

THE GENERATION GAME

From the No.1 bestselling author of *The Pope's Children*



DAVID McWILLIAMS

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Gill & Macmillan

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| PART 1

Falling Down

Check-in, Dublin Airport, 6.50 a.m.

Tatiana, a Russian from Latvia, has not been into Dublin city yet, although she has worked at the airport for four months. She secured this Bagel Factory job before she had left the airport on her first day in Ireland. She arrived with her CV ready and resolved not to step out of the terminal without a wage. Tatiana worked her first shift after two hours in Ireland, borrowing someone's uniform and stashing her suitcases under the counter. She hasn't stopped working since. Her flat, which she shares with her cousins in Swords, is next door to the Central Statistics Office—the only official people who know she exists. She has been home to Riga twice for one-day visits but has never been to Henry Street. Given that there are five low-cost flights a day from Dublin to the Baltics, it is less hassle and cheaper to go to Latvia than Leixlip.

Twenty yards away, four English forty-something men with shaved heads, wearing outsized combats and teenage trainers, struggle to get their Big Berthas onto the excess-baggage carousel. They're frisking themselves to find their ticket-less stubs which verify that they're on the flight. The lads are chirpy in a still-drunk type of way, heading home following a second-time-round stag weekend in Dublin. The Slovak check-in girl with bad teeth who sleeps four to a box-room in Hazelhatch is in no mood for their jaded *double entendres*.

The recycled air reeks of that sickly combination of Shake 'n' Vac, Alpine air freshener and human flatulence. The shaved heads snigger childishly. Three Polish immigrants in bottle-green double-breasted suits, the type favoured by one-hit wonders and Fianna Fáil councillors in the 1980s, queue in an orderly fashion. They're going home with the month's takings to put a deposit on a house. The Poles still dress up to travel, the way we did twenty years ago.

Beside our gaseous fortysomethings, just beyond the ambitious Slavs, a group of peroxide-haired Geordie hen-night lassies sing Shakira numbers as they display their varicose corned-beef legs. At half-seven in the morning this shows a refreshing, if rather scary, self-confidence. Their 'Kiss Me Quick, I'm Irish' leprechaun hats fail to hide the swollen love-bites.

The big Romanian touts for work at the Kiwi buff-stop shoeshine. Business in Dublin is quiet—the Irish haven't been rich for long enough to indulge in such public displays of master and servant. That'll take decades. Attitudes to shoe-shine services reveal something of the psychology of a country. People who unselfconsciously use shoe-shine boys in public—particularly in foreign airports—tend to come from countries where social democracy never really took off. Today, three Chinese Christmas-toy salesmen with identical glasses, navy suits and severe side-partings are perched on the shoe-shine throne.

Across the hall, last-minute texters work their fingers frantically as guilty, duty-free children's

presents are stuffed into counterfeit Prada handbags and large groups of overweight third-generation Irish-Americans with yellow hair, visors and name-badges clutch onto each other, terrified by the foreignness of it all. These 'tour-bus Americans', with a weakness for purple polyester, are like a flock of endangered birds negotiating their way through the make-shift labyrinth.

You can spot the Marian tour pilgrims going to Lourdes: they are the nuns disguised as gender-studies lecturers. They are also the only people in the airport with packed lunches. Beside the self-conscious nuns, a twin-setted and pearled Sloaney fund manager, all expensive blonde highlights and fetish heels, rabbits into her top-of-the-range Motorola camera phone and snaps at the check-in girl, who's on €10 an hour and whose very presence seems to irritate little Miss ISEQ. Democracy is so foreign she thinks to herself—all these people, horrible. It's hard to imagine her as the student activist she once was, with the megaphone, Sandinista T-shirt and Doc Martens, screaming about students' rights outside the Dáil in the early 1990s. But one of the beauties of our New Ireland is the liberation to reinvent. If you don't like yourself, just make up an avatar. It's *Second Life* for real people.

Local property developers, Ireland's new chieftains, scour the *Financial Times* while simultaneously checking out the tabloids. They are the first tribe to buy both the *Sun* and the *FT*—deviant shopping behaviour which renders redundant the quack science of modern consumer profiling, so beloved of advertisers.

Except for the gap-year, credit-card Crusties on their way to Nepal, deep in the shallows of Deepak Chopra, men of all ages and classes devour the Monday-morning sports supplements. Sport is the new news. It bonds us.

Everyone is fielding mobile calls from the office and slurping coffees.

Have you noticed how people in airports appear to be constantly eating and drinking? We ate a quarter-of-a million sandwiches in the airport last year and drank 1.6 million cups of tea. We devoured over a million slices of toast, gulped 1.2 million coffees and close to a million cappuccinos while we stuffed over half-a-million Danish pastries into our gobs. 672,000 muffins were served by 20 different nationalities as were a similar amount of bottles of Coca-Cola. The airport turns over more than €5 million in food alone. Is it any wonder that Rennie antacids are amongst the bestselling items in the airport shops, along with Taytos?¹

Some races bring their exiles reminders of home, like books, DVDs and newspapers. Central Americans tend to bring religious imagery from the old country to their emigrant friends. Irish people bring each other crisps.

The more Taytos bought at the airport, the more of us are emigrating. The Taytometer is a more accurate indicator of the state of the economy than anything you'll get from government press releases. Last year, we spent €96,000 in the airport on packets of Tayto crisps.² Watch this figure closely in the next few years as the slowdown forces many of us back on the boat again. If the Taytometer rises, you know that things are getting worse here. Looking for a start, boss?

The incongruous Italian tourist in his Bono Stetson looks aghast at the huge watery coffee served up for €3 by Magda the Pole, who left the plum hair dye in too long last night, making her look like an extra from Michael Jackson's 'Thriller'. The two water-drinking developers' wives from Dungarvan—former Avon ladies—are head to toe in Ib Jorgensen. As they glare in the mirror, they practise their Elizabeth Arden pouts, complaining about the delay to New York but it does give them more time at the MAC counter, which is cosmetic heaven.

If anything tells you about the extraordinary excesses of the Irish consumer, and explains why Botox clinics are opening on the Walkinstown Roundabout, it is the Dublin Airport Big MAC Index. The MAC counter at Dublin Airport is tiny. And yet this single small counter is the sixth busiest MAC shop in the world. This includes the likes of Fifth Avenue, Bond Street, rue du Faubourg St Honoré, Milan and Hong Kong. And despite the fact that Dublin airport is only the 50th biggest in the world,

the MAC counter is the second busiest of any airport.³ Irish girls are piling on the slap, no matter what the cost.

The Avon ladies have seven empty bags and return tickets to Woodbury Common from Port Authority. They can't wait for Thursday afternoon in New Jersey; they're tooled up with maps of the shops and strategic meeting points. The shopping planner is meeting them tomorrow morning in Fitzpatrick's Hotel to take them on the Sex and the City Tour before the full-frontal assault on Bloomingdales. After that, cocktails in the Waldorf Astoria beckon with the girls from Nenagh.

This year, it is expected that over 350,000 Irish people will visit New York—the vast majority of these to shop. This figure is increasing by over 30% per year and is up 145% since 2001.⁴ The tourism campaign, 'Next Stop NYC', was created last year by New York retailers to capitalise on the booming Irish travel market which is currently—according to the *New York Times*—'the fastest-growing among New York City's top-ten origin markets'.

