national independence, which had left six northern counties under British rule, the Republic's closest neighbour was characterized by systematic discrimination against its Catholic-nationalist minority. When British troops were deployed to contain civil disturbances at the end of the 1960s, hopes for reform were quickly dashed as London chose to prop up the sectarian Unionist government with escalating measures of repression. By the time it abandoned that policy in the spring of 1972, a low-intensity war was in progress, pitting the Irish Republican Army (IRA) against British state forces and unionist

⁵ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, London 1971, p. 351.

⁶ In contrast, Italy had lifted the ban on divorce in a 1974 referendum; Portugal liberalized its divorce law in 1977 and Spain followed suit in 1981.

paramilitaries: it would last for another two decades, claiming three and a half thousand lives.

The Northern Irish 'years of lead', incomparably more destructive than those in Italy or West Germany, largely bypassed the southern state and its citizens, but left a profound mark on the Republic's culture nonetheless. Members of the southern political class were chiefly determined to prevent the violence from spilling over into their domain, and to maintain good relations with London as far as possible: any residual commitment to Irish unity was overshadowed by these priorities. Many intellectuals went further in their hostile reaction to the IRA campaign. Nationalist mythology would have found itself under scrutiny from a new generation of historians under any circumstances, and deservedly so; but the form assumed by that questioning of received wisdom was inseparable from the northern conflict. 'Revisionism', as it came to be known, was intensely suspicious of revolutionary nationalism, its practitioners often extending their dislike of the modern IRA to the entire republican pantheon from the eighteenth century onwards. A sanitized view of Britain's role in Irish affairs that frequently veered towards outright apologetics was the flip side of this approach. Roy Foster's *Modern Ireland*, published in 1988, provided a brilliant synthesis of revisionist historiography while condensing many of its flaws.⁷

Within this constellation, O'Toole's affinities lay with the forces of social liberalization and modernization, and with the revisionist backlash against Irish nationalism. His abiding passions were literature and the theatre: he read English and philosophy at UCD, and began his career as a drama critic for the listings magazine *In Dublin*, going on to perform

⁷As one (highly sympathetic) commentator noted: 'Lord Mountjoy, who "successfully commanded the English forces that drove the rebels from the Pale 1601-1603", is described as "a humane man". On the other hand, the United Irishman Napper Tandy who, in a biographical note, is said to be "eulogized in national folklore", is described by Foster as "the ludicrous Napper Tandy". I do not know how it is possible to apply such adjectives from the 20th-century perspective to any figure from the 16th century, especially a figure sent by England to Ireland with an army, nor to any figure in the 18th century, even one eulogized in national folklore . . . underneath the brilliant insights and real originality in Foster's *Modern Ireland* there is an ideology perhaps not as crude as that of any nationalist historian writing school texts in the Twenties, but just as clear.' Colm Tóibín, 'New Ways of Killing Your Father', *London Review of Books*, 18 November 1993.

the same role for the *Sunday Tribune*. O'Toole expanded his range with political and cultural reportage for *Magill*, a monthly current affairs magazine, and would serve as its editor for a year in 1986–87 (*Magill* provided the launchpad for several journalistic careers: the novelist Colm Tóibín was one of O'Toole's predecessors in the editorial chair). At the same time O'Toole was working on his first book, a study of the playwright Tom Murphy, whose early work had provoked clerical fury and denunciation.⁸ In 1988, the year he turned thirty, O'Toole was hired by the *Irish Times* as a columnist and feature writer, which gave him a platform at the heart of Ireland's media establishment; he has stayed with the paper ever since.

The *Times* has followed a curious path since it was established as the mouthpiece of Irish Unionism in the late nineteenth century. Dublin-based, the paper found itself stranded in the new state after independence and had to adapt to its new surroundings. For much of the twentieth century it was overshadowed by two rival broadsheets, the *Independent* and the *Press*: each sold 200,000 copies a day in the 1950s, while the *Times* lagged far behind on 35,000.⁹ At that point it was still the paper of choice for a residual Protestant middle class, concentrated in business and the professions: for that reason, although the *Times* was always a conservative newspaper, it could never be *the* conservative newspaper, and stood at some remove from Dublin's political elite. Like other Protestant bastions—Trinity College, the Anglican and Presbyterian churches—the *Times* adopted a position of social liberalism by default, serving to distance the paper's editorial line from an establishment that remained profoundly Catholic in its ethos.

During the long stewardship of Douglas Gageby—editor from 1963 to 1986, apart from a brief gap in the mid-70s—the *Times* shed its Commonwealth allegiances and began to expand its circulation, gradually moving within sight of the *Independent* and the *Press*. Its traditional liberalism proved an asset as Gageby recruited a new generation of writers in tune with the emerging women's movement, and there was even room for a small leftist cohort on the editorial staff, although Gageby himself was close to Fianna Fáil and its leader Charles Haughey; the fact that cultural issues occupied centre stage throughout the 1980s made

⁸ Fintan O'Toole, *Tom Murphy: The Politics of Magic*, Dublin 1987.

⁹ John Horgan, *Irish Media: A Critical History Since 1922*, London 2001, pp. 62–3.

the paper's dominant perspective seem more radical than it actually was.¹⁰ By the time O'Toole joined the *Times*, it had completed its transformation into a 'paper of record', cast self-consciously in the mould of *El País* or *Le Monde* (and with a comparable sense of its own importance). Gageby's successor Conor Brady continued to boost the paper's circulation figures, benefiting from the demise of the *Press* in the mid-90s: at time of writing, its per capita sales exceed those of the *Guardian*, *Times*, *Independent* and *Financial Times* put together. Under Brady, the paper's editorial sympathies lay with those who supported modernization and the liberal agenda while remaining within respectable boundaries, from the Progressive Democrats to Labour's centrist leader Dick Spring, a Kinnock clone who acted ruthlessly to smash the party's left wing.¹¹

Early themes

O'Toole's speedy ascent owed much to his gifts as a writer, which stand out even in a country where literary talent is not in short supply. His prose is both fluent and controlled, with a sharp eye for detail and a fine sense of narrative cadences. But his political viewpoint was also a neat fit for the *Times* consensus, representing the liberal strand of conventional opinion. Three main issues attracted O'Toole's attention during the initial stages of his journalistic career: Catholicism, corruption and conflict. The decline of clerical power was the most prominent of these subjects. His first collection of articles, *A Mass for Jesse James*, took the temperature of Irish Catholicism in the 1980s, when the conservative backlash appeared triumphant. O'Toole suggested that in retrospect, the decade would be seen as 'a time when the gap between private action and public expression became total. Traditional values needed to be publicly reinforced precisely because they had ceased to have private meaning.'¹² It would not take long for the truth of this observation to become manifest. The strongest blow against religious authority came from the abuse scandals that began with the arrest of Father Brendan Smyth, a serial

¹⁰ Mark O'Brien, *The Irish Times: A History*, Dublin 2008, pp. 175–6.

¹¹ Brady would later recall his admiration for Spring's purge of the Militant Tendency, whose supporters had 'made life intolerable for Labour ministers, persistently seeking to subvert any policies that they saw as compromises with the centrist parties . . . Spring took them on with his own cabal of tough men.' Conor Brady, *Up With The Times*, Dublin 2005, p. 210.

¹² Fintan O'Toole, *A Mass for Jesse James: A Journey Through 1980s Ireland*, Dublin 1990, p. 9.

predator who had been shuffled complacently from parish to parish by his superiors. As O'Toole noted, the controversy aroused by the Smyth case was as much a symptom of upheaval as it was a catalyst:

Rather than changing what we know about reality, it confirms it. It puts a face to the dark, faceless knowledge that has clung to Irish childhood for generations. It names a nameless truth. At the level of raw experience, hundreds of thousands of people in Ireland have known for most of their lives that there is a problem of paedophilia within the Church.¹³

From schools where 'the risk of being molested was taken for granted', to residential institutions characterized by systematic abuse of children in care, the nameless truths of Irish Catholicism would soon be exposed to harsh public scrutiny.¹⁴ The insolence with which the Church hierarchy continued to stigmatize those who rejected Catholic moral teaching, after its own record of complicity with abuse had been documented so abundantly, compounded the malaise.

