

Family Life

I was watching Questions & Answers on Monday night listening to the agendas of each of the political parties and I could not help but feel that they are missing the essential point about life in modern Ireland. Each party lists the same political agenda – the economy, health, crime, education, transport, and “whatever your having yourself”.

Not one political party has laid out its agenda in terms of family life. If I were a leader of a political party I would not lay out my stall by trying to trade in such impersonal terms as ‘stabilizing the economy’, ‘restructuring the health service’, ‘reducing recidivism in crime’, ‘changing tax brackets’, ‘targeting the national development plan’, ‘promoting transparency and accountability in political life’, or doing a forensic analysis of the Taoiseach's financial history.

I would prioritize only one thing: Family life. I would want to see a platform laid out not by a bunch of economists, lawyers, tax consultants, and health care providers but by parents, spouses, children, employees, psychologists, nurses, community care workers, and teachers.

Politicians have all missed the point that the currency in which mothers, fathers, couples, and families relate to are light years away from National Development Plans and how many billions of euro are ear marked for this and that! Mothers and fathers are concerned about happiness and security. Every parent wants to know that their children are provided for, happy, safe, and developing well.

Parents and partners are concerned about family stability, safety and love, worry about teenagers, education for children, the emotional and mental health of family members, work related stress, caring for relationships, looking after grandparents, managing under-age drinking, anti-social behaviour by teenagers, etc. Parents need guidelines on resetting norms for children and teenagers in a changing society. Parents need mental health services for young and old alike. Parents need encouragement. Lone parents need recognition and value, estranged fathers need challenge and inspiration, working mothers need validation and tax-breaks, families need affordable housing, and toddlers need international-class pre-school and childcare. Families need to be able to buy cars that are affordable. Housing estates need to be painted, manicured, and provided with play areas. And poor families need holidays.

My list could go on and on but not one politician has articulated their agenda in terms of family life. It is a tragic commentary on post-modern Ireland that none of our political figures are capable for speaking in any compelling way to these issues. Modern political speak is void of inspiration, encouragement, empathy, compassion, and any spirituality in its broadest sense. Not one political leader seems capable of speaking directly into the kitchens and living rooms of family life in Ireland.

Politicians are now coached in speaking to Focus Groups, that is groups of strangers gathered together on whom researchers test out reactions. Based on this research, political parties then decide what is and is not relevant as a political agenda. As a consequence, all political-speak lacks heart, soul, emotion, inspiration, and conviction. Politicians now try to say what focus groups want them to say. The humourless, grim,

uninspired, cranky, compassionless agendas laid out by each of the parties are compelling examples of that. Inspiration can only be built on acute empathic awareness of the emotional life of people. Therefore, our political debate has lost its heart. The soul of the country has been diluted down to sound-bites on the economics of trolleys in hospitals.

I have no interest in politicians promising to do what they are obliged to do by the terms of their office – all governments have to be judged on the very basic requirements such as proving a health care service, public transport, a stable economy, and sufficient police, teachers, nurses, doctors, and social services. This is the kindergarten agenda of any political party and any Junior Cert student knows this stuff. This is the very purpose of government.

However, I need a party to inspire me with its vision, imagination, leadership, and empathic sensitivity to how central it is to take care of and support family life. I would want to ask Bertie, Enda, Trevor, Gerry, & Michael to sell their policies in the currencies of any family life, not in the currency of economics or social politics.

For example, I would say “Don’t patronize our grandparents by telling them you will be upping their pension by 5 euro a week. Show us how much you value them. Speak to them so that they are left feeling worthy, inspired, recognized, and remembered. Show us how, as a nation, we can applaud and give thanks to the generation that goes before us. Don’t patronize parents by telling them that you will be working on stamp duties. Show how you consider parenting to be the bricks and mortar of our social life and show us how you value that, how the psychological and developmental care of children and teenagers is a central policy. Promise that every parent in Ireland has access to immediate emergency psychological services for all children. Show me that you have even the remotest clue as to how alcohol and drug abuse is rampant in teenage life in Ireland and that you can initiate large-scale social change policies to manage these things.” That’s only for starters!

At the end of the day, all people in a community need to feel that they belong to something larger than themselves that inspires and motivates them in the stress of everyday life. Not one parent in Ireland goes to bed worrying about trolleys in hospitals or the stability of the economy. We go to bed worrying about those we love and how to find safety, happiness, and reassurance in an anxious world. Speak to that, if you have a heart.