

MY MODEST PROPOSAL – TRANSCRIPT

READING (Jonathan Swift, 1667 to 1745)

A Modest Proposal

For preventing the children of poor people in Ireland, from being a burden on their parents or country, and for making them beneficial to the publick.

by Dr. Jonathan Swift, 1729

It is a melancholy object to those who walk through this great town, or travel in the country, when they see the streets, the roads and cabin-doors crowded with beggars of the female sex, followed by three, four, or six children, all in rags, and importuning every passenger for an alms.

JESSICA TRAYNOR

A Modest Proposal, by Jonathan Swift, is a pamphlet which starts with a really, really outrageous proposition, that the current issues, or the issues of the day in Ireland, mass hunger, mass starvation, famines of the kind which would eventually lead to the Great Famine, that they're caused by overpopulation, and that one way to solve this issue of the poor, the urban poor, the rural poor, starvation, would be to look at a very different commodity that hadn't been considered before, and that commodity is the children of the poor.

READING (Jonathan Swift)

I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London, that a young healthy child well nursed, is, at a year old, a most delicious nourishing and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricasie, or a ragoust.

MARY O'MALLEY

To read this casual reference to babies being put in the oven, it was just – Well, I think it was shocking because the image was so strong.

SARAH CLANCY

It's shock after shock as you're reading it, but one of the things that really hit me was the idea of using children's skin, you know, it was detailing using them for gloves, and so on, and you know, if I'm remembering it correctly it was lamenting that although they weren't that awfully big, that still they would be profitable.

KEVIN HIGGINS

It's like an early performance of the Sex Pistols, or something like that. It moves political writing away from earnest pleading, you should listen. Swift turns it on its head and it's very entertaining.

READING (Jonathan Swift)

I grant this food will be somewhat dear, and therefore very proper for landlords, who, as they have already devoured most of the parents, seem to have the best title to the children.

NICK LAIRD

It's sort of almost persuasive, I suppose, on one level, but you realize that what's pushing it along from behind is this, you know, incredible anger with the state of things

READING (Jonathan Swift)

Many other advantages might be enumerated. For instance, the addition of some thousand carcasses in our exportation of barrel'd beef (...) which are no way comparable in taste or magnificence to a well grown, fat yearly child.

RITA ANN HIGGINS

It was mind-blowing, really, because you knew that the person who was saying it somehow wanted the opposite of what he was saying. So, really, it was satire, slap in the face, hit with a bus. You either got it or you didn't get it.

Commissions are always kind of odd because having A Modest Proposal as the backdrop would be the same as having Ulysses as the backdrop. So you have to just be humble, go to your desk and see what happens

JESSICA TRAYNOR

My own modest proposal was inspired when in January of 2019 I spent a lot of time noticing really horrific headlines in newspapers that were connected with violence perpetrated on women. For example, there was a horrific headline around a mystery woman found in a ditch.

There is something wrong in the way that we view women in this society, that we treat women in this society, and that is coming out in these violent crimes.

My own modest proposal, what I proposed was that rather than dealing with the root cause of these violent crimes we continue to do what we always have done as a nation, which is to pray to a distant deity, to make martyrs of those who were killed, and potentially even to set up little altars in the ditches where these bodies were found. I do think we have a legacy of a certain view of women that has come through the 20th century Catholic church, and we have not necessarily dealt with that legacy yet.

A PLEA FOR THE SANCTIFICATION OF THE DITCHES OF IRELAND

By Jessica Traynor

Ashamed of what I loved
I flung her from me and called her a ditch
- from 'Innocence' by Patrick Kavanagh

In these difficult cases

where the death-site is unknown –
where guesswork festoons each hedgerow
bog hole
car boot
in caution tape
for a mother sucked through the estuary's throat
and into the sea –

in these dark times when our men
are driven by swallowed sorrows
to make a butcher's block of the hearth
the best course of action
is to sanctify the sites
where these unfortunate women found their rest.

If we worship them here
maybe their fractured ribs will knit
like a Moses basket to shelter the heart;
contusions to the chest
legs
forearms

will fade like darkness licked back
into an inky horizon; broken necks
will kink into place with a click
as neat as a car boot's closing

and mirrored in the meadow's satin dew
will be a host of little Virgins
mothers of the field
ditch
cistern.