The young woman, Castleknock's finest, is, like everything else on that side of the Áras, on her way up, fast. She's off to Barcelona for a weekend with the girls. They are not alone. The short-break market has exploded in Ireland in the past three years along with its hand maiden, chick lit. We spent €560 million on short breaks last year.⁵ Of the 22 new routes out of Dublin in the past two years, short-break destinations account for 15 of them.⁶

Dublin airport, like the rest of the country, runs on a combination of exhaustion, excitement and stress. It is straining under the volume of passengers that cheap travel affords, bursting at the seams. This offers us a vision of our metropolitan future, at one time mixed-up, blocked, snarling, angry and ready to ignite, while simultaneously compliant, empathetic, communal, tolerant and patient.

Ireland is on the move, coming, going, rushing—everyone's got somewhere to be, someone to meet and something to do. Everything in our lives is snatched, grabbed and rushed. The clock is on, time is money. The airport is our speeded up, just-in-time, clock-watching life. We are the Transit Nation.

The Last Democracy

Dublin airport is the last place in Ireland where all the social classes mix. It is our melting pot. It's a democratic and class-free environment. If your flight is delayed, don't fly off the handle, sit back, for out half the price of your Ryanair ticket for a coffee and watch the country. All Irish life is here, from the top dogs to the bottom-feeders. Spend a day here and you'll see New Ireland, warts and all.

Only the extremely poor and the extremely rich avoid the airport. For the rest of us, wedged in the middle, the airport is as close to a commune as we are likely to experience.

The synchronised clackedy-clack of heels announces five Aer Lingus hostesses, all up dos and eyelashes, pulling behind them five identical suitcases on wheels. As they castanet confidently past the security check, you are briefly reminded of a different age. When my mother was young, an air hostess was the swankiest job a girl could have, what with those fitted French-looking uniforms, suggestive caps and *Vanity Fair* pilots with Ray-Ban Aviators and Leonardo diCaprio looks. Now in the era of thirty-minute turnarounds, stag-nights and €1 promotional fares, a career as a prison officer is more prestigious. The collapse of the status of flying and the resulting democratisation of airports has been one of the most dramatic social features of the past twenty years. Once flying was the privilege of the sophisticated few, today it's about as glamorous as Jade Goody. It is mass transport for the mass market.

At the make-shift check-in counter, the soon-to-be-outsourced corporate man on his way down brushes shoulder pads with a cosmetically-enhanced 'nail technician' on her way up. This Enda-Kenny-meets-Kerry-Katona moment could only happen here. These types would never meet each other in real life but at the check-in desk, they are one. Pinched collar meets muffin-top across the

queue and just for a split second, they are linked by the last communal activity known to man, queuing up at the airport as the grumpy Czech security man on the minimum wage rifles through their washbags. We are all suspects, potential shoe-bombers or moisturiser murderers, tied up and stuck here, gelled together in almost Blitz-type stoicism.

With the increasing hierarchies in the education system, the health system, sports facilities and gentrification (which is a nice expression for the more accurate but Yugoslavian-sounding term 'social cleansing') of huge swathes of our cities, where else can you see the full social mix?

In education, the obsession with school league tables means that parents will pay any price to get their children into the 'better' establishments. This leads to kids from the same social class all going to school together. Sophie never sleeps with Wayne. Abercrombie and Dubs rarely meet hoodie and Nike Air Max, unless they're buying drugs.

It's the same story in the health service. Mr Private VHI Plan E runs a mile from Mrs Public waiting list. Apartheid is the governing philosophy. Meanwhile, multi-storey shopping centres have put paid to the chance social meeting of the classes that used to be commonplace in that greatest of public spaces, the Main Street. Sport, although less so than it was, is also segregated along old tribal lines. Even for spectators, at most big games there is tiered pricing, making sure the *hoi polloi* remain firmly away from the respectable. The rule-of-thumb in Ireland's exploding world of corporate entertainment is that only the poor pay at the turnstiles; the rich get in free.

In contrast with our segregated tribal behaviour, the airport is an exercise in social engineering which would doubtless please James Connolly. The Unicorn meets Abrakebabra, crab timbale and rocket rubs shoulders with chicken nuggets and chips. Lexus queues up with HiAce and croquet chats to soccer, if only to borrow a pen: last-minute name-tag panic knows no class. The airport is as close to forced collectivisation as we have ever come. Everyone's a comrade.

According to the airport authorities, 21 million people—five times the population of the country—will pass through its doors this year. Estimates indicate that over 800,000 Irish people will travel—most by plane—this Christmas.⁷ This is an extraordinary figure for a country with a workforce of just 2 million.

More phenomenal is the amount of immigrants coming through the place. In 2005, 143,000 Poles passed through here.⁸ Last year, that figure jumped to 580,000.⁹ Passengers from the Baltics increased from 147,000 to 340,000 in 2006.¹⁰ At this rate, by 2016, these countries will be empty. As in the Second World War, the Polish Parliament will sit in exile, perhaps in Lucan rather than London.

Aeronomics

A day spent in the major airport of a country gives you a better insight into the true nature of the place than many convoluted political lectures. As a quick rule of thumb on the economic front, you can tell where the country is in the economic cycle by the queues. If there are no queues, there's a recession. When you see orderly queues and strong national airlines, it means that the country is in at least the fourth generation of wealth. Generally speaking, the more people, screaming kids and makeshift check-in desks, the higher and more unstable the growth rate.

As for house prices, which so many people fret over, what can you tell about them from looking around the airport? Well, first, prefabs are a bad sign because they imply that the construction industry is operating at full tilt and builders are throwing up anything. Prefabs anywhere in the airport tell you that we are near the top of the boom cycle because everyone is just making do at the moment. Builders are scarce and things are being thrown together with little thought. Prefabricated Portaloos rather than the real deal, implies you should start worrying about the value of houses. Once you see prefab corridors masquerading as fully-fledged terminals, you know it's too late to sell. Cops in prefabs and you know the house party's all over.

You can also be pretty sure that if the place is full of ‘cancer-flirters’, that personal borrowing is going through the roof and the dodgier end of the market is booming. The cancer-flirter is that person who places post-Christmas pinkness ahead of personal safety. You know the type who comes back to work in the rain on 7 January with third-degree burns, who is described by that great Irish euphemism as having ‘got the sun’.

For the economy, thousands of pink tourists in winter, coming back from somewhere their natural skin pigmentation is not used to, is a sure sign that this country is spending more than it earns. If people are reckless enough to fry for a fortnight, despite everything we know about skin cancer, you can be sure that this country isn’t too worried about its carbon footprint, has a weakness for interest-only mortgages and that when everything goes pear-shaped, the general population won’t care about handing back the keys. These people don’t take advice, let alone play by the rules. Repossessions are just around the corner. Liquidators are salivating.

What about the arrivals hall? What can we glean from it? Clusters of foreigners on mobiles still in their dusty work overalls means the country is going through a period of mass blue-collar immigration. Dubious stilettos and back-combed hair is a sure sign that the society is in the second phase of immigration: the family is following two years after the father came to make money. Grandpa is on the next flight. This is the phase where immigration numbers multiply rapidly. The schools in the commuter belt of this country will be overcrowded, multilingual and under-funded.

Looking around, if the shopping areas are better staffed, kitted-out and presented than the loos, the information desks and the car-parks, you know the trade unions are in control of much of the country that sewage works are delayed and that there is a significant chance that you’ll encounter a bewildered man with a ‘stop/go’ sign managing traffic on the country’s main roads.

