



Unmasking the real enemy

Kevin Higgins

Asylum-seekers and other non-white economic migrants first began arriving here in significant numbers during the late 1990s. The numbers involved are still relatively small – not much more than 10,000 expected this year – but, nevertheless, the sight of Romanian women selling the *Big Issues* and black men driving second-hand cars have become increasingly familiar features of the urban Irish landscape. The reasons for the sudden appearance in Ireland of people from eastern Europe and Africa are twofold.

Firstly, there has been a general increase in the numbers of immigrants entering the EU, legally and otherwise. And it's not hard to see why. Several African countries, such as Sierra Leone, Liberia and the Congo Republic, have been torn apart by a series of particularly disastrous civil wars. The oil-company-friendly military dictatorship in Nigeria – Africa's second richest country after South Africa – has been cracking down on even the mildest forms of dissent. And post-Stalinist eastern Europe has faced economic collapse and ethnic strife which, in the case of the former Yugoslavia, reached genocidal proportions. Prague and Budapest may be the latest fashionable playgrounds for the seemingly endless army of Americans abroad, but Romania, Slovakia, the Ukraine, Georgia and, of course, Russia are all economic disaster zones. Capitalism may be working in Seattle, but it is most definitely not working in Bucharest.

The other factor drawing people here has of course been our much talked-about economic boom. In the years 1996-2000 Ireland's Gross Domestic Product increased by 66 per cent, after inflation is factored into account. For those of us who remember the 1980s, when unemployment hit 20 per cent nationally and 70 per cent in some parts of Galway city, it sometimes seems as if things as we knew them have vanished entirely. Like almost any country experiencing a boom, Ireland is now awash with crap jobs. Many of us have been forced onto FÁS and VTOS schemes in order to avoid the absolutely unthinkable: a job washing dishes at Eddie Rocket's. Property prices and rents have gone through the roof. And a cappuccino in the new Milano restaurant on Middle Street costs £1.65. It's the end of the world as we knew it. With our per capita national income now higher than Italy, France and the UK, we are suddenly just like any other 'rich' western European country. In this context it's hardly surprising that we are now also experiencing our first significant trickle of immigration. And there will, of course, be much, much more: for every black person or sallow-skinned eastern European you see in the street today, several more will arrive in the near future; because even the crappiest job here – yes, even Eddie Rocket's – is heaven compared to the possible alternatives in, say, Slovakia or Sierra Leone. The Minister for Justice can introduce all the harsh anti-immigration legislation he likes, but people will continue to come here. Immigration is now an inescapable fact of life in Ireland.

However, the reaction of some to our new-found neighbours has been a predictable and opportunistic attempt to stir things up. The *Sunday World* and *Sunday Independent* have both run lurid anti-immigrant 'stories', the worst of which appeared last year. Under the screaming headline "Refugee Maniac Covers Dublin Woman's Body With Vicious Bites", the *Sunday World* 'informed' us of an assault carried out by a Kosovar against his Irish wife. It was an absolutely clear-cut and appalling case of domestic violence, but had nothing whatsoever to do either with his nationality or his status as a refugee. Never mind the reality, just give us a headline and make it snappy! One of the results of this sort of 'journalism' has been a sharp increase in the number of Irish citizens willing to get up off their fat arses and

go out and physically attack the dark-skinned people they see around them. It is only a matter of time before someone on some dark Irish street is knifed or battered to death. And when this happens, the media whores sitting smugly in the offices of the *Sunday World* and *Sunday Independent* will be absolutely as guilty as the actual perpetrators.

Our politicians have, of course, been no better. Minister for Justice John O'Donoghue has talked endlessly about 'floods' of immigrants, while some of his party colleagues have gone in for even more exotic descriptions. During the 1997 general election a number of Fianna Fáil candidates in Dublin, including recent jailbird Liam Lawlor, produced specifically anti-immigrant leaflets in their own constituencies. The worst of these came from Fianna Fáil councillor and candidate in Dublin South West, Colm McGrath. McGrath's leaflet claimed that if the "flood" wasn't stopped, the constituency would soon be "swamped" by refugees whose "way of life is entirely alien and includes, among other things, sacrificing animals during religious rituals". Since then Colm McGrath has departed from Fianna Fáil after refusing to co-operate with the party's internal inquiry into donations received by candidates. He was, it seems, too obvious a crook even for them.

The other predominant response has come from what might be described as the liberals – the Labour Party, the Greens and Sinn Féin. They have quite rightly been critical of the boot-boy anti-immigrant language used by the Minister for Justice and others. And they have, to their credit, opposed some of his more repressive proposals such as 'flotels'. But the one thing liberals everywhere have in common is that they are all itching to get into government, which, in this case, means hopping into bed with either Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael after the next general election. It also means accepting the EU-wide 'Fortress Europe' anti-immigration policy on which the present government's policy is based. When I hear a spokesman for Labour, the Greens or Sinn Féin criticising John O'Donoghue's approach, I welcome it because it makes life easier for immigrants and cuts down slightly on the amount of xenophobic garbage I have to listen to: every little does help. But I am also acutely aware that a government containing Labour, the Greens or Sinn Féin – a definite possibility after the next election – would basically continue the present policy of trying to stop people coming into the country and deporting them when they manage to slip through the net. Whatever their rhetoric, the policies of these parties amount to little more than a wish to slip a velvet glove onto John O'Donoghue's iron fist.

