

Cutbacks are as pernicious as hard drugs

THE protests about drug-dealers in Roscrea gave me a profound sense of déjà vu. In a small town hit by the recession, Gardaí have complained that their 'limited resource base' has restricted their capacity to respond to the problem. Although the Garda Regional Response Unit has been deployed, the Roscrea problem is hauntingly reminiscent of another drugs-based criminal culture — Limerick City's in the last major Irish recession, in the 1980s. When I was researching gangland crime, residents of Limerick's marginalised areas described how, during the 1980s, drug dealers got a hold in their neighbourhoods. These settled estates became ravaged by drugs crime and anti-social behaviour. A poorly resourced police force struggled to respond and the power vacuum fostered a more serious criminal culture.

This criminal culture produced a deadly feud, a highly organised crime network and a culture of intimidation, culminating in a series of murders that tore the city apart. It took 100 extra Gardaí, an armed response unit, a new Criminal Justice Act, as well as massive investment into community policing and youth intervention schemes to undo the damage created by state neglect.

The parallels between the current problems in Roscrea and the earlier problems in Limerick City have raised, for me, deeper questions about the legacy of austerity in Ireland.

Remarks by the Tánaiste, Joan Burton, about the forthcoming budget, this week, suggest a softening of fiscal adjustment and a growing optimism about the economy. However, after four years of savage cuts to services, new taxes, high unemployment and emigration, what kind of society are we left with?

What are the gaps in public

services and how will these affect future generations already saddled with massive debt?

There are lessons to be learned by re-visiting the previous recovery period in Ireland.

Between 1980 and 1989, 29% of acute hospital beds were taken out of the Irish health system, creating over-crowding in accident-and-emergency units that was never satisfactorily solved. During the 1990s, key pieces of infrastructure, such as the National Children's



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Hospital, were not built. State institutions, such as St Patrick's, which had been declared unfit in the 1980s to house young offenders, were still open and the increasing wage levels of the Celtic Tiger did nothing to plug these gaps. While the recession of the 1980s was the result of economic mismanagement, clearly economic management of the boom was not a sparkling success either.

Why? One of the reasons may be Ireland's reactive, interest-driven political culture. Writing about Irish economic failures in the 1970s, the industrialist, DSA Carroll, complained that "successive governments have proposed policies which they then failed to pursue, have made offers to the electorate which they could not afford, and have responded to factionalist demands of nar-

row and immediate interest, to the detriment of the broader and long-term interests of the factions themselves, apart altogether from the nation as a whole." These comments could have described Irish political culture at almost any time between the early 1970s and the bailout. Carroll predicted that this approach to economic management would end in disaster and, of course, his predictions were correct. The pandering to factionalist interests led to an economic crisis for

its remit to prudent advice about managing our relationship with the markets and the ECB, though, like NAMA, it may widen its remit in the future. In the meantime, however, I have been heartened somewhat by the substance of a political spat this week between Gerry Adams and John Bruton.

Bruton's call for an enthusiastic commemoration of the passing of the 1914 Home Rule Act evinced an extremely negative response from Adams,

the Sinn Féin leader, who accused Bruton of "denigrating the sacrifice of 1916 participants". This public battle between two senior political figures renews the focus on the competing visions the Irish revolutionary generation had for Irish society 100 years ago.

While there may have been dramatic differences between 1916 revolutionaries and the advocates of Home Rule, each group did, at least, have its own distinct vision for Irish society, which transcended the

demands of internal interest groups and, indeed, over-bearing external powers. Throughout this period of turmoil, which deeply damaged the Irish economy, men and women dared to think about what they wanted Irish society to be, despite the limited fiscal resources of a newly emerging state.

The state they created deviated, in many ways, from all their idealistic visions and was, at times, horrifically repressive.

However, for all the mocking of Eamon de Valera's musings on 'cosy homesteads' and 'comely maidens', he and his opponents within the Civil War generation of Irish politicians did, at least, have a vision for Irish society. They publicly debated what kind of existence Irish society would offer its citizens. They considered what would be their rights and, indeed, their obligations to this new state. It is perhaps appropriate that, in the malaise of the post-bailout period, the current generation of Irish politicians is beginning to reflect on the contribution of the various political and revolutionary groups of the 1914-1916 period.

That generation showed extraordinary courage in creating a state in the face of powerful opponents. At the end of the War of Independence, they stood in the rubble of an old state and created a new one against significant odds. The challenge faced by the current

generation of Irish politicians is less staggering, but equally important.

As austerity lifts, there are significant gaps in public services, which are catering to a population weary of taxation and the never-ending struggle to survive. Failure to recognise these gaps could lead to a sharp decline in quality of life for all. At the meeting to discuss the drugs crisis in Roscrea last week, one local GP said the people of the town "have reached their limit".

They are not the only ones. In the wake of austerity, what kind of Ireland do we want to create? Let's ask the people of Roscrea.

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