A day in the life of Dublin airport demands the patience of a saint, the humour of a condemned man and an explorer’s sense of direction. A packet of Solpadeine, a compass, an overdraft and some Valium would come in handy too. But remember, you’ve got to arrive early. Like a good safari, a bus airport is best seen at dawn.

But before we head out to Santry via the clogged M1 and M50 intersection, where HGVs dodge demented Africans in Nissan Micras and salarymen try to break the world land-speed record in their top-of-the-range BMWs—let’s look at how it could be. (By the way, we could go through the Port Tunnel, the most expensive piece of infrastructure ever built in Europe, but our government, having gone on about it for years as if Ireland was sending a man to Mars, now wants to keep it a secret. So, at a price of €12 to go three kilometres, they’ve made it more expensive to drive through than it is to fly with either Ryanair or Aer Lingus to Rome.)

Fantasyland

Imagine you arrive at Fantasy Airport in the back of a clean cab, preferably a new car with well-sprung seats and an unobtrusive driver, who isn’t giving you his opinion on Steve Staunton. In Fantasyland, you can choose—there is also high-speed monorail link from the city centre.

You enter the departure lounge. You look up. Immediately, you see a brightly illuminated departures board, not an ad for O’Brien’s sandwich bars. Everything in the triple-height, galleried terminal is open and accessible. Breathe in the design. The public art is prominent but discreet. These people don’t need to brag. There are no ads for the local boy band anywhere.

It is clean. The queues are orderly and there are more than enough check-in desks, staffed by employees who don’t have to buy their own uniforms. The signs are clear and the intercom announcements are comprehensible in five languages. The floor-staff, unlike Dublin airport’s insomniacs, look as if they’ve had a good night’s sleep.

In our ideal well-run airport there is soap at the washbasins. The hot-air dryer works and wastepap

baskets are emptied regularly. The place is calm. The ceiling is high and far away. The sky-light is just that, a clear view to the sky letting in light, rather than a steamed-up, filthy, out-size piece of corrugated Perspex. You feel that you are in a transport hub rather than Lidl. There are wireless internet hot-spots with high-speed connections. All is working, coordinated and reassuring.

Countries with fantasy airports also have UNESCO-protected heritage sites, hands-off politicians, good train services and no MRSA. Health magazines sell well and all houses are properly insulated. Local primary schools don't feel the need to fundraise. Builders don't fold overnight and disappear without a trace. These are the types of places that plan ahead, invest in life-long learning and have bilingual, preschool teachers who are also accomplished gymnasts. Heart disease is not common, breast checks are regular and smiling children sing, rather than mumble, the national anthem. Pyjamas are worn in bed, not in Spar.

The people are tolerant and courteous, if a little dull. They rarely own more than one house and education is free. Think Canada with European trams and Japanese bullet trains, where uniformed traffic wardens could grace the pages of *Wallpaper** magazine. These are countries where celebrity is retiring and TV presenters are, well, just TV presenters.

Now, consider Dublin airport—the gateway to the New Ireland. Compare it with the futuristic glass and-steel cathedrals to taste and design that are München airport, Schipol or Charles de Gaulle. Or what about the new Asian airports, built for twice today's capacity in order to prevent over-priced, last-minute, cheap-looking pre-fab jobs in ten years' time?

Can you imagine these places having signs which declare with odd syntax: 'pardon our appearance as you are funnelled down a two-mile corridor to another cow-shed? These airports, with their high-speed trains linking terminals, ample car parking and real espresso are built to reflect the aspirations of societies that are at ease with themselves, where economic growth is manageable and where immigration is thought through. They are not over-indulging, over-hyped or bursting through their shabby seams. They're also not much fun.

But Dublin airport, in contrast, is Us. It is an A&E ward for slightly healthier people. It is a microcosm of the new, out-of-breath, indigested, lastminute.com Ireland. It is the Calcutta of the sky which waves its contemptuous two fingers at the traveller through its broken masonry and interminable queues, snarling at you with the Ryanair quip, 'What the hell do you expect? You only paid a fiver.'

But on the other hand, if you want to get a good sense of the dynamism and the chaos, the Babel of voices, the gridlock, the sticking-plaster solutions and hope, optimism and expectations that drive our country forward, spend some time here. If you want to see how somehow Ireland powers ahead despite itself, come here. This is Ireland's hall door.

Landing

The Latvian check-in girl has learned how to deal with the complaining Paddies. Just smile and they blow their own tempest out in time. Unlike in Latvia, the Irish never report you to anyone. It's the ones with too much panstick and two-tone hair who are the worst. Airport people call them 'Jiffies'.

The Jiffy gets off the plane from Malaga in late January, with a little skirt on, bright red legs and a boob tube which doesn't so much prop up, as hold in place, a scorched, scarlet cleavage. She's stooped from years of sticking her mouth out and dragging deeply on cigarette butts, giving her the disturbing appearance of a pigeon wearing blusher.

She of the bejewelled incisors is laden down with duty-free Johnny Blue and her pink ghetto-blasta is pumping out an Usher and Rihanna mix. The Jiffy loves R'n'B. When she bends down to grab her 'chrysalised' phone, her sunburned butterfly tattoo appears just above her G. She examines her stick-on nails, and continues to drone on about the contents of her duty-free swag and the fact that a litre of

Bacardi only cost €7 in some country called 'Spaint'.

Everything's a 'meal', from breakfast, to tortillas, to steak and chips. And all 'meals in Spaint' were 'whopper'. Her fella, Fran, whose shaved head and neck fused with his torso a few years back, giving him the look of a rhino from the back, is rubbing his bare Johnny Adair arms as he shapes down the stairs. If there was a shaper's catwalk at Dublin Fashion Week, he'd win a prize for the best razorblades-under-the arms swagger.

Jiffies are a year-round attraction. They usually travel in packs of eight or ten minimum with their Ma or other members of the extended family. They get a 'd'apartment' which they trash. They used to be localised in Spain but now they're just as likely to be on packages to Koh Samui.

Like the Jiffies, most of the Irish have bitten the travel bug and the average person you see at the airport will leave the country six times every year.¹¹ We are now the best travellers in the world. We are global gypsies who are in and out of the country on holidays or business, on the move, trading, spending and spoofing, keeping the entire show on the road.

The Jiffy cranes her neck out of the plane door, looks up at the grey overcast Dublin drizzle. She's overweight, under-dressed and over-accessorised. She glances at her mate Colette who can hardly walk as the back of her knees are scalded. In unison, like synchronised swimmers, both grab their exposed thighs, rub their nipples, grimace and screech—'Jaysus It's Fuckin' Freezing, Yeah'—J.I.F.F.

The Jiffy is home.

Darkness Falls

By nine o'clock, the Jiffy is glued to a double-bill of *Coronation Street* and shouting to Fran to turn down the sound of the football on his plasma in the next room or she'll burst him.

Around this time, the airport changes and another aspect of modern Ireland takes over. In the arrivals hall, they are beginning to congregate. It looks like a scene from *Gorky Park*. Slavs of all sorts assemble to meet friends and then disappear to the remotest parts of the country in a Vilnius-registered Audi Quattro—the favoured car of Lithuanians. It was declared extinct here in 1996, only to reappear last year.

Sometime in the evening, the arrivals section turns into a holding pen for East Europeans. You notice the crew cuts and fake Ducati biker jackets in various garish shades of orange and yellow with misspelled motor oil ads emblazoned across the back. They look like bouncers, big bullet heads on them, broad shoulders and Soviet-Special-Forces handshakes. Revealing that our culture is rubbing off on someone, they've a disturbing fondness for sovereign rings and Champion Sports clothes.