The signature note of O'Toole's writings on the Church during this period was often more soothing than triumphalist, with an eye clearly directed towards that large body of Irish Catholics who had experienced the disgrace of the clergy 'not as a liberation but as a trauma', having seen their faith in 'the one thing that seemed stable and trustworthy throughout the breathless decades of change' so comprehensively betrayed.¹⁵ O'Toole was keen to offer reassurance to this unsettled layer as they gradually embraced a more tolerant and pluralist outlook, arguing that everyday practice had long been at odds with religious doctrine: 'One of the strange things about Ireland is that, perhaps uniquely among societies, we have insisted on proclaiming a public morality that is in many ways worse than our private values. Our peculiar form of hypocrisy has been not a whitened but a blackened sepulchre.'¹⁶ By 1997, he could observe that 'Catholics have become markedly Protestant in their attitude towards Church teaching . . . the most important tenet of Protestantism—the right of individual conscience—is now accepted by the great majority of Irish Catholics.'¹⁷ Mass attendance and clerical ordinations have plummeted, and the traditionalist bloc has been defeated in every set-piece battle since the early 90s: divorce, contraception and

¹³ *Ex-Isle of Erin*, p. 198. ¹⁴ *Ex-Isle of Erin*, pp. 198–200. ¹⁵ *Ex-Isle of Erin*, p. 221.

¹⁶ *Ex-Isle of Erin*, p. 219. ¹⁷ *Ex-Isle of Erin*, pp. 16–17.

homosexuality have all been legalized, although the ban on abortion has yet to be repealed and the bishops retain their stranglehold on public education, their right to discriminate against teachers and students on religious grounds formally enshrined in law.

A second major theme of O'Toole's writing was the crisis afflicting secular power-holders in the Republic. The stench of political corruption emanating from the Fianna Fáil hierarchy was at its most pungent during the controversy incited by financial malpractice in the meat industry. O'Toole was assigned by the *Irish Times* to cover a long-running tribunal that scrutinized the affairs of Larry Goodman, Europe's leading beef exporter and one of Ireland's most powerful men, who had exploited his contacts with Fianna Fáil to secure access to vast government hand-outs. O'Toole later published a full-length book based on his work at the inquiry, *Meanwhile Back at the Ranch*, the greater part of which consisted of a meticulous, step-by-step reconstruction of the tribunal report, which had compounded the inherent obscurity of the subject matter with a tendency to pull its punches whenever possible. The book also placed Goodman's empire in the context of an economy that had long been dependent on cattle exports, and neatly captured the preposterous self-image of the man himself, whose business model was almost entirely based on the manipulation of state subsidies, yet who cultivated the persona of a dynamic, thrusting, free-market entrepreneur held back by a shadowy 'Establishment', in whose ranks he was definitely not to be counted. O'Toole quoted Goodman's ingenuous reply to a tribunal lawyer who had suggested that Goodman Meats was 'dominant' in the European beef industry: 'I don't like the word "dominant". I wouldn't agree with that . . . we don't like the word "power". That is a sort of Leninist idea.'¹⁸ The cattle tycoon was closer to the mark than he realized, for Lenin's view of the capitalist state would prove a better guide to Irish reality in the years to come than the verities of political science textbooks.

Taking Goodman's 'anti-establishment' pretensions as his starting-point, O'Toole offered an illuminating take on the country's social hierarchies, identifying a cultural dislocation at the heart of its bourgeoisie: 'Because there is, in Ireland, a self-conscious elite created by a certain number of fee-paying schools, to be outside of that elite,

¹⁸ Fintan O'Toole, *Meanwhile Back at the Ranch: The Politics of Irish Beef*, London 1995, p. 34.

however much power and wealth and control of other people's lives you may have, is to be allowed the luxury of feeling yourself to be outside of the establishment.'¹⁹ This elevated caste had its origins in the decades before independence, when a Jesuit-trained professional elite had clustered around the Irish Parliamentary Party, ready to assume a position of real authority as soon as Ireland was granted Home Rule, before finding itself upstaged by 'a crowd of Christian Brothers boys with Webley revolvers' after the 1916 Rising: 'Thus was born that fascinating phenomenon—a well-established, highly privileged upper-middle class that, without being in any way economically discommoded, was politically usurped.'²⁰ The dislocation that ensued had lasted to the present day: while in the UK, the public-school transmission belt dispatches its alumni into every section of Britain's ruling class, from City boardrooms to the front bench of the Conservative Party, the Irish equivalents tend to be less ecumenical in their reach. Although the business elite still draws many of its luminaries from Leinster's private-school complex—among them the newspaper mogul Tony O'Reilly, Ryanair's chief executive Michael O'Leary and the poster boy of Irish capitalism, Peter Sutherland, who has served as chairman of BP and Goldman Sachs—the political class attracts fewer recruits from such circles. On the other hand, the 'negative logic' described by O'Toole—'the establishment talks through its noses. I talk through the side of my mouth, therefore I am not a member of the establishment'—has allowed many Irish businessmen (property developers in particular) to adopt the brash, outsider persona developed by Larry Goodman: 'We end up with two sets of people who have immense power but yet manage, through their complementary myths of persecution and marginalization, to avoid responsibility for the state of the place.'²¹

The abortive push for 'clean hands' in the early 90s was very much part of the *Irish Times* house orthodoxy.²² So, too, was support for the nascent peace process in Northern Ireland: the *Times* was strongly in favour of engagement with Sinn Féin, the IRA's political wing, while

¹⁹ *Black Hole, Green Card*, pp. 208–9.

²⁰ *Black Hole, Green Card*, p. 213. James Joyce was the most famous product of this embryonic governing class, albeit an entirely atypical one.

²¹ *Black Hole, Green Card*, pp. 209, 215–6.

²² This high-minded crusade, spearheaded by Dick Spring and the Labour Party, ran into the sand after the 1992 election, when Spring took Labour into government with Fianna Fáil—much to Conor Brady's annoyance: Brady, *Up With The Times*, p. 231.

the *Independent* took a much more hostile view. These contacts led in due course to a permanent IRA ceasefire, in place from 1997, which cleared the way for a power-sharing agreement to be negotiated between unionist and nationalist parties the following year. O'Toole was enlisted by the *New York Review of Books* to write a series of articles explaining the northern peace talks to its readership.²³ His analysis was very much in tune with the revisionist school of thought, absolving Britain of any historic responsibility by concentrating on internal factors: 'Though Irish nationalists tend to regard the partition of the island by the Westminster parliament in 1920 as a heinous British crime, it was in reality an inevitable product of Irish political, economic and religious divisions.'²⁴ O'Toole's account of the modern period likewise downplayed British culpability: 'The IRA's campaign has not been a war of national liberation, waged on behalf of the majority against an oppressive minority or a foreign power. Its enemies have not been illegitimate regimes but two liberal democracies—the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland—and the majority Protestant population in Northern Ireland itself.' He qualified this picture of the UK as a benign, liberal-democratic state confronting the menace of terrorism by referring to internment of suspects without trial, the Bloody Sunday massacre of 1972, and Margaret Thatcher's 'hard-line attitude' to republican hunger strikers, but described these actions as 'blunders', arising from a 'lack of understanding' on the part of British politicians (no such leeway was granted to Irish republicans for their own 'mistakes').²⁵

In assessing Britain's role in Northern Ireland, O'Toole let conservative ideology override his critical faculties and put forward arguments with a strongly apologetic flavour. He glossed over the flagrant injustice of the partition settlement, which granted the Unionist Party a block of territory far in excess of its popular mandate. There was no ideal solution to the problem of Ireland's conflicting identities, and the arrangements imposed by London in the 1920s certainly made no attempt to provide one, based as they were on the most sordid calculations of imperial strategy. O'Toole's account of the modern conflict also effectively whitewashed the record of the state forces, whose agents collaborated extensively with

²³ Fintan O'Toole, 'The End of the Troubles?', *NYRB*, 19 February 1998; 'Are the Troubles Over?', *NYRB*, 5 October 2000; 'Guns in the Family', *NYRB*, 11 April 2002; 'The Taming of a Terrorist', *NYRB*, 27 February 2003.