In a world around which money is allowed to flow absolutely freely, it is completely reactionary to support any form of immigration controls. An Irish businessman such as Tony O'Reilly (owner of the *Sunday Independent*, *Irish Independent*, *Sunday Tribune*, *Evening Herald* and former chairman of Heinz) has the freedom to invest his money wherever he so chooses. O'Reilly's attitude is a good example of the way the ruling business class think about national boundaries. He is a US citizen and, as a result, pays no tax in Ireland. In 1988 he was chairman of Pennsylvania for Bush and was, at one stage, even tipped for possible inclusion in Bush senior's cabinet as Secretary for Trade. And he recently received a knighthood from Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth. The world is, almost literally, at his feet. While the likes of O'Reilly is free to profiteer in Asia, eastern Europe, Africa and South America, how can it be morally defensible to support a policy which denies poverty-stricken individuals from those same parts of the world the right to live and work here, if they should so choose?

The woolly liberal answer to this question goes something like this: 'I absolutely sympathise with the tragic situation these people find themselves in, and we here in Ireland must do whatever we can to help them. But this does not mean an open door policy when it comes to immigration. This would simply lead to chaos, and would in many ways make the situation much worse.' The problem with this sort of woolly liberal talk is that it tries to obscure the undeniable reality that, in the so-called 'Third World' and in eastern Europe, chaos is already at hand. But, of course, the woolly liberal can live quite comfortably in a

chaos-ridden world, as long as the chaos doesn't come anywhere near the end of the leafy lane where he typically lives. In such a world as this, it is not an anti-racist's job to make constructive suggestions as to how the Irish ruling elite might 'sort out' their immigration policy. As far as I'm concerned, anyone who wishes to come and live here, legally or otherwise, is welcome to do so. Who am I to stand in their way? And anyone who does try to stand in their way automatically becomes my enemy.

This has nothing to do with a sentimental attachment to the 'downtrodden of the world' or any such woolly liberal concept, but is, instead, a simple matter of solidarity. The same economic and political forces which have brought chaos to their lives are constantly trying to bring chaos to mine. We are all at the mercy of the US Federal Reserve and the European Central Bank. This country, this city does not in any meaningful sense 'belong' to the likes of me, but is owned lock, stock and barrel by the Tony O'Reillys, the Ben Dunnes and the ladies and gentlemen who sit on the Galway Chamber of Commerce. And when they pop their clogs, as even multi-millionaires must, they'll pass it all on to their pampered pasty-faced children. I can think of no earthly reason why I should wish to protect the borders of Ireland Incorporated from small groups of Nigerians and Romanians who have done me no harm whatsoever.

Of course the vast majority of people don't think like this at all. Most Irish people think that Bertie Ahern is a 'nice guy', whatever that means, and say 'fair play' to Denis O'Brien for making £230 million from ESAT Digifone. After all, most people think of Denis O'Brien as one of 'us', whereas a Romanian or a Nigerian is definitely thought of as one of 'them'. This very comforting, but entirely false view of the world is the glue which holds the system together. If the majority of Irish people were to suddenly come face to face with the reality of their own political and economic powerlessness, our millionaire class and the political parties they own might very quickly find themselves applying for asylum, in Vienna or Paris like latter-day members of the Czar's extended family. Liberal calls for tolerance and multicultural evenings are well and good. But they are not enough, because racism is not caused, primarily, by cultural misunderstandings between members of different ethnic groups. Nor will it be defeated by preaching brotherly love in some fuzzy, almost Christian, sense.

Racism is the potentially deadly force that it is precisely because it is a system of thinking whereby particular ethnic groups become lightning conductors for resentments—for example, about housing—which, in and of themselves, are entirely justified. In this sense it represents a dangerous new weapon in the ideological arsenal of the Irish ruling elite. And they are loving every minute of it. Every time someone from inner city Dublin phones *Liveline* to complain about refugees getting Corporation houses, the property speculators all light another cigar and have a good loud laugh. And when unemployment returns, as it undoubtedly one day will, the *Sunday Independent* will blame the Nigerians and Romanians for that too. The most urgent task at hand for anti-racists is to educate people to take their resentments out on the real enemy.

It is not enough to rant and rave in abstract about 'big business'. The enemy has to be unmasked, given a recognisable face. There is no shortage of possibilities. The crowd who come to Galway to live it up during the Oyster Festival and those who stay in the Great Southern Hotel during Race Week spring immediately to mind. Or if we could somehow manage to get Irish people forced to wait for a bus in the rain to picture Denis O'Brien's fat chauffeur-driven face, rather than wasting their time resenting the black man who just drove past in a ten-year-old car, then we would be making real progress. And maybe then our new-found friends from Africa and eastern Europe would find walking our streets just a little easier.

Red Banner 10
July 2001