

TROUBLING IRELAND

Knowledge of the Grass

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We've been taken for a ride. The guarantees that we were given – if we took the hard decision, if we took the pain up-front, if we admitted that we were living beyond our means, if we all made the sacrifice to get the economy back 'on track'; these guarantees were nothing but misdirections, designed to provide a convenient cover for the vindication for more powerful, if opaque, interests. It's not that there was some over-arching conspiracy. Many of the Government Ministers, economists, 'experts' and the commentators who uncritically formulated and promulgated these simplistic nostrums may have genuinely felt this was the only alternative, that something had to be done, and that this was how things were done. No matter. Benign subjective intention is no excuse for malign objective outcomes. Mistakes are only excusable when admitted to and corrected. Livelihoods and life-chances have been destroyed, an economy has been impaired and society has been degraded. Even democracy has been compromised. We can change parties in Governments, the faces of Minister, the names of programmes and agencies but we remain trapped in a one-policy state.

This is the state we are in.

There is little sense in wishing it were otherwise, pretending we have capacities which we don't possess. As we are often told – we are where we are. And where we are is not where we intended or where we were told we would be.

Austerity is an honest ideology even if its promoters in public policy are not always so. Austerity says, 'if you use me, you will devastate jobs, incomes, growth and living standards.' It sits on an economy like a large, immovable boulder, pushing down everything beneath it, crushing the weakest, the frailest. It makes no other claim. It is an instrument only, and it is a dangerous one.

But to describe the economic impact of austerity is to grasp only part of the picture, important as it is to do so. The real impact is on the public realm and the idea of the 'political'. If politics is the space where people come to solve collectively the problems they face individually, then austerity can be utilised to limit that space, squeeze the potential solutions and leave people to individually solve their problems in the private market place; and that can be quite profitable for some. It is not just the services and income supports (health, education, pensions). It limits the options for democratically accountable production of goods and services. It limits the solutions we can bring to issues of debt and low incomes. People are disempowered; a price tag is placed on everything; we are not treated as autonomous individuals. We become 'costs'. And these costs must be cut.

We have outsourced democracy. Our relationships – in the workplace, in the community, in the home – are priced, traded and discounted in a glorified bazaar that always ensures the bottom-line is not breached. The issue here is not profit as such. In the public realm, in that political space where collective responses are constructed, we can all 'profit'. The social and economic realms are appropriately intertwined, inextricably so; overseen by a democratic and participatory process.

Again, the issue here is not markets as such. Markets are politically constructed – allowing for millions of prices, signals and transactions to occur every day, every hour (how many people have ordered a cup of coffee in Ireland since you started reading this article). The problem lies in the

construction itself – one person's 'healthy' market is another person's (many people's) nightmare: unemployment, poverty, deprivation, low-pay and an inability to fulfil their potential.

How do we wake up from the nightmare? How do we end the one-policy state? How do we re-politicise society? We start with the individual in a democratising, participatory process. We matter. Even a rejection of the status quo is an affirmation of a better future, even if we are unsure how to get there, disagree on the next step, are perplexed and sometimes feel helpless in the face of forces that overwhelm us.

Wouldn't it be nice to have a handy manual at hand, something that we can refer to like a simple design guide? But democracy is hard and uncertain work. It is not an instruction sheet to put together a piece of furniture. Fortunately. People must not be reduced to a formula, an accounting device, a category in marketing data. When they are, we depopulate the political.

We can find assistance in recalling the struggles of those in the past – people who overcame slavery, oppression, exclusion, discrimination. Not as a museum visit nor because we can repeat their strategies and policies. But rather, to maintain, reanimate and participate in the spirit that motivated them. This remembering is vital because history can be a liberating space.

What if the world had been covered with concrete for a long time? We live and work on this concrete, believing it to be the only state possible. But one day, a crack appears and through it a blade of grass grows. How would we know its grass? In these difficult times, where dissenting opinions are ignored or ridiculed, it is important to keep that knowledge of grass. To remember; and, so, learn. For cracks will inevitably appear if we don't create them ourselves.

And when that happens, we will have to be ready.