²⁴ 'The End of the Troubles?'

²⁵ 'The End of the Troubles?'

unionist paramilitaries responsible for hundreds of sectarian killings (in addition to the 186 civilians killed directly by British forces during the ‘Troubles’).²⁶ To speak of ‘blunders’ in the face of these systematic abuses is an evasion of reality. There is still a strong case to be made against the IRA campaign, which unquestionably produced its own horrors, but not on the grounds advanced by O’Toole.

Nordic visions

By the time the Belfast Agreement was signed, the gloomy economic vista of the 1980s had been replaced by a triumphalist mood in the Republic, as growth accelerated and unemployment fell. In the preface to *The Ex-Isle of Erin*, published in 1997, O’Toole informed his readers that Ireland’s ‘Celtic Tiger’ economy was ‘not so much on the prowl as on the razzle-dazzle’, its GDP per capita surpassing that of the UK for the first time in 1996.²⁷ Combined with the psychological impact of cultural liberalization and the Northern Irish peace process, the decade-long boom generated a mood of national self-confidence that would endure in one shape or form until the crash of 2008. O’Toole was now firmly established as one of the stars of Irish journalism: his political commentary for the *Irish Times* was accompanied by substantial work as a drama critic, including a widely praised biography of Sheridan and a ‘radical guide to Shakespeare’ aimed at secondary-school students.²⁸ In the new context created by the boom, he would use his media platform to set out the positive vision that had underpinned earlier critiques of Fianna Fáil, the Catholic Church and the IRA: a moderate, left-of-centre outlook, rooted in the belief that Ireland should emulate the Nordic model of social democracy.

The most comprehensive statement of this outlook could be found in *After the Ball*, which was published by the left-liberal think-tank TASC in

²⁶ For a good summary of the evidence, focusing on the 1970s, see Anne Cadwallader, *Lethal Allies: British Collusion in Ireland*, Cork 2013; for more recent examples of state complicity, see in particular the 2007 report delivered by the then-Police Ombudsman Nuala O’Loan on the murder of Raymond McCord (available at the University of Ulster’s CAIN website).

²⁷ *Ex-Isle of Erin*, p. 19.

²⁸ Fintan O’Toole, *A Traitor’s Kiss: The Life of Richard Brinsley Sheridan*, London 1997; *Shakespeare is Hard, but so is Life*, London 2002.

2003. TASC had been established two years earlier with funding from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Irish-American billionaire philanthropist Chuck Feeney; O'Toole would serve as chair of its advisory board, along with a cross section of Irish soft-left luminaries. *After the Ball* tacitly assumed that the problem of how to generate wealth had been solved: now it was a question of what Ireland chose to do with the resources available. O'Toole noted that Irish investment in social protection was uniquely stingy among its European partners: 'The EU average is 27.3 per cent, and no country spends less than 20 per cent. Except, that is, Ireland, which spends a spectacularly low 14.1 per cent.'²⁹ After several years of unprecedented growth, levels of poverty and inequality remained second only to the United States among western nations. Private patients were guaranteed speedy access to hospital treatment, while their less fortunate brethren languished on waiting lists, with alarming consequences for public health:

The general death rate from heart attacks in Ireland is 176 per 100,000 of population, compared to 108 in the EU as a whole. In those under 65, the death rate from heart attacks is nearly double the EU rate: 46 per 100,000, compared to 25 in the EU as a whole. Treatment for cancer is often astonishingly poor for a wealthy, developed society. Less than one-third of the 12,000 patients who require radiotherapy in the Republic each year receive it. Public patients face a three-month delay for radiation treatment that they have been told is both necessary and urgent.³⁰

O'Toole rejected the claim that any shift towards Scandinavian levels of taxation and social expenditure would kill off the Irish boom. Ireland's economic success had never been simply a matter of keeping taxes low and letting the free market work its magic: it should in fact be seen as 'a complex product of left-of-centre values which has not ended the spectacle of social squalor even while removing the excuse for it'. Contributory factors deriving from such values included large-scale investment in public education, EC/EU structural funding, greater female participation in the workforce, and national wage agreements to guarantee industrial peace.³¹ There was sufficient room for manoeuvre to make a social-democratic reform programme viable without compromising economic growth.

²⁹ Fintan O'Toole, *After the Ball*, Dublin 2003, p. 62. The percentage is of GDP.

³⁰ *After the Ball*, p. 80.

³¹ *After the Ball*, pp. 168–9, 17–26.

After the Ball's final chapter qualified the picture of a successful economy whose fruits now simply had to be put to good use. O'Toole pointed to a divergence between foreign and Irish-owned companies, the former concentrated in areas like software, chemicals and electronic engineering, the latter 'still dangerously dependent on the export of bulk commodity food (mostly beef and milk in a raw, unbranded, low value-added form) and live animals, which account for almost half of total indigenous exports but under 6 per cent of the total'.³² But overall, readers were given little sense of the problems that were being stored up as the boom progressed: in particular, the increasing dependence on construction and finance as engines of growth, and the spectacular rise in transfer pricing by US multinationals from the late 90s on, which completely distorted the figures for Irish GDP.³³

There was also no discussion of the political forces that might be expected to put O'Toole's programme into effect. Readers of his *Irish Times* columns, however, would have known that O'Toole looked to the Irish Labour Party as the chief domestic vehicle for his ideas. This was a classic example of hope triumphing over experience: having always stood on the right wing of European social democracy, Ireland's centre-left party now clearly had no intention of disturbing the political peace. Dick Spring had led Labour to its highest-ever share of the vote in 1992, only to bring it back down to its previous level in the following election, after forming coalitions with both of the main conservative parties. Amid the flux of the 1990s, the venerable two-and-a-half party system seemed to be the only rock of continuity, with the challenge of the Workers' Party on Labour's left flank proving ephemeral, and the hard-right Progressive Democrats happy to serve as (very) junior partners to Fianna Fáil. Fianna Fáil itself gained a new lease of life after the corruption scandals of the early 90s, resuming its place at the head of government in 1997, where it would remain for the next decade and a half.

O'Toole's advice to the Labour leadership fluctuated sharply in the wake of national elections, depending on the immediate possibilities

³² *After the Ball*, pp. 162–3.

³³ Between 1990 and 2010, employment at US-owned companies rose by 127 per cent, while declared income for the same firms rose by 2,457 per cent: Jesse Drucker, 'Man Making Ireland Tax Avoidance Hub Proves Local Hero', *Bloomberg*, 27 October 2013.

that seemed to lie before them. When Fine Gael lost almost half of its TDs in 2002, after one of the worst performances in the party's history, a left-of-centre bloc comprising Labour, the Greens, Sinn Féin and left-independents now had more seats in parliament than Fianna Fáil's principal rival. O'Toole urged Labour to break with its traditional partner so as to lend greater cohesion to this emergent bloc: 'No Labour leader can credibly convince his party that the way forward lies in working with Fine Gael rather than seeking to replace it as the second party.'³⁴ But the chances of Labour displaying such audacity were negligible: its left-wing elements had been clobbered decisively by Spring and his allies in the early 90s, their spokesmen either co-opted or expelled. With the unerring instinct familiar to students of the party's history, the Labour hierarchy grasped hold of this opportunity to miss an opportunity with both hands, negotiating a pact with Fine Gael that helped the latter to recover over the next five years while Labour itself stagnated and its would-be partners were left out in the cold.

