

## **Backwards Ireland looks like Deep South**

By Michael Clifford

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SCENES from anther world. Mississippi 1963.

Black people, or Negroes, as they were known, are burnt from their homes at a time when minorities in the US began to assert their civil rights. As far as some people were concerned, the blacks were sub-human and deserved to be treated as such. These bigots held sway in the Deep South.

Belfast 1969. Catholics are burnt out of their homes. Just as those of the minority religion began to assert their civil rights, elements in the majority violently let it be known that the Taigs should lie down where they belonged. The police force looked on. Unionist leaders' voiced muted, if any, abhorrence of the violence. The sight of fellow Irish people literally fleeing for their lives from their own homes elicited huge anger and sympathy south of the border. In council chambers, members spoke for the great majority of citizens and decried the animals that would do such a thing onto their fellow human beings.

Kilmacow, Co Kilkenny, last Saturday. In the early hours of the morning, somebody attacked the new home of a Traveller family, setting the abode alight and destroying everything within.

The house had been purchased by Kilkenny County Council during the construction of the M9 motorway. It had been renovated at a cost of €110,000. Then, recently, the local authority assigned it to a Traveller family who had been finding it difficult to settle in a housing estate in a nearby town.

The father and five children received the keys to the house on Friday. They had begun moving in their possessions but didn't sleep there on Friday night. Had they done so, and had the arsonist still committed his crime, a serious loss of young life would have been possible, if not probable.

According to council officials, most of the family's possessions were moved on the day they received the keys. These included personal items like clothes, a television, and family photographs. The new home was left a burnt out shell, reeking of embers and hate.

When crimes of hate like this occur, leaders are obliged to step up to the mark. If leaders are unwilling to show any moral courage, then racism or bigotry can spread like a virulent disease. If such crimes are not regarded as an abhorrent act in an alleged civilised society, hatred will fester.

Yet, the reaction to the burning out of a family in Kilkenny has been as muted as similar acts once were in the bigoted Deep South. Last Tuesday, RTÉ's Morning Ireland broadcast an item on the arson attack. The presenter Cathal Mac Coille said the show was unable to get any local public representatives to come on. This was despite the fact at least two councillors had made representations to Kilkenny County Council to reverse the decision to allocate the house to the Traveller family.

It's a strange day when county councillors pass up the opportunity to go on the national airwaves to lash out at crime and criminals. According to the council's director of services, John McCormack, the concerns expressed did not relate specifically to the family who were moving.

"In my view, it's the fact that they are Travellers that generated this whole focus," he said.

The daily press carried comments from local Cllr Pat Dunphy (FG). He condemned the attack on council property "at a time when council funds are low". There was no mention of the victims who had lost their home and possessions, or the obvious fact that they were targeted because of the fact they were Travellers.

On Wednesday, I went in search of some leadership from local politicians.

Cora Long is a Fianna Fáil member of Kilkenny County Council. When asked did she condemn the arson, she replied: "I'd rather not comment on it if you don't mind."

When pressed, she said: "I'm not saying anything to anyone." Finally, after further dialogue: "I abhor what was done to the house and that taxpayers may have to pay for this."

I pointed out that the family had reportedly lost all their possessions, not to mind a new home. "They didn't lose all their possessions," she said. "They hadn't moved into the house." (In fact, council officials assisted the family in moving in their possessions on Friday.)

Next up was Eamon Alyward, a councillor from a family with a long-standing national presence in the Fianna Fáil party.

"You can't condone what has happened," he said. "Nobody should take the law into their own hands... you have to be careful what you say in these circumstances."

When pressed, he went on: "I'm not going to say anymore. I have my own views on it. People need to have a think about this."

What do they need to think about? "Somebody must have felt very strongly to take action like this and we have to find out why."

The idea of a Fianna Fáil councillor mulling over what drives a criminal to commit such a crime, rather than sympathising with a traumatised family whose lives have been devastated was mind-boggling.

Another Fine Gael councillor, Anne-Marie Irish, didn't return calls.

These are the responses of local leaders to the burning out of a family. The main concern is that the arsonist has cost the so-called taxpayer. It's as if none of them want to be quoted offering sympathy to a family which have been violently dispossessed.

There is no reason to believe that any of the councillors harbour personal prejudice against Travellers. So is this a case of politicians rooting around in the gutter for a few votes? Or are large swathes of citizens really so prejudiced against Travellers that local councillors are

scared stiff to express even basic sympathy for a family burnt out of their home? Whichever it is, the result is utterly depressing in a society that claims to be civilised.

The only politician, local or national, to condemn the attack, publicly and without qualification, was the Green Party's Malcolm Noonan.

Beyond the base prejudice, there are issues between Travellers and settled people. Some among the transient community show scant regard for the basic mores of the majority. There are issues around the maintenance of halting sites. This may demonstrate scant regard by some Travellers for their responsibilities or it may be the inevitable reaction of some to feeling disenfranchised by wider society.

Those who advocate on behalf of Travellers tend to be far louder on rights than responsibilities. Again, this attitude may be forged on bitter experience of base prejudice.

Whatever the issues, when a family gets burnt out of their home, alarm bells should be sounding, particularly among those who purport to lead. Instead, we might as well be back in the bigoted Deep South of 50 years ago. Silence and mumbled platitudes about property coming from elected representatives says all that needs to be known about the quality of leadership on offer when it comes to racism and prejudice.

Truly, in this facet if no other, despite the advances of recent decades, Ireland lives down to the label of a backwards, little country

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