Each little break-neck each strangled waif
will be May Queen
a fly-tipped boreen her altar
and her song will pour like honey
over the fields sweet as blackbird song
rippling the wooded glen –

Oh raise your hands in supplication
chant her name across the evening in a round:

Mother ditch prepare a bed for us
among the nettle leaves
O mother dip your net for us
amongst the choppy waves
O mother ditch we pine for you
until the moon is full
and then we see your face appear

in every bog pool....

MARY O'MALLEY

The idea behind this proposal came from an ad I heard on radio and television from banks, playing on parents' guilt, and more or less giving the idea that it was their duty to get out of their houses or take on big loans to help their kids get into debt to start their little cycle of bank loans, and I just thought this is so outrageous.

You know, you've worked all your life, you've managed, in some cases with great difficulty, to keep going, possibly to get a house, and then they're trying to get you out of it before you're even half dead. That was the spur.

A PROPOSAL FOR PREVENTING THE PARENTS OF POOR PEOPLE IN IRELAND FROM BEING A BURDEN TO THEIR CHILDREN OR COUNTRY

By Mary O'Malley

Minister, it is a melancholy object to those who walk through our great towns or travel in the country when they see the streets, the roads and cabin doors crowded with the elderly of both sexes, but predominantly female for it is said they live longer, begging for medical cards and importuning every passing politician for alms in the form of pensions, medicines and even beds in, of all places, hospitals.

There they are, and unless someone shoots them in a great October festival to commemorate the Celtic culls of our pagan past, there they will remain.

So here is my proposed solution, beautiful in its simplicity, easy as a recipe for good roast kid. Goat, that is.

Send every citizen over sixty-six a coffin.

Not your old showy environmentally damaging hardwood, but something cheap and biodegradable, made of sally rods perhaps? You could give the Heritage crowd a hand by reviving an interest in the ancient Irish craft of basket weaving at the same time.

And think of all the benefits – basket weaving would be taught in schools and within twenty years all but the most manually challenged would be able to grow their own sally rods and weave their own coffins.

Now the next step is the tricky one and a little PR will be needed. Your aim is to get those surplus people to move out of their perfectly good houses which can then be re-cycled for younger consumers. I am reliably informed by a PR guru I know that the best way is to begin by suggesting the health benefits of spending a few nights a week in the open air, sleeping in some natural shelter, willow or sally being the best.

Gentle pressure can be exerted on the unwilling by the discreet withdrawal of travel passes, fuel allowances, and all prescription medicine whether paid for or free. Then it's only a matter of time to arrange their complete removal into their new homes.

The last phase will be to get them to move into specially converted sites with washing facilities, and here's the sweetener, a free dispensary, and a day care centre where they can play games such as draughts and ludo, or even read books, and watch television.

These day care centres should be built close to the graveyard so that when the time comes, some of the fitter patients can move permanently into their little coffins and bed down closer to the entrance, thus saving fuel and energy.

Initially, there will be resistance, but a compliant people will soon see the sense of this, particularly when you enlist the help of their children whose space, after all, they are taking up and whose resources they are using. It is fortunate that we are living in an age of high parental guilt and a higher sense of entitlement in the young.

The banks would help with the smooth takeover of accounts by next of kin, who would spend the money to get the economy moving and not leave it sitting there, doing nothing only earning interest.

But those details are for your staff to iron out.

I have no interest at all, I assure you, in benefitting from this proposal by way of exemption, and offer it in a spirit of civic duty only. I intend to move to Spain at the age of sixty-four, for my bones.

SARAH CLANCY

The thing that inspired my own modest proposal, my piece of satire, was the scale of climate change and our total inaction about it and, it's not in my poem because it made me too sad, but the main bird that I think I'll miss will be the curlew, because it has been the background, I live in the Burren, in County Galway. It's a specially-designated habitat, and some of the very few, last breeding pairs of curlews that we have in Ireland are there, and their sound is so eerie and melancholy on summer evenings. It's just typical of being outside there.

So that'll be something that I knew in my lifetime that was a complete feature of my lifetime, but, for example, may not be a feature of my young grand-nieces' and grandnephews' and, you know, that idea that the animal books that we had, full of giraffes and things growing up, that they actually are going to become these documents, you know, they're going to become the same as books about dinosaurs, and that's really what provoked me, to a certain extent. Maybe we can identify it on that level.