As he digested the results of the 2007 election, O'Toole looked ready to throw in the social-democratic towel: having spent much of the preceding decade railing against Fianna Fáil and its leader Bertie Ahern, he was now prepared to endorse a coalition between Fianna Fáil and Labour with Ahern as prime minister. Although his post-election analysis criticized Fine Gael, Labour and even Sinn Féin—'a party of protest that was protesting too little'—for their timidity in posing alternatives, he went on to argue that Labour had 'no realistic route to government, either now or in the foreseeable future, except in partnership with Fianna Fáil'; the moment for supplanting Fine Gael as the main opposition party had passed, and the best that could be made of a bad business was to negotiate a deal with Ahern after his third successive electoral triumph (letting his imagination run riot, O'Toole suggested that Labour could implement radical health-care reform from within the cabinet, ensuring that 'its swallowed pride would not taste so bitter').³⁵ No such alliance materialized in any case, as Ahern struck a bargain with the Green Party to form a government that would lead the Republic into the worst economic crash of its history.

³⁴ Fintan O'Toole, 'Ahern, master of a quiet revolution that produced a slick FF machine', *Irish Times*, 20 May 2002.

³⁵ Fintan O'Toole, 'Rejection of "same, only different"'; 'Bertie deal is Labour's best option', *Irish Times*, 28, 29 May 2007.

Manna from Brussels

If Labour showed no sign of repaying O'Toole's faith on the domestic front, there was another putative agent of reform that he had in mind: the European Union. O'Toole's published output bore witness to a growing Europhilia from the mid-90s on. In 1997 he had referred to the 'paradox' of Ireland's position in the modern world: 'Its sovereignty is a power that can be exercised mostly by giving it up. Its separation 75 years ago from one political and economic union, the United Kingdom, is justified by its membership of a bigger political and economic union, the EU.'³⁶ So far as O'Toole was concerned, this was a transformation of quality as much as one of quantity. Far from constituting another form of alien rule, European integration had strengthened democracy and the power of states to act constructively on behalf of their citizens. *After the Ball* went further still, crediting the Union with averting civil conflict in the 1980s:

The EU gave conservative Ireland a stake in its own destruction. Would it have died anyway? Yes. Would it have died without a potentially disastrous struggle? Probably not. For when we look back over the last 30 years, the astonishing thing is not that there were sometimes bitter social tensions in the Republic but that they were contained with relative ease. With massive levels of unemployment and social exclusion, with a fierce struggle between secular and religious forces and with a violent conflict on its doorstep, Irish society should not have been able to accommodate huge economic and cultural changes. Without the EU's success in luring conservative Ireland into the modern project, it almost certainly could not have done so.³⁷

O'Toole's warmest assessment of the European Union was set out in another book for TASC, 2005's *Post Washington*, which he co-authored with Tony Kinsella. Subtitled *Why America Can't Rule the World*, it was one of a batch of works by centre-left intellectuals contrasting US-style capitalism with an allegedly superior European variety (Will Hutton's *The World We're In* and Tony Judt's *Postwar* being notable examples of the genre). The main polemical thrust of *Post Washington* was directed against those commentators who believed that Ireland should be 'closer to Boston than Berlin'—a rhetorical trope first deployed in 2000 by the Progressive Democrats leader and deputy prime minister

³⁶ *Ex-Isle of Erin*, p. 20.

³⁷ *After the Ball*, p. 21.

Mary Harney, which proved sufficiently inane to become a staple of Irish political discourse. The bleak picture of American society that emerged in *Post Washington* was plainly intended as a rebuke to this tendency, with European virtues standing out more clearly against the transatlantic backdrop.

Kinsella and O'Toole listed the factors that set the US apart from European societies, giving particular emphasis to the more exotic features of the American cultural landscape, before drawing up a negative balance sheet of recent economic trends.³⁸ With the Bush–Cheney team at the peak of its international notoriety, much of the book was devoted to a critique of the foreign-policy doctrines underpinning the 'war on terror' and their roots in the military–industrial complex. A final chapter drew out the implied contrast between the Unions in plain sight, posing Europe as a superior alternative, whether in terms of economic models—'the ultra free-market US system does not work; derivatives of the European social market economy do'—or of international relations: 'The EU has succeeded because it has expanded peacefully and voluntarily. It has spread its ethic—legality, democracy and the global market—much more effectively than the neo-conservatives in the US have spread theirs.'³⁹

Written at a time when Donald Rumsfeld's 'Old Europe' barb was still fresh in the memory, the book greatly exaggerated the differences between Washington and Brussels in matters of war and peace. A quotation from the EU's foreign policy chief Javier Solana was rather more double-edged—and thus more honest—than the authors appeared to believe: 'There is no inherent opposition between power, supposedly the "US method", and law, the "European method". Law and power are two sides of the same coin. Power is needed to establish law, and law is the legitimate face of power.'⁴⁰ Solana himself would hardly have been able to serve as NATO secretary general if he had held any principled objection to militarism, or to US hegemony in world affairs. Tensions over Iraq proved to be short-lived: quite apart from the presence of major European states among the 'Coalition of the Willing' whose soldiers

³⁸ Tony Kinsella and Fintan O'Toole, *Post Washington: Why America Can't Rule the World*, Dublin 2005, pp. 63–81.

³⁹ *Post Washington*, pp. 312, 317.

⁴⁰ *Post Washington*, p. 217.

marched into Baghdad, from Britain and Denmark to Italy and Poland, the main opponents of the war in Paris and Berlin swiftly gave their assent to the occupation that followed.

The ‘social market economy’ held up by Kinsella and O’Toole as an example to the world had an equally tenuous grounding in reality. To begin with, a number of European countries—notably Ireland and Britain—stood closer to the American ‘social model’ than to its idealized European counterpart. Elsewhere in the EU 15, citizens did enjoy more rights in the workplace and better access to public services outside it, but these social gains owed nothing to the process of European integration, having been won at the level of the nation-state. Neither of O’Toole’s TASC publications made any reference to the neo-liberal framework that had been put in place for the Eurozone, or to the obstacles that any social-democratic agenda would now face in Brussels and Frankfurt: *After the Ball* dwelt admiringly upon the long-defunct vision of a ‘social Europe’ advanced by Jacques Delors in the 1980s, but said nothing about developments since the ink had dried on the Maastricht Treaty.⁴¹

These questions had been aired in Irish political debate during the referendums on the Nice and Lisbon treaties, both of which were voted down by the electorate (in 2001 and 2008 respectively), only to be pushed through at the second time of asking.⁴² The Irish No campaigns included right- as well as left-wing forces, posing conflicting arguments on a range of subjects and along separate organizational tracks. The broad public sentiment behind the No votes probably owed more to dislike of the political establishment and a desire to give its leaders a sound kicking than to any explicitly ideological critique of the EU. While we should thus be careful in presenting the referendums as evidence of a leftwards shift in popular opinion, the fact remains that the Euro-critical left has been a real political force over the past decade and a half—unlike the right-wing Euro-sceptics whose attempts to capitalize on Nice and Lisbon at the ballot box were crowned in abject failure.

⁴¹ *After the Ball*, pp. 18–9. O’Toole had referred explicitly to the constraints imposed by Maastricht in his reporting on the 1992 general election campaign, but appeared to have lost sight of those shackles in the meantime: ‘Avoiding the hard choices’; ‘Promises blowing in the wind’, *Irish Times*, 18, 24 November 1992.

⁴² Because of a court ruling in the 1980s, Irish governments are obliged to seek popular approval of new European treaties—much to the annoyance of EU officials, whose aversion to such consultations is well known.

Yet O'Toole responded to the emergence of this progressive constituency, which held much greater promise than the plodding efforts of the Labour Party, by brushing it aside. Calling for a Yes vote on all four occasions, he concentrated his fire on the most reactionary elements in the No camp, and accused left-wing No campaigners of mendacity in their arguments: 'The process they want us to fear is actually a progressive and civilizing one that can be used to support real political struggles by people against power.'⁴³ The course followed by Irish politics since the crash tells its own story: the fault-line between those who gave their support to European treaties and those who campaigned against them can be mapped almost exactly onto the present divide between those who preach submission to the Troika and those prepared to challenge its authority.

Class dismissed

Behind O'Toole's trust in wildly inappropriate agencies for reform, from the Labour Party to the European Union, lay a shaky grasp of the social constituencies that could be mobilized behind such a programme. *After the Ball* listed a series of marginal groups who were 'on the outside' of Celtic Tiger Ireland: women and children, gays and lesbians, immigrants and asylum seekers, Travellers and the disabled. The discrimination faced by these social categories was beyond dispute. But one group was notable by its absence: the working class. O'Toole might have argued that in Ireland as elsewhere, wage-earners were far from being a monochrome social layer whose experience of life was more or less identical—but the same could be said *a fortiori* of women or children, which did not stop him from including them on the list of those facing discrimination in Irish society. In *Post Washington*, Kinsella and O'Toole dismissed the whole concept as a relic of the past: 'In our post-industrial societies it is almost meaningless to talk of a working class in nineteenth-century terms . . . twenty-first-century society can be divided into three social sectors: a rich elite, an underclass and a large, if multi-layered, middle class.'⁴⁴

One would gather the impression from this passage that class analysis had not moved forward since the *Communist Manifesto*, or made any

⁴³ Fintan O'Toole, 'The real fight has always been to achieve social justice', *Irish Times*, 3 June 2008.

⁴⁴ *Post Washington*, p. 39.

attempt to grapple with mutations in the social terrain of advanced capitalism. Ralph Miliband, among others, argued for a definition of the working class as ‘all those people whose main, and usually exclusive, *source of income* is the sale of their labour power, or transfer payments from the state, or both; whose *level of income* places them in the lower and lowest income groups; and whose individual *power* at work and in society at large is low or virtually non-existent’. Miliband also referred to the presence of a sub-professional lower-middle class, whose members were more likely to ally themselves with the working class proper than the traditional petty-bourgeoisie had been, and were also capable of taking industrial action in their own right.⁴⁵ These definitions can be accepted or rejected, but they clearly represent a departure from the stereotypical image of a Victorian industrial proletariat alluded to by Kinsella and O’Toole, and offer a better foundation for political action than the idea of a vast middle class, whose layers are not specified, standing over an impoverished and excluded sub-proletariat.

It was easier for O’Toole to entertain such debilitating notions during the boom years, when the number of days lost to strike action fell to historic lows—thanks not least to the system of national wage agreements known as ‘social partnership’. O’Toole’s brief reference to this process in *After the Ball* gave it a positive spin: by embracing corporatism, Ireland’s union leaders had shown evidence both of intelligent pragmatism and concern for social justice.⁴⁶ When a group of train drivers who had joined a breakaway union stepped outside the partnership framework in 2000, O’Toole responded with a stinging attack on the strikers, accusing them of ‘aristocratic’ pretensions, and contrasting their ‘old-fashioned’ union leadership with the wise heads to be found elsewhere in the Irish labour movement: ‘subtle, sophisticated and, in the broadest sense, political’.⁴⁷ Fellow-pundit Gene Kerrigan’s retrospective take on the corporatist experiment is far more pointed:

⁴⁵ Ralph Miliband, *Divided Societies: Class Struggle in Contemporary Capitalism*, Oxford 1989, pp. 22–3, 47 (emphasis in original).

⁴⁶ *After the Ball*, p. 26.

⁴⁷ Fintan O’Toole, ‘Train drivers’ mystique no longer makes sense’, *Irish Times*, 15 August 2000. O’Toole’s otherwise deeply conventional polemic was spiced up with some eccentric ramblings about the place of trains in popular culture—‘somewhere in the dream life of men over 40, the locomotive driver forever rides the rails’—much to the amusement of the strike’s leader Brendan Ogle, *Off the Rails: The Story of ILDA*, Dublin 2003, pp. 222–3.

While 'social partnership' produced stability, and it gave the union leaders a certain status, and the leaders could point to social achievements, there was a price. Society was becoming more unequal. Union membership was falling. It was harder to organize the increased numbers of casual and part-time workers; increasing numbers of companies were actively anti-union. At rank-and-file level, with little to do but accept the agreements negotiated by the union leaders, the sinews of the movement had atrophied. A generation of union officials hadn't ever organized a strike or a campaign of any sort and wasn't very good at recruiting. Trade union membership in 1980 was 55 per cent of the workforce. By 1999, it was 38 per cent. By 2010, it would be 31 per cent.⁴⁸

Corporatism also had a baleful effect on working-class community organizations, which had posed a significant challenge to the state and its priorities in the 1980s before finding themselves absorbed and neutralized during the period that followed, with government funding used to direct such groups away from political campaigning and towards the provision of services. The real legacy of the 'partnership' years was to have opened the door to Thatcherism by stealth, in contrast to the British experience—avoiding the trauma of defeat, but also the memory of struggle. The relative weakness of social mobilization in Ireland since 2008 cannot be understood unless we take this background into account. Without a dynamic labour movement at the heart of a social bloc able to press its demands upon the Irish political system, there was no chance of O'Toole's blueprint for reform being translated into reality.

After the crash

Ireland's spectacular rise to the top of the European ladder was followed by an equally dramatic fall after the collapse of Lehman Brothers precipitated a global financial meltdown. The Irish economy suffered the largest decline in GNP of any industrialized nation during the first three years of the crisis, while unemployment soared from 4.6 per cent in 2007 to 14.2 per cent by June 2011.⁴⁹ The cost of bailing out the major banks rose

⁴⁸ Gene Kerrigan, *The Big Lie: Who Profits from Ireland's Austerity?*, London 2012, p. 29. Kerrigan, who writes for the *Sunday Independent*, Ireland's best-selling newspaper, stands closer to O'Toole in political terms than any other columnist in the Irish media. Their contrasting views of 'social partnership' may reflect a generational divide: Kerrigan is older than O'Toole, and began his career in journalism writing for the Trotskyist *Worker* during the heyday of Irish labour militancy in the 1970s.

⁴⁹ Stephen Kinsella, 'Is Ireland really the role model for austerity?', *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, vol. 36, no. 1, January 2012.

exponentially, eventually reaching €70 billion—a crushing liability for one of the Eurozone’s smallest economic units. By 2013, Eurostat would estimate that Ireland had absorbed 42 per cent of the *total* cost of the European banking crisis: a larger share than Germany’s, even in absolute terms, and vastly greater when the size of their respective economies was taken into account.⁵⁰ The prohibitive cost of the now-infamous bank guarantee drove Ireland into the arms of the Troika at the end of 2010, burying the triumphalism of the boom years once and for all.

O’Toole responded to this calamity by moving left, just as the *Irish Times* was shifting in the opposite direction. With the waning of clerical power from the 1990s, the paper had lost whatever dissenting profile it may once have possessed, and its residual left-wing contingent was gradually eroded by death or retirement, leaving O’Toole as an isolated voice on the comment pages, where boosterism and complacency held sway. O’Toole himself was passed over in the search for a new editor after Conor Brady stepped down in 2002: management opted instead for Geraldine Kennedy, a one-time Progressive Democrats TD. The slump that began in 2008 has seen the *Times* give full rein to its essentially conservative nature as the self-appointed champion of ‘Middle Ireland’ and principal cheerleader for the Troika. The paper’s most influential columnists have argued ceaselessly for a permanent regime change in the economic sphere, taking all important decisions out of the hands of elected politicians so as to guard against ‘populist’ temptations.

Against this backdrop, O’Toole’s post-crisis works stand out all the more sharply. *Ship of Fools* was published in 2009, followed by *Enough Is Enough* in 2010 and *Up the Republic!* in 2012—the last title being a collection of essays edited by O’Toole, with his own contribution making up one-quarter of the book’s length. *Ship of Fools* put forward the author’s explanation of the crisis, while its two successors answered the call for an alternative blueprint that might serve as a guide to constructive political action. In addition, O’Toole has continued to write his weekly column for the *Irish Times*, and has made regular appearances on radio and television challenging the government’s response to the crisis. His analysis has probably been the most influential alternative to the stultifying consensus shared by the three main parties and the great bulk of the Irish media.

⁵⁰ Ann Cahill, ‘42 per cent of Europe’s banking crisis paid by Ireland’, *Irish Examiner*, 16 January 2013.

Ship of Fools offered a blistering indictment of the politicians, bankers and property developers who had steered the Irish economy onto the rocks. The Fianna Fáil-led governments which held office from 1997 to 2011 had 'practiced the economics of utter idiocy, watching a controlled explosion of growth turn into a mad conflagration and aiming petrol-filled pressure hoses at the raging flames'.⁵¹ They had encouraged the chaotic property bubble by providing lucrative tax incentives to developers, shelling out €330m of public money to subsidize the construction of hotels for which there was no demand, and €2 billion on 'renewal' schemes that built homes where nobody wanted to live. By 2006, the construction sector accounted for 19 per cent of total employment and almost one-quarter of Irish GNP—twice the average ratio for Western Europe.⁵²

Such practices had a long pre-history. O'Toole looked back at the ruling order's tolerance of outright criminality in the financial sector during the 1970s and 80s—a time when the state lost billions to various tax evasion schemes that were organized by its own banks, and government inspectors would respond to evidence of wrongdoing with all the tact and discretion of 'a maiden aunt who has peered through a neighbour's window and inadvertently seen him indulging in a private and intimate pleasure'.⁵³ The *modus operandi* of Irish banking had not changed in the slightest during the intervening years, although its leaders had certainly become more ambitious: Anglo Irish, the piggy-bank for property developers that would leave stratospheric debts to be paid back with public money after the crash, saw its assets rise from €15.8 billion in 2001 to almost €100 billion seven years later—including €44 billion of soon-to-be-worthless property loans in Ireland alone.⁵⁴ The same culture of impunity was applied on a grander scale at the International Financial Services Centre. Launched with great fanfare by Charles Haughey's government in the late 1980s, the IFSC provided all the benefits of a tax haven

⁵¹ Fintan O'Toole, *Ship of Fools: How Stupidity and Corruption Sank the Celtic Tiger*, London 2009, pp. 19–20.

⁵² *Ship of Fools*, pp. 116–8. Construction's share in the Spanish economy was 15.7 per cent of GDP in 2007. The European figure is also expressed in terms of GDP: because of transfer pricing and profit repatriation by foreign companies, GNP is a more useful benchmark for the Irish economy (uniquely in Western Europe, Ireland's GNP is significantly lower than its GDP).

⁵³ *Ship of Fools*, p. 57.

⁵⁴ *Ship of Fools*, pp. 197–8.

without the stigma attached to micro-states like Bermuda or the Cayman Islands. By 2005, three-quarters of all foreign investment was destined for the centre, which became the locus of ‘a spectacular tri-continental triple crown of dodgy dealing—Europe’s biggest ever fraud, the largest bankruptcy in Australian history, and a \$500 million scam in the US’.⁵⁵

Peculiarities of the Irish

Beyond greed and incompetence, what deeper causes were identified by O’Toole? In the book’s opening chapter, he suggested that the crash had been ‘induced by a lethal cocktail of global ideology and Irish habits’.⁵⁶ The ideology alluded to was, needless to say, that of free-market, neo-liberal capitalism, which had picked out Ireland as one of its great success stories during the boom. But when the time came to draw together the strands of his narrative, O’Toole put all the explanatory weight on the other side of the question, referring to Irish cultural traits grounded in ‘nineteenth-century revenants’ as the decisive factor:

A primitive, pre-modern land hunger created the new feudalism in which an elite puffed up the price of land and inflated a fatal property boom. The political system, embodied most thoroughly in Fianna Fáil, remained rooted in the Tammany Hall politics of the nineteenth-century Irish-American Democratic Party machines . . . in business, and especially in banking, there remained an anarchic attitude to law and morality, rooted both in a colonial habit of playing games with authority and in a religious culture that saw sex, rather than money, as the currency of sin . . . the heroic powers of denial, the ability to know and not know at the same time, that had been formed by the peculiar circumstances of Irish history, remained remarkably intact.⁵⁷

In this reading, Ireland’s greatest problem had been its failure to become truly modern and shake off the dirt of the past. The effect of such arguments could only be to obscure the social dynamics of the Irish construction boom—and to encourage the sort of cultural fatalism that O’Toole has been quick to deplore in other contexts. Asset-price bubbles and financial crises have been recurrent features of the neo-liberal era. On the eve of the crash, wildly overheated property markets could be

⁵⁵ *Ship of Fools*, pp. 126, 140. The fraud: Parmalat. The bankruptcy: HIH Insurance. The scam: AIG.

⁵⁶ *Ship of Fools*, pp. 23–4.

⁵⁷ *Ship of Fools*, pp. 214–5.

found in four western countries—Ireland, Spain, Britain and the United States—with a wide range of cultural and political idiosyncrasies: big and small, Protestant and Catholic, monarchy and republic, colonized and colonizer. That fact alone would suggest the need for a broader perspective than one which emphasized the ‘peculiar circumstances of Irish history’.

This does not require us to overlook those factors that left Ireland especially vulnerable to such afflictions. But talk of a ‘primitive, pre-modern land hunger’ came uncomfortably close to the obfuscatory waffle about a supposed ‘Irish property-owning gene’ that has become a staple of conservative punditry. At one point, O’Toole asserted that ‘87 per cent of Irish households own their own homes, compared to an EU average of 61 per cent’, without supplying a reference for his statistics; Eurostat, however, gave a figure of 78 per cent for 2007, against a European average of 73.6 per cent, placing Ireland thirteenth out of twenty-nine countries listed.⁵⁸ Irish exceptionalism in this field is greatly overstated. If there is a stronger bias towards home ownership than can be found in some European countries, we need not seek its roots in a primordial attachment to the land, deriving from ancestral memories of dispossession; more immediate causes can be identified, notably the run-down of public housing by successive Irish governments.⁵⁹

A more selective version of the ‘property-owning gene’ could perhaps be said to afflict members of the Irish business elite. While bank lending rose by 466 per cent in the space of a decade after capital gains tax was slashed in 1998, just 2.5 per cent of that funding went towards the much-vaunted high-tech manufacturing sector; construction and real estate attracted 28 per cent, with commercial property absorbing the lion’s share.⁶⁰ But that surge towards property speculation was enabled by a flood of capital from US, UK and Eurozone banks, which removed any barriers to credit expansion that might have been imposed by the size of the Irish economy. The ‘anarchic attitude to law and morality’

⁵⁸ *Ship of Fools*, p. 102; *Europe in Figures: Eurostat Yearbook 2010*, Luxembourg 2010, p. 332. The 29 states listed were the EU 27 plus Iceland and Norway; the average for the EU 15 was 71 per cent.

⁵⁹ Conor McCabe, *Sins of the Father: The Decisions that Shaped the Irish Economy*, Dublin 2013, pp. 32–60.

⁶⁰ Seán Ó Riain, ‘The Crisis of Financialization in Ireland’, *Economic and Social Review*, vol. 43, no. 4, Winter 2012.

referred to by O'Toole also typified banking practice in Wall Street and the City of London, where it cannot have owed much to Catholic religious doctrine or the heritage of colonialism. The rotation of personnel between leading investment banks and the US Treasury Department was conducted with a cheery shamelessness that put Fianna Fáil's notorious fund-raising tents in the shade. This strand of US political culture had a much greater impact on Ireland's property bubble than the influence of Tammany Hall.

There was nothing uniquely Irish about a bourgeoisie that channelled much of its wealth into property and financial speculation, nor about a state that worked tirelessly to facilitate such dispositions. Ireland's main curse has not been incomplete modernization, but the whole-hearted embrace of 'modernity' in its predominant form: neo-liberal, financialized capitalism. No change of heart has been discernible since the crash. The Department of the Environment decided to lease excess housing supply from private developers instead of buying it outright. No cost saving was at stake, but the class logic was impeccable, as Peadar Kirby and Mary Murphy observed: 'In choosing to lease rather than purchase these houses, policy works to bail out developers and to transfer national wealth from the state to the private sector, rather than acting as a mechanism for rebuilding the national social housing stock.'⁶¹ The ambitions of the governing class stretch further than stoking up another domestic housing bubble: plans are now afoot to complement the IFSC with an 'International Property Services Centre' that could become a 'global centre of excellence' for such activity.⁶² O'Toole's emphasis on 'nineteenth-century revenants' simply diverted attention from these impeccably modern developments.

A new republic

O'Toole described his next work, *Enough Is Enough*, as a response to the most frequently asked question on his promotional tour for *Ship of*

⁶¹ Peadar Kirby and Mary Murphy, *Towards a Second Republic: Irish Politics after the Celtic Tiger*, London 2011, pp. 133–4.

⁶² Predictably, the civil servant behind this scheme used the mythical property-owning gene as an alibi: 'We see this as producing a way for the Irish obsession with property, historically so individualized, to be more professionalized.' Aubrey Robinson, 'The Reboot of Irish Property Finance', *Irish Left Review*, vol. 1, no. 2, Autumn 2013.

Fools—‘what do we do next?’ The book bore the subtitle *How to Build a New Republic*, setting the stage for his emphasis on ‘republican democracy’ as the basis of an alternative politics. It opened with a story about Samuel Beckett that would also supply the title for its successor. Beckett had been asked to contribute to a famous volume in which writers took sides on the Spanish Civil War: his ‘typically laconic’ reply was to send a card with the message *UPTHEREPUBLIC!* As O’Toole noted, however, this clear declaration of support for the Republican cause ‘also carried something else that was typical of Beckett, a sardonic irony’:

By taking possession of an Irish slogan that had been used by both Sinn Féin and Fianna Fáil, and that had little appeal for him, Beckett was making a joke on both himself and Ireland. He knew very well that in Ireland being a republican meant something quite different from what it meant in a broader European context. Beckett thus summarized in thirteen letters the strange situation of a country in which people who regarded themselves as republican might be at odds with the political realities of the republic itself.⁶³

Those familiar with Irish history were left to recall that a few years later, when Beckett was working as a resistance courier in occupied France, the leaders of the rump IRA had made contact with German intelligence and were co-operating with agents of the Third Reich. This episode underlined the ambiguity of ‘republicanism’ in the Irish context: more often than not the term has been a synonym for militant nationalism, its associations with a particular form of government remaining much weaker. The allusion to Beckett was intended to cleanse O’Toole’s neo-republican agenda of such connotations. But in a search for historical ballast to strengthen his programme, O’Toole nonetheless set about delving through the actually existing republican tradition for material. In *Up the Republic!*, he contrasted the Fenian manifesto of 1867 favourably with the better-known Easter proclamation of 1916:

Ireland is not invoked as an abstract entity, summoning ‘her children to her flag’. The 1867 references to the country are concrete: ‘the soil of Ireland’; ‘the Irish people’. On the other hand, the 1867 proclamation does mention certain things absent in 1916: a republican form of government (as against both ‘oligarchy’ and ‘the curse of Monarchical government’); economic injustice (‘the oppression of labour’); and economic equality (‘we aim at founding a Republic based on universal suffrage, which shall secure to all

⁶³ Fintan O’Toole, *Enough Is Enough: How to Build a New Republic*, London 2010, p. 21.

the intrinsic value of their labour'). Even more uncomfortably, the 1867 proclamation resists ideas of either religious or ethnic solidarity as the basis for the Irish republic. It is explicitly secular: 'We declare, also, in favour of absolute liberty of conscience, and complete separation of Church and State.' And it does not create a simple opposition of 'Irish' to 'English'. It declares war on 'aristocratic locusts, whether English or Irish, who have eaten the verdure of our fields'.⁶⁴

Enough Is Enough made the Democratic Programme adopted by Ireland's outlaw parliament during the War of Independence into one of its touchstones, citing the document's pledges to establish a national health service and to provide for the welfare of children and the elderly, in place of the 'odious, degrading and foreign Poor Law System' that had been established under British rule.⁶⁵

O'Toole's search for reference points in the Fenian heritage was one measure of how far the crisis had shaken up old certainties. His excursion through history still bore the heavy imprint of revisionist dogma, however. Laying the blame for partition exclusively at the door of Irish nationalism, O'Toole quoted James Connolly's warning that it would lead to a 'carnival of reaction' in both parts of a divided island, without giving readers any sense of what Connolly had actually meant.⁶⁶ He criticized opponents of partition in the southern political class, who were said to have created 'a feeling that the Irish state was a temporary arrangement, at best a mere way-station on the road to the true Republic of a United Ireland that would emerge at some time in the future'.⁶⁷ This greatly

⁶⁴ Fintan O'Toole, ed., *Up the Republic! Towards a New Ireland*, London 2012, p. 12.

⁶⁵ *Enough Is Enough*, pp. 22–3.

⁶⁶ *Enough Is Enough*, p. 24. The founder of Irish Marxism had called for implacable resistance to a measure that was bound, in his view, to have disastrous consequences: 'Such a scheme . . . would mean a carnival of reaction both North and South, would set back the wheels of progress, would destroy the oncoming unity of the Irish Labour movement and paralyse all advanced movements whilst it endured. To it Labour should give the bitterest opposition, against it Labour in Ulster should fight even to the death, if necessary.' Peter Berekford Ellis, ed., *James Connolly: Selected Writings*, London 1997, p. 275. There was a Marxist strain of revisionist historiography, most ably represented by Paul Bew and Henry Patterson, which defined itself in opposition to Connolly's thinking on the national question. O'Toole's view of partition clearly owes far more to Bew and Patterson, whose scholarship he has praised on several occasions, than it does to Connolly (Bew has since exchanged the Althusserian precepts of his early work for a seat in the House of Lords as a Unionist nominee).

⁶⁷ *Enough Is Enough*, p. 30.

exaggerated the extent to which most southern politicians actually concerned themselves with Irish unity as a practical goal. O'Toole ignored a far more important barrier to the realization of progressive hopes raised during the struggle for national independence and codified in the form of the Democratic Programme. The civil war of 1922–23 ended in triumph for the most conservative elements in southern Irish society, who had rallied behind the pro-Treaty forces: the Free State which emerged from the conflict answered their need for a government that was determined to preserve the social order in the face of challenges from below—most notably from a trade union movement that had grown dramatically while the republican insurgency was at its height. A letter drafted by the Free State's chief of staff, Eoin O'Duffy, in August 1922 cut to the heart of the matter: 'If the Government can break the back of this revolt, any attempts at revolt by labour in the future will be futile.'⁶⁸ For O'Toole, with his intense distrust of Irish-style republicanism, such matters remained taboo.

The main thrust of O'Toole's argument in *Enough Is Enough* was to call for a new political order that would embody the spirit of republican values in a way that its predecessor had never managed. This demand for constitutional reform could point in two directions. The construction of a new political framework in countries like Bolivia or Venezuela has formed part of a broad civic insurgency against the power of traditional elites. The commentators who have made 'reform' into a buzz-word since 2008 have not been thinking of such models, however. A seemingly endless succession of op-eds in the *Irish Times* have blocked out the real question of who exercises power in Irish society, proposing instead the kind of institutional tinkering that would change everything so that everything could stay the same. Italy's transition to a Second Republic that was meant to ensure the 'normalization' of its political culture, yet which found itself in thrall to a lecherous, perma-tanned crook, offers a telling precedent for such frivolities.

O'Toole's blueprint for political reconstruction—a new electoral system, stronger parliamentary committees, devolution of power to local government—could not be dismissed so easily, linked as it was to a serious economic programme that addressed the questions of

⁶⁸ Charles Townshend, *The Republic: The Fight for Irish Independence*, London 2013, p. 432.

housing, health care, pensions and education. *Enough Is Enough* concluded with a list of fifty proposals for action, including the inauguration of universal health insurance, in place of the existing two-tier model that segregates patients on the basis of their income, and a crash programme of social housing, to be funded by the money currently diverted into rent supplements and tax relief for private landlords.⁶⁹ The unifying theme was admirable: to halt and reverse the transformation of public goods into commodities supplied through the market, establishing a system of universal provision based on need rather than ability to pay. Yet O'Toole's push for republican democracy drew back at the threshold of the boardroom. He took it for granted that private firms would remain the dominant players in economic life, merely proposing that 'no-one should be allowed to serve on the boards of more than three publicly quoted companies' and appealing to the enlightened self-interest of Irish capital: 'The opposition between successful enterprise on the one hand and probity on the other is not just wrong but fatal. Sustainable, long-term businesses are not built on having an eye for the main chance, covering up fraud and ineptitude and repeating the same crass mistakes over and over again.'⁷⁰

At a time when the Irish banking sector was entirely dependent on public funding to survive, O'Toole's reluctance to contemplate any extension of republican principles to the workplace was telling. His own essay in *Up the Republic!* identified various 'isms' that had prevented Ireland from becoming a true republic—Catholicism, nationalism, localism, clientelism, even mercantilism—but left capitalism off the list.⁷¹ The lengthiest discussion of economic affairs in the book, a contribution from the Irish political philosopher Philip Pettit, was mainly concerned with making the case against public ownership of the banks. 'Long tradition' was said to impose the conclusion that 'everybody's business is nobody's business and that in general, as Aristotle observes, people will look after their own property better than they will look after what belongs to all.'⁷² Shorn of its philosophical allusions, Pettit's essay simply restated the most hackneyed 'private good, public bad' dogma in a more

⁶⁹ *Enough Is Enough*, pp. 240–4. One surprising omission from the list of reforms was a meaningful trade union recognition act, which might have supplied a bridge between O'Toole's programme and the social power needed to realize it.

⁷⁰ *Enough Is Enough*, pp. 235, 233.

⁷¹ *Up the Republic!*, pp. 33–8.

⁷² *Up the Republic!*, pp. 174–5.

exalted register, claiming that government regulation of finance would suffice to contain its destructive tendencies, and ignoring the systemic capture of such regulators by the banking elite—not least in Ireland.⁷³

Uncharted waters

Having neglected the subject altogether in *Ship of Fools* and *Enough Is Enough*, O'Toole cautiously broached the question of Europe in *Up the Republic!*, observing that Ireland's present status was 'not unlike the kind of Home Rule that was supposed to come into force in 1914: local autonomy without fiscal or budgetary control. Except that such control does not reside in England but in Germany.'⁷⁴ His tenacious Europhilia had finally snapped after the terms of the bail-out programme imposed by the Troika were announced in November 2010: 'The sadistic pleasures of punishment have trumped the sensible calculation that an Ireland enslaved by debt is not much use to anyone . . . yesterday's abysmal deal turns Ireland's shame into Europe's disgrace.'⁷⁵ By 2012, O'Toole was urging his readers to reject the EU's fiscal treaty, describing a No vote as 'a responsible act of European citizenship, encouraging the change of direction without which the EU will destroy itself'.⁷⁶ This disillusionment has not been accompanied by any critical re-examination of his previous stance, however.

On the domestic stage, O'Toole's interventions since the Troika assumed control of Irish economic policy have been rather erratic. He considered running for office in the 2011 general election as part of an ill-defined 'non-party' alliance that never got off the ground. Fianna Fáil went on to suffer the worst defeat of its history, while support for left and centre-left parties was higher than ever before, with Labour alone winning 19 per cent of the vote. In the wake of the poll, O'Toole spoke of the need for 'a radical reassertion of Irish sovereignty, a popular revolt, not just against Fianna Fáil, but against the bank bail-out and the EU-IMF deal as well', and warned Labour that it would pay a heavy price for entering

⁷³ O'Toole himself supplied ample documentation of such complicity for the Irish case: *Ship of Fools*, pp. 146–8.

⁷⁴ *Up the Republic!*, p. 10.

⁷⁵ Fintan O'Toole, 'Abysmal deal ransoms us and disgraces Europe', *Irish Times*, 29 November 2010.

⁷⁶ Fintan O'Toole, 'Treaty a mere clause in contract yet unseen', *Irish Times*, 22 May 2012.

government with Fine Gael.⁷⁷ Predictably, the party's leadership ignored his advice. The enthusiasm with which Labour ministers set about vilifying the unemployed and selling off public assets was matched only by the self-righteous fury with which they responded to any criticism. Voters passed a fitting verdict on this record in the 2014 European elections: Labour's support collapsed and the party found itself overtaken on the left by Sinn Féin, standing on an anti-Troika, social-democratic programme. In his first *Irish Times* column after the results came in, O'Toole seemed to have given up hope that Labour might redeem itself: 'A broad progressive movement will thrive if it can bring together four big issues—debt resolution, radical democratic reform, social justice and sustainable economic progress—in a coherent vision . . . Labour has ceased to be a credible vehicle for that vision.'⁷⁸

This is unfamiliar territory for O'Toole, who has always seemed more comfortable positioning himself on the left of the mainstream than standing outside the consensus altogether, and it would be surprising if his post-crisis turn was carried much further. A striking observation from his biography of Richard Brinsley Sheridan could easily be applied to the author himself: 'He was always careful to speak *within* the accepted language of contemporary politics, to take the words and thoughts that were around, and shape them into new meanings . . . instead of proposing alternative modes of understanding or feeling, he operated entirely within those that were given to him, but seized control of them and made them his own.'⁷⁹ The limitations of this rhetorical procedure should be obvious. The breadth and calibre of O'Toole's work command respect: there can be few, if any, writers in other European countries with comparable range and impact on public debate. His books and essays will repay careful study, with all their strengths and shortcomings, for many years to come. But a more radical critique of Irish and European power structures will be needed if the complacency of their elites is to be disturbed.

⁷⁷ Fintan O'Toole, 'Radical change is what we really need', *Irish Times*, 1 March 2011.

⁷⁸ Fintan O'Toole, 'From tragedy to farce: Labour's big mistakes in 1918 and 2011', *Irish Times*, 27 May 2014.

⁷⁹ *A Traitor's Kiss*, pp. 203–4 (emphasis in original).