The girls are mostly Slavic-pretty, long limbed, with high cheekbones, sallow-skinned and green-eyed. They are the closest to thing to a supermodel Mulhuddart has ever seen. Behold the next TV3 weather girl. It's amazing how the lads all look a few shillings short and the girls could have stepped out of the pages of Italian *Vogue*. There is a disturbing amount of stonewashed denim and a few trademark Slovakian mullet-and-moustache combinations. Meet our future.

Céad Míle Fáilte

'Fearful pigs face death as water rises.'

The notice board in the immigration office reveals that the gardaí can laugh at themselves. The headline has been cut out of one of the tabloids and pasted on the board over the usual notices for mileage-allowance changes, overtime rates and for-sale ads for second-hand Opel Omegas. There is also the picture of probably the worst passport impersonator they've seen yet—a Chinese man trying to blag his way in on Slovak papers. The most conspicuous notices are for translation services, the

mobile numbers of immigrant polyglots putting their superior education to use. When they are not serving kebabs to drunks who can hardly speak English, they are translating three languages—simultaneously.

The whiteboard is the one to watch. This reminds gardaí coming on the morning shift that there are people to be deported tomorrow and where these transients are sleeping tonight. This evening there are two Sri Lankans in Santry Station, one in Arbour Hill and a Ukrainian in Malahide.

Ironically, the first image a would-be immigrant sees in Dublin airport is walls adorned with pictures of destitute Irish emigrants looking starved, emaciated and beaten as they disembark from famine ships in New York. We've come full circle. Our immigrants are building Ireland in the same way as we built America.

The immigration gardaí are a bit apprehensive tonight. In the last few months the big problem has been Romanians. Lads they threw out last year are now coming back, goading their former tormentors with impunity of an EU passport. In the first three months of 2007, 10,000 Romanians arrived in this country.¹² The government has introduced the policy of allowing Bulgarians and Romanians to travel here freely, but they are not allowed to work without a permit. So the gardaí at immigration is asked to police the unpolicable, by a State that doesn't know what it wants, but knows what it doesn't want—if you know what I mean.

That's not surprising, of course, because Ireland's immigration policy is made in London. Because of the border with the North, which we don't want to turn into an Iron Curtain, we can't have a different immigration policy to Britain's. Well, we could, but we couldn't be bothered. So, when the British government in 2003 said that it would open its doors to all the accession countries, Ireland followed suit. And, in 2006, when they decided not to allow Bulgarians and the Romanians to work without a permit, we followed them again.

Our interest rates are determined in Frankfurt and our immigration policy in London. In the new world of globalisation, when house prices and immigration are two significant challenges, we have given away the only two policies that might give us some control over either. It's no wonder people are confused. We have no policy at all other than, 'it'll be grand'.

Back at Pier B, the gardaí have recruited a couple of Romanian translators, but even though they know that the vast majority of Romanians are coming to work in the black market, there's nothing they can do. The inspector drags his hands through his hair as he resignedly explains how the gardaí are called 'girlie cops' by macho Ukrainian smugglers, who fully expect to get a proper hiding when caught. Within minutes, they lose all respect for the gardaí when they are read their rights and given access to a doctor and a lawyer.

The Amsterdam flight touches down at 10 p.m. As expected, it's full of Brazilians who, as if on cue, all tell the immigration officers that they are here to see our castles. This is a sign to the cops that they will be on the next plane to the UK once they get their Irish tourist stamp. As for the Irish castles, no-one knows where that comes from. The Brazilians are mainly using Ireland as a way into the UK, where there's a community of over half a million.

And that is one of the patterns of immigration—people go where their mates are. The amount of Poles coming to Ireland is determined by the size of the Polish community here as well as the wage differential between here and Poland. The pull of the existing emigrant community was evident in Irish emigration patterns to the US between 1850 and 1920, when we were the largest ethnic minority in the US, ahead of the Germans who also left in their millions.

The immigration officers' hatches are cramped, strewn with empty coffee cups, GAA-National-League supplements and rulebooks and guidelines.

A couple is asked to step aside and they are shown into one of the two holding rooms just beside the immigration hatches. That's a return ticket to Santry Garda station for them tonight, by the looks of

things.

~~Human nature doesn't change and they are only trying to do what we did in the 1980s. Many of us remember lying through our teeth to get into the US. In the summer of 1986, I wedged my illegal body behind four Hondurans and a couple of white South Africans, full-time, no-going-back immigrants both. The South Africans were waved on after a grilling, but the Hondurans were given the full treatment. By the time I faced Lieutenant Mahoney of the US immigration service, my accent was somewhere between Tom Cruise in *Far and Away* and Pat Shortt of *D'Unbelievables*. Mahoney, probably because he wanted to, believed my unbelievable auntie-in-Yonkers yarn. Once on American soil, I disappeared into the kitchens of Manhattan.~~

Our immigrants are at the same game. The only difference is that they are faced by men who've been on the other side of the glass. Our gardaí are probably the only immigration officers in the world who have themselves experienced being illegal somewhere. Two of the lads on duty had spoofed their way into Logan Airport in the dark 80s, so their sympathies were with the desperate people they face.

At 12.10 a.m. a Filipina girl, very well dressed and nervous, is stopped. She looks petrified. This is the human face of globalisation. She is nearly in tears and you can see her trying to keep it together. Try to imagine what's going through her head. Think about how much it took to get this far. Freedom is just a yard away, yet it's miles. Anyone with a conscience would claim her as his wife just to get her across the line.

She licks her lips. She looks away from the glass. Her nerves leave her mouth parched. Who is she thinking about? Her mother, her brother, husband or boyfriend? Who is waiting for her at the far side? Who is willing her through customs? Her phone beeps with an anxious incoming text.

The garda asks her to stand back against the wall where there is a life-size ruler. He checks her height, asks her for another paper, her letter and invitation. He phones someone. Will she incriminate her friends who are waiting at arrivals for her? Might the gardaí use her as bait? She's not too sure. She can't hear. It's all happening too quickly. The rest of the queue is staring at her, irritated. There's nothing more impatient than a bunch of Poles who three years ago were in the same predicament as the Filipina but now feel an entitlement. They examine their fake Rolexes, shaking their heads. Eaten bread is easily forgotten.

Then she hears it. It's faint at first. Is someone talking to her? No, it's metallic. It's the click of the visa stamp pressing down on her passport bearing the official seal of Ireland, engraving the smudged ink with the harp. It's a chance of a new life, giving her a new lease, she is in. She cries. All this trauma to change the bedpans of frail Irish geriatrics whose own families, for whatever reason, can't look after them.

The next batch is four Baltic flights and one from Brussels. As the Balts stream in, you can sense the rents in Tyrrellstown rising. It's like watching the entire staff of a large Centra on the move. The gardaí catch a cup of tea. The boss's 'Eye of the Tiger' ringtone goes—it's the missus asking him to bring back a curry.

The investigative team arrives. He's half-*Miami Vice*, half-*Garda Patrol*, kitted out in full GAA-club chic: beige suit, brown soft shoes and green tie. You couldn't make it up. Her hair matches his suit. They work together—good cop, bad cop. They're working on a Moldovan prostitution ring. They've also been tracking a Nigerian fraudster gang for weeks now, but Don Johnson claims that the Nigerians are harder to crack than any other criminals. All police work is based on local intelligence and the Nigerians don't grass up their own—even with the threat of deportation hanging over them. Most others will sing like canaries when they're threatened with expulsion—not the Nigerians.

There's a Japanese passport alert just in from our man in Paris. The gardaí have a network around Europe, watching, noting and passing intelligence back and forth. They work closely with other cops but given the sheer numbers of people arriving, they only catch a fraction of the action. The smuggler

know this. They know the odds are stacked in their favour. It's a game of cat and mouse, with human pawns.

At any one time, there are 30 million Chinese people on the move around the world.¹³ Picking on rich Japanese is common. Chinese smugglers steal Japanese passports from expensive hotels on the continent. They then line up their stable of would-be illegal migrants and examine everyone for similarities. If one of the Chinese can pass for the Japanese in the picture they will cut her hair and change her clothes accordingly. They work on the assumption that we can't tell the difference between Chinese and Japanese, in the same way as they couldn't tell the difference between an Irish person and a Latvian.

The stewardess announces the incoming Brussels flight. The passengers queue up with the confidence of western Europeans which, counter-intuitively, means looking at their shoes, slightly guiltily. One young woman is different. She constantly changes queue at the faintest sign of a hold-up. She is well dressed. Her papers are in order. Something is not quite right. Her palms are sweating. She looks like the French woman in the photo: everything matches. The officer checks again. She's wearing a long dress. He asks her to inch closer. 'Please turn around, Miss.' He asks her to stand against the life-size ruler. She's the right height, but quite tall for a West African at five foot eight. She looks around nervously and tries to regain her composure by flicking her hair and examining her impressively varnished nails. She plays with her earrings. She's trying to flirt without making eye-contact.

He points to her ankles. She doesn't move and pretends not to understand. He motions again and asks her to lift up her dress. She begins to shake and speaks French to anyone who will listen. But human nature is cowardly. When the quarry is being chased it is vaguely interesting, when the game is up and the prey cornered, no-one has the stomach to watch.

Underneath her long skirt is a pair of customised eight-inch heels. The poor girl is practically crippled. She bursts into tears. She is Congolese, fourteen years old, in a strange country and has probably been pimped here on false, stolen documents. She is nowhere near the height of the person she is supposed to be. She's about five foot and she stands there sobbing, frightened and alone. The woman who, three minutes ago was checking her nail varnish, is now a distraught child. The middle-aged gardaí see their own daughters in front of them. Someone in the queue is drafted in to translate.

Dublin airport is our Ellis Island. These people are our huddled masses. This is what the new world order means, and Ireland is on the front line.

Chapter 2

| VERTIGO

Dream On

Have you noticed the respect you get in estate agents lately? It feels good. You are important again. Your money has value and you have a certain stature that a buyer hasn't had in a while. It is a sign of things to come.

Last year you were treated with haughty contempt by the pretty girl with beige hair, pencil skirt and French-manicured gel nails. Today, Ms Pencil Skirt fawns over you as if you were a precious commodity. Well, you are a buyer and there aren't many of you around. She flicks her hair and breathlessly raves about the generous proportions of the seven-hundred-square-foot, honey-coloured starter homes.

They all have curved drives, you know.

A bend in the drive, no matter how small, gives the impression (to whom, one wonders) that there is a broad sweep in front of an impressive home. Or so she learned on her weekend auctioneering crash course. Last year, this was a selling point. Last year, she simply opened up the plans, sat back and took deposits. This year, she's been up to all sorts of tricks: installing water features, rockeries, black bamboo, anything to make the 87 unsold homes move. The developer, who used to spend all day in his helicopter, is on the phone constantly.

She's trying her best. They even gave away two houses on FM104 as part of an all-out marketing campaign. But nothing's moving. She's convinced the offer of a free kitchen will work. The kitchen suppliers are only too glad to give the stuff away at a discount. Their stores are full of Shaker units. Last summer young parents were crawling all over the place; today there isn't a jogging stroller in sight.

The banks have been very helpful in putting together a soft financing option for the first 500 buyers (They would do that; their share price depends on it.) But it's still dead, even with the developer's offer to pay the first year's mortgage. The only rent is coming from Department of Social Welfare clients, but if she's honest, Ms Pencil Skirt knows that the sight of unemployed Africans has never done much for sales.

Now, I'm not racist or anything, but you know what I mean?

She clicks her false nails off her IKEA flat-pack desk. Ms Pencil Skirt has a small ladder in her tight that no amount of nail varnish can arrest.

The ladder is like confidence in the housing market in Dublin 15, the fastest growing suburb in the

country.¹ No amount of schmoozing can obscure the fact that there are too many 'for sale' signs up, houses are languishing on the market for months and the supply coming online is enormous. Prices are falling, landlords are panicking and although she can't see it, there's more at stake than the repossession of Ms Pencil Skirt's cream convertible vw Beetle called Babes. Where have all the buyers gone?

Drive out to any of our new suburbs, the ones that we've thrown up in the past two or three years, and you get a feeling that something is not quite right. Yes, we have built 310,000 new houses since 2004 and yes, 122,000 of these are empty,² without tenants and generating no rent, but it is not just the economic numbers that are not adding up, something else doesn't quite fit.

Wedged in the crook of the Dublin-Meath border, where the last of the Dublin Mountains gives way to the flat lands of North Leinster, the new villages of Dublin 15 are the face of New Ireland. These are places of removal vans, foreign-registered Honda Civics, kitchen showrooms and overcrowded multilingual pre-fab schools. But these places, homes to thousands of us, are presented as an experiment in nostalgia. If you think you've just walked on to the set of *Fair City*, you are not alone. You are surrounded by old-looking new stuff. Everything is mock something or other. A sanitised version of the past is on sale, the dream of a life less ordinary up for grabs. We are stepping back in time to a pastoral Ireland, where milk bottles were left out, doors were left unlocked and children were left alone to fly kites.

But if you feel that you are hurtling forward, propelled along by the new forces of globalisation, why the overriding obsession with the past? What is it about the word 'village'? Sign after sign on the endless maze of ring roads points to the so-called 'village centre' as if by calling it a village, you imbue it with a whiff of history.

But we all know that there is no village here. We know that a village is something that evolves over time, centuries in many cases. We understand that a village has a soul and the soul is the people, the dead generations giving the place a distinct flavour, almost a smell which is spiced by rivalries, tall tales, jealousies, loves, losses and rural legends, all of which go to make up the story of the place. A church helps too. What makes a village different from a shopping centre is history. We know all this, yet, we are prepared to accept the preposterous conceit that there is a village centre in Ongar, Dublin 15, when there is manifestly not. It was built two years ago.

Ongar is a fabrication, as much as *Fair City*, *Glenroe* and *Coronation Street* are fabrications. Dublin 15 is now dotted with these 'instant villages'. Much in the same way as the estates have incongruous names such as 'The Boulevard', the instant villages aim to create the illusion of 'established communities'.

We are all culpable. Jump in a cab and ask to go to Ongar Village and the taxi-driver will nod with the same familiarity as if you said Ballymore Eustace. He might even ask, 'Is it the village you want or one of the estates?'

So we are playing a big game of Let's Pretend. Let's pretend we don't live in a new estate built in the past three years, where we have no idea who is living beside us. Let's pretend that we don't commute. Let's pretend that we actually live in a peaceful village, not a concrete jungle with speed bumps. Let's pretend that this is where our grandfathers came from, where we chased in the fields as kids, picked blackberries, made tree huts, played conkers and ate homemade brown bread baked by neighbours. Let's recreate Arcadia west of Clonsilla.

The reason for this nostalgia trip is that Ireland is moving forwards but looking backwards.

It begins with the developer, who creates a myth. He sets aside an acre or two of retail space within the vast complex and calls it a 'village'. The planners are in on the joke. The village will then grow backwards. First, the retail space is marketed to retailers just like the ground floor of any new shopping centre. An anchor tenant, such as Dunnes Stores, will be secured and this will act as a honeypot to lure other retailers, like Spar or Centra. The roads on the surrounding estates will be designed to funnel people into the shopping complex. This will create profit-maximising footfall and is the new-development equivalent of one-way escalators in Liffey Valley shopping centre.

Once the anchor retail tenant is in, the developer will get on with the ludicrous business of creating the instant village to encase the twee shopping centre. In the next month or so, a makey-uppey village will rise out of nowhere. Here, modern Ireland is grafting on the idea of community to make shopping centres more palatable for planners. Everyone is scrambling for a bit of community these days.

Let's see, what else do we need to create a community? A school? That would be far too much hassle and it doesn't pay the rent. Let's start with a fake clock tower and a village green. What else do we need? Maybe a set of Victorian railings going nowhere in particular, fencing off nothing in particular and a wrought-iron pretend water pump? A village green with an ornamental 1960s' P&T telephone box, some overflowing hanging baskets and two new Edwardian-style benches might do the trick. The focus group told the developer that's what people liked, a sit-com-set village made them feel permanent, rooted and at home rather than what they were, transient, floating, in flux.

The developers are selling an illusion. Everything, except the plasma screen in each home, is retro.

In no time, the developer has succeeded in passing off a field in Meath as an early-20th-century market town like Kenmare. The new village resembles where you came from. It is a tranquil, complete market town with local characters, solid shopkeepers, village gossips and idiot savants. If people want nostalgia, we'll give it to them. We want to go backwards to go forward. Glenroe is our destiny.

Why now? Why the nostalgia bonanza? Possibly because we are afraid of the future. When people are on the move, uprooted and dislocated, we yearn for some ideal vision of the past, a romantic fantasy of a place secure from the nastiness, chaos and anxiety of modern life. We don't want to be just number 176 in a suburb of over four thousand new houses and apartments; we want to be a member of a community and a neighbourhood. Don't worry about the fact that the pace of change in your job, your relationship and your family is knocking you off course, why not just pop down to the village for a pint of milk, the newspaper or just a quick chat to catch up on the gossip? It is all so familiar, even if the shop assistants are Poles bussed in at dawn from Blessington.

The instant villages are, in fact, the bizarre creation of a graphic designer who lives in a loft and would not be seen dead in D15. He has a shaved head, sculpted facial hair and wide-rimmed Bono glasses. He sits behind an Apple Mac in Grand Canal Basin, working in an open-plan office with an *à la carte* urban-planning graphics package made in China. Just about as far from a real Irish village as you can get.

But he understands that the sales pitch of the new village appeals to something very deep in us, the need to belong. In modern Ireland this wanting to belong is made all the more acute because we have just come through one of the most dislocating cultural spin cycles in our history. We have been tossed around by financial and social upheaval. We are clutching at straws. What happened? How did we get here? Where are we going?

Turn on the radio today and you will hear countless chat shows about the old days and why things were better. These are being hosted and contributed to by people old enough to remember the old days. This is middle-aged radio, for middle-aged people. But nonetheless, it reveals the obsession with nostalgia. When things are moving forward at such a dramatic pace, there is a yearning to slow things

down, to go back to an idealised, slow life before TV dinners and YouTube. There is a great urge to escape the modern world and to revert to a mythical cocoon of grainy early-Technicolour home video of children in short pants, stable families and stay-at-home mothers with beehive hairdos.

These Let's Pretend villages are simply digitally re-mastered versions of the original—repackaged, re-sold and hyped up.

Today, we are in Ongar Village, one of the biggest developments in West Dublin, named bizzarely after an Essex commuter town. As well as a fake water pump, there are two shops, three crèches, the ubiquitous Curves gym, a Domino's Pizza, an off-licence (but no pub), a Paddy Power bookmakers, three hairdressers and seven estate agents. Yes, seven. This is the set of *Ryan's Daughter* where John Mills is a mortgage broker. But nothing's selling, the market is going the wrong way.

Ms Pencil Skirt gazes out the window across the village green, past the black traffic warden standing by the ad for Dunnes Stores. She's dreaming of her cute texter, living for the weekend. She applies more nail varnish to the ladder in her tights, wondering how she's going to shift these 87 apartments without dropping the price. From wistful to wishful thinking. Her tights stick to her waxed legs.

Don't Look Down

Clumsy self-delusion and hoping for the best are two of our national characteristics. We can deceive ourselves about anything: we deny that we have a housing addiction, despite the fact that 83 cent of every euro borrowed last year went into property or construction-related investment.³ We have all chased the housing dragon for years—anything that looks like a comedown is to be denied at all costs. No-one wants national cold turkey.

But by joining the dots, it is clear that we are past the tipping point. We are at the top of the economic cycle. Don't look down. It's a long way to the ground.

Ireland is in trouble. The Irish dream of mass home ownership at any price is set to crash into the global reality of enormous economic change, at a time when the gravitational pull of interest rates is irresistible. This implosion will alter the country in three profound ways.

First, the financial miracle of the last five years is likely to be exposed as nothing more than a monumental overdraft secured on dramatically overvalued property. When payback time comes, young working families, the backbone of society, will be hardest hit. They are the ones with the most debts and the least wealth. They are the ones with the insecure income made more fragile by the twin forces of globalisation and the disappearance of the 'job-for-life' culture. They are also the people most in competition with the new wild card in the Irish pack: immigrants.

When the economy is going well, all these conflicting drags can be easily ignored. But when the cycle turns, it's a different story. The cycle is turning and this will lead to a demographic war, not so much between the haves and have nots, the rich and the poor, the Left and the Right but between the young and old. The Irish property boom has greatly enriched the middle-aged at the expense of the young. The dividing line is when you bought property: if you bought last century, you are cushioned, if you are just on the ladder in the past few years, you are exposed.

Second, as a result of this new economic reality, the country will feel wounded, let down and deflated. Domestic politics could be set for a period of severe turbulence. In the run-up to the 100th anniversary of the 1916 Rising, the political pendulum will swing. Yet again, Ireland will have to reinvent itself. Everything that we take for granted has been structured in the context of an economic boom, with ample revenue and enough cash to smooth over the rough edges. When this changes, all bets are off. Hard choices will have to be made, new challenges faced and novel directions taken.

Third, the social forces unleashed by an economic downturn, caused by a falling housing market and enormous debts, will be so powerful that the direction of the country for the next ten years is at

stake. A battle for the heart and soul of the nation is likely to play out as it has done in other countries that have come through a similar experience. Everything will be questioned. Will we try to close ourselves off? Will Ireland choose nationalism over globalisation, interventionism over *laissez-faire* regulation over deregulation, Hibernianism over cosmopolitanism? What are the likely implications for immigration, the eu, freedom and tolerance? Is there another way—an Irish solution to an Irish problem, combining the best of Irishness with the best of globalisation?

To make clear decisions, we have to stop pretending that nothing is wrong. We need to accept that Ongar and all the other ‘villages’ in Dublin 15 are about as real as *Fair City*; accept that nostalgia won’t protect us from the future and that one of the least densely populated countries in Europe⁴ can sustain the highest house prices in Europe⁵ indefinitely. We won’t progress until we accept that the property obsession is a monster that is cannibalising us, and far from being good for the economy, the property boom is making us feeble. It is elbowing out proper business and sucking in all the resources of the economy. It is our greatest weakness, not our greatest strength.

It is creating a dangerous demographic divide in our society which is pricing thousands of young people out of a future and lumbering thousands of others with ludicrously large debts which will affect their quality of life and that of their children for a generation. This is socially divisive but more than that, it is a betrayal of the expectations of a generation. Since time immemorial, societies have been based on the idea that the old and middle-aged pass wealth on to the young. In Ireland, the young, via the property market, are passing wealth up to the middle-aged. The worker bees are supporting the drones.

The first part of this book will focus on this demographic divide. There are three generations competing for the fruits of the boom. The first generation is the middle-aged ‘Jagger’ generation who have been dramatically—and in many cases, unexpectedly—enriched over the past few years. They have most to lose from a change in the status quo and, as such, will try to keep the party going for as long as possible. The second generation, coming just behind the Jagers, are the ‘Bono Boomers’, Ireland’s first ‘permalescent’ (permanently adolescent) generation. While not sitting quite as pretty as the Jagers, they are doing quite nicely, thank you. The third generation, the ‘Jugglers’, is made up of the worker bees, the unintended victims of ludicrous house prices, massive debts, underfunded pensions and potential negative equity. They are told they’ve never had it so good, but, in fact, they are pinned to their collars. Up until now, this generational divide has been disguised by the effervescence of the housing boom. Now that the housing market is faltering, the generation gap will be exposed, leading to serious social and political consequences.

The crux of the dilemma for Ireland is that we find ourselves in a Catch-22 situation. Domestically and for local political reasons, everything will be done to prevent the housing market from falling. However, internationally, the Irish economy will not regain competitiveness unless house prices fall so that the economy may recover and society rebalance itself. Hesitancy at this stage will be an act of economic sabotage which delays the inevitable. Difficult as it is to appreciate now, in the longer term a house price slump will allow us to blow the froth off the economy and come through the far side much fitter and more open to the opportunities that the brave new globalised world affords us.

That’s the challenge. The next five years will be crucial.

| THE JAGGER GENERATION

The Winner Takes All

Billy Bunker has just picked up his corporate hospitality tickets for the gig of the century: the Rolling Stones' Bigger Bang Tour concert at Slane. Ironically, he didn't go the last time, 25 years ago. Now, however, courtesy of *www.corporate.ie*, he can get a weekend hospitality ticket for the Stones and bring clients. The *Irish Times* has produced a four-page supplement on it. This will be the Ryder Cup with music. It will be the day out for the gilded generation, the people who run the country.

When you examine where the reins of power are held, you see that when you strip back the spin and hype suggesting that it's the young who have all the opportunities in the New Ireland, there's always a middle-aged man with his finger on the button. We are ruled by an evergreen generation, like their idol, Mick Jagger. They are all well into their 50s, but never want to get old. They are good fun, and will always be the last people at the party. They were Ireland's first teenagers and are not going to let it go now.

No music shop can do without them. They are the ones who buy all the CDs, those Cream back-catalogues, top-of-the-range iPods, corporate boxes as well as Mini Coopers. They were the people who made *Reeling in the Years* one of the bestselling CDs ever. They know the words to 'An Dearg Doon', make the annual pilgrimage to the Vibe for Philo and consider nuclear power to be the spawn of the devil, while holding up France (Europe's biggest user of nuclear power) as the cradle of Republican civilisation.

The Jagger Generation is not a bad generation: you can't pin genocide, ethnic cleansing or the Magdalene laundries on them. The charge against them is that they have financial serendipity on their side—an ally most of us would welcome with open arms. They were on the right side of the property boom and have been enriched beyond their wildest dreams. They are reasonably good citizens with a weakness for tax-relief car parks, pension scare-mongering, the *Late Late*, digitally remastered Van Morrison CDs and Marianne Faithful memories.

The Jaggers were born between 1945 and 1960 when the country was in trouble. Many of their older brothers and sisters emigrated in the great flight of the 1950s when the entire Irish Republic project was being questioned, even by the original revolutionaries who created it in the first place. Close to half a million people left our country between 1945 and 1960.¹ Those who stayed found themselves in a denuded country, on the cusp of social change.

Most of our enlightened laws have been made by and for the Jaggers. They are tolerant. The Jaggers supported the EEC, they fought for the separation of Church and State and kept the place afloat in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

They were Ireland's first hippies and Ireland's revolutionary generation. They made Carnsore our

Woodstock, drove Citroen 2CVs with 'Atomic Power, *Nein Danke*' stickers, picketed the British Embassy, marched at Wood Quay, took condom trains and manned the 1970s' barricades. Those who weren't so public about their politics, privately wrestled with their own conscience and went on anti-tax marches. Together, the Juggers dragged Ireland, screaming and kicking, into the modern age.

They did all this while also breeding like rabbits. They had big families early, who they educated well. In fact, the tempo at which they bred was quite impressive in the first years of their marriages and the population of suburban semi-detached estates of the 1970s attest. Their marriage boom climaxed in a crescendo in 1973, when there were more weddings in Ireland than in any year before or since.²

Many of these marriages are now fracturing as the gelling agent of children has loosened and the empty nest is echoing hollow. Early retirement is allowing many of the mothers, who've never looked better, to flog it all, split the house proceeds and head off for Marbella and winter golf. There are now considerably more divorces per head amongst Ireland's Juggers who were brought up in Catholic Ireland than amongst the younger commuters who were brought up in secular Ireland.³

All in all, the Juggers are just older versions of the rest of us except for the fact that, now they are in power, they have abandoned the idealism that defined them and have replaced it with pragmatism. And that means holding on to what they have. Because they only make up 14%⁴ of the population, the Juggers' stake in society is hugely disproportionate and their wealth has been bolstered by the housing market, the very asset that is an anvil around the neck of the commuting generation, the Jugglers.

The Juggers have inherited the very country they should now be bequeathing. What's more, they are going to be around for a long time and have no intention of passing the baton, so we'd all better get used to them. Whether it's a phantom swing with Tiger at the K-club, or 'My Generation' with the WHO at Marley Park, the Juggers are in the driving seat, in top gear.

From the corporate sector to the media, from heads of academic departments to senior civil servants and many of our TDs, the entire Irish establishment comes from this Jagger Generation. In the years ahead, the political battleground in Ireland will not be between Left and Right, Catholic and Protestant, urban and rural Ireland, but it will be between the asset-rich, well-off Jagger Generation and the rest, particularly the younger, cash-strapped, heavily indebted Juggler Generation about 20 years behind them, who keep the whole show on the road.

The Juggers were at Slane in their thousands on 18 August, air-guitaring along with Keith to 'Sympathy for the Devil', while checking their Blackberries. Like Jagger, they led the revolution, railed against the system and threatened to overthrow the power, but today they are the power. In the same way as former rebels, the Rolling Stones, play like court jesters at Bill Gates' 50th, the Jagger Generation has joined up, opting-in rather than dropping out. Whether they are Lexus-driving, chino-wearing golf obsessives or lentil-eating, yoga-driven high-end spa devotees, they are bound together by their age and their taste in music. They were all at Slane. They still can't get no satisfaction.

When their parents were their age they were tucked up in bed, but not these lads. They're partying harder in their 50s than they did in their 20s. So long as the ticker holds out, there's no inconsistency here. Although a cynic might say that inconsistencies are the Jagger Generation's calling card.

Many vote Green but take more polluting short-break flights than anyone else. They speak the language of Labour, yet have holiday homes in Connemara. They support the Rosspoint Five, yet invest their pension funds in American multinationals. They argue for better public hospitals, yet are fully paid up VHI Plan-E members, en route to the Beacon Clinic. They rail publicly against the price of houses for first-time buyers but are actually the largest bunch of investors in the country, cannibalising the first-time buyers. They want more motorways, but vote for lower taxes; they were the first generation to benefit from free education, yet send their kids to private fee-paying schools. They are all united behind the Luas, particularly the Sandyford line.

As they now control the ‘commanding heights’ (an expression they were fond of when they were young) of the media, it was easy for them to take over the airwaves for days to mourn George Best and Charlie Haughey, while the rest of the country went to work. In fact, despite claiming to hate the tabloids, Rupert Murdoch and Michael O’Leary, they turned Best into the Britney Spears of sport—a tabloid freak, an accident waiting to happen, and then mourned his passing with crocodile tears as if he were somehow unexpected. On the other hand, they vilified Haughey privately when he was alive, afraid to confront him for fear it might affect a friend’s Aosdána application. When he died, they eulogised him publicly as a genius rather than a thief. The death of Haughey was a Jagger-fest of monumental proportions. The radio and television were full of gab-fests about Haughey. But it wasn’t about Haughey; it was about the Jagers, their youth, their lives and their memories. Most people under forty never had the chance to vote in a Haughey election.

As for Michael O’Leary, they all love to hate him in public—they are the ones you’ll hear complain loudest at the carousel about Ryanair’s excessive golf-club charges—but they are also the ones at the front on the maiden flight to Pula with their chequebooks open, hoping to be ‘first in’ in the latest Ryanair-inspired, cheap-flight-enabled property bonanza.

You will hear them over a pint in O’Dowd’s in Roundstone or over lunch in Fallon & Byrne, still arguing about Lennon versus McCartney, Haughey versus FitzGerald, Church versus State, Roe versus Wade, balsamic versus tarragon, focaccia versus ficelle and spin versus substance.

They are the sultans of spin: they make it up as they go along, history is reinvented, victories appropriated, core-positions dropped and the future is inherited now, not in the afterlife. This is the generation that went from civil rights to property rights, from burning the British Embassy down to talking the British housing market up, from revolution to risotto, from Long Kesh to Long Beach.

How did the generation that was going to change other people’s lives, end up buying other people’s lifestyles, more worried about grinding coffee than grinding poverty?

Before we answer this, let’s examine the Jagger Generation, Ireland’s new ruling class, more closely.

There’s nothing new about the middle-aged running the country or the middle-aged constructing it in its own likeness. Jagers all over the world are at the same carry-on. This is what happens in social democracies. A few years ago, while interviewing the old English socialist, Tony Benn, on the issue of ageing, he turned to me and said, ‘Young man, the old and the young have one thing in common: they are both bullied by the middle-aged.’

But what is interesting in the Irish case is just how dominant the middle-aged Jagers are, how few of them there are in comparison with the rest of society, how much richer they are than anyone else and how oblivious they are to the fact that they are now at the epicentre of power. Nothing happens in Ireland without them, no laws are passed which might affect them negatively and the country has been turned into a middle-aged playground. Most interesting of all is that they think they are still young and as a result, they are the only generation to have pissed off both their parents and their children. Now that’s some achievement.

The Jagers fall into two broad camps. Only recently have these tribes realised that they have more in common than they thought. Listen to the paper-reviewing panels on Marian Finucane’s RTE Radio show on Sunday morning if you doubt that. In an extremely good programme, with the most naturally talented radio broadcaster this country has probably ever produced, there is a nice consensus, driven more by age than ideology. The Jagger fusion has happened.

But it wasn't always like this. Back when they were young and angry during the set-piece battles of the 1970s, both camps were implacable enemies with very different views of what Ireland should be. As they've got older and more similar, they have realised that they have much more in common with each other than with anyone else in society. Power is not only a great aphrodisiac, it focuses the mind. Every generation has its price and in the end, the great arguments of the two opposing camps of Jagers who came of age in the 1970s, were ultimately settled by money.

The Redundant Radicals

The first Jagger tribe is the Redundant Radicals, who realise that their bluff was called in 1989 when the Berlin Wall fell and who have been desperately groping around for a new identity ever since. Finally, like the Labour Party and Sinn Féin, they've thrown in the towel and succumbed to the allure of tax cuts. It's hard to sustain a world of capital-against-labour when most workers are capitalists and when the main unions in the country do not represent endangered hod-carriers, but pampered public-sector workers. Also, international workers' solidarity is hard to maintain when the main threat to the living standards of what remains of the Irish industrial working class is not the boss, but hungry workers from Poland who are prepared to work for the minimum wage because they live three-to-a-room in investment properties owned by the Jagger Generation.

Along the way, the Radicals lost Marx but found Joyce, dropped *Das Kapital* and picked up *Ulysses*. Truth be known, they have probably read neither; but that hasn't stopped them from turning Bloomsday into their very own May Day, complete with a communist weakness for uniforms and role playing, an absolutist and unwavering devotion to the sacred text and a Soviet-style obsession with minute detail and reinterpretation. They are disciples, after all. Ironically, despite anticlericalism being their unifying thread, hating, as they do, all things religious, they retain a fondness for sacrament and ritual and dietary exclusiveness as they munch their way through piss-smelling kidney at eight in the morning, head to toe in ceremonial Edwardian costume. But it's all good fun in that first-edition, 'in crowd' type of way.

Redundant Radicals are prominent in the media, politics and academia, which might possibly explain why the former two are often lagging indicators of social trends, why much of the media misread the last election and why Irish universities do not figure in international league tables.

From such elevated safe-ground, the Redundant Radicals can launch broadsides against fictitious class enemies while continuing to live in Victorian Ranelagh. They can also rail about developers exploiting immigrant labour, while they extend their second houses in the West using bewildered Latvian lads just two weeks in the country. Even they have realised that bashing the Church is a blood sport. They still read *Hot Press* and are behind the new obsession with public awareness campaigns. So, instead of hard, unambiguous legislation to police bad behaviour, we have soft, woolly public awareness campaigns like Age Action Week, Dental Awareness Week, Racism Awareness Week, International Women at Work Day, and Be Nice to Dad Day. What next? Be Nice to Pet Rabbits Day. Take your pick. They accept that the tribunals are a waste of time (apart from their left-wing college mates at the Bar who set out to change the world and ended up changing the Volvo).

The Redundant Radicals have had to migrate to the corners of the protest movement not because they were unsuccessful, but because everything they campaigned for, they got. They won the war because they were right but they are too self-absorbed to realise that they've won. They still want to be taken seriously, but have ponytails. In many ways, modern Ireland is the place they dreamt of in 1969, only richer and more decadent.

Because they defined themselves as rebels, giving the two liberated fingers to authority, many have been unwilling to set out rules, regulations and discipline for their children. The vacuum vacated by the Church has not been filled by anything, except Doors back-catalogues and serial inoffensiveness.

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