WHO CARES ABOUT THE SPIX'S MACAW?

By Sarah Clancy

I am so tired of people telling me I oughta care about species extinction, as if their lives are worse somehow since the Great Auk exited, and I have to say that I have never forgiven the bumble bee for the time it stung my buttock when I was three years old and starkers in the garden, oh bumble bee, it's a triumph of marketing that you've got people so soft on you when all you are is a nightmare of histamine and emergency colouring we'll be better off without you, and it's not like we haven't dealt with species losses before, we let the dodo become a no –no and no one died except of course the birds and there wasn't any need for

histrionics and still isn't. I can think of very few indeed who will keen for the European eel which any day now is taking its by your leave I'd hazard that there's not a person who wouldn't paddle with a bit less trepidation without it troubling their tootsies, oh cosmopolitan eel, auf wiederseh'n, you won't be missed except by the crew in Britain who seem to like you jellied, you'd be better off extinct, don't you think. And honestly are you trying to tell me that you'll be grieving when the tiny little Vaquita has vanished into the distance? I can hear you saying 'what even is it?' yeah, a little smiling dolphin that you never knew existed and you're going to cry now, oh spare me, and in all honesty has your life been affected much by the death of the last male white rhinoceros, I bet you didn't even send condolences to his two potential soulmates who are devastated without him and contemplating lesbianism because they find themselves so horny, and in fairness it's long past time someone told those giraffes to reel their necks in. Anything so tall that doesn't play basket ball and provide sponsorship opportunities has very little purpose to its existence, they never contributed anything to commerce or industry or business, which is what it all comes down to, it's survival of the fittest and hey, little Giraffe calf, don't bother batting those beautiful eyelashes at us, there is no exemption for cuteness. It's a dog-eat-dog world, you win some and you lose some.

* It should be noted that although the writer appears to have predicted the extinction of Giraffes, in fact the Giraffe population thrived following the widespread extinction of homo sapiens.

KEVIN HIGGINS

There's a terrible shame around homelessness. I was actually homeless, partly through chaotic lifestyle, but I actually slept rough for a week in 1989, in London. The feeling of not knowing where you were going to be tonight is very disturbing and strange, and my modest proposal is a satire on the solution always being incentivising someone private to do something.

WHAT THE MINISTER FOR HOUSING PROPOSES:
THINKING OUTSIDE THE COUNCIL HOUSE

By Kevin Higgins

Easy for the Opposition
to hang around overheated TV studios,
spouting impossible promises
which at this stage sound
like a recorded message from Santa Claus.
But out there, in what I like to call
the world, a constituent of mine
and his wheelchair recently spent
the coldest night of the year
in a discontinued telephone box
and, worse than that, there are people
who have nothing better to do
than use this situation as an excuse
to be atrocious to Government Ministers
on Twitter.

If we as a country,
who, relatively speaking, lived mainly
in tumbled-in cottages
and could barely afford trousers
until around about last Friday,
are to get past this glitch
we need to start thinking
outside the traditional council house –
which, like communism,
selling encyclopaedias door to door,
and National Health glasses,
isn't coming back.

First thing tomorrow morning
immediately after my Eggs Benedict
I will introduce tax breaks incentivising
those who have them to rent out every available
wardrobe and wheelie bin
to those who through some bad life
decision have found themselves caught
between tiny thousand quid a month
flats.

Given the lack of such facilities
in your average wheelie bin or wardrobe,
every qualifying adult will be issued with a potty
which may be emptied anywhere except
over the Minister for Housing's head.

And under subsection seven
of my Housing Emergency Provisions act
infants inconsiderate enough to have been born
without fixed abode will be confined
to newly tax deductible sideboard drawers
so they won't grow up
to take more space
than the world has for them.

RITA ANN HIGGINS

Fortunately for me, I'm a bit of a radio listener, and I had heard this programme where people from a redress board were ringing in, complaining about that they weren't- they had long times to wait on the phone, and then the response to the people from the Redress Board was truly inhuman

We are going to give you stuff, lots of stuff, we're not going to give you any money, but you're going to jump through the hoops to get this stuff, and, believe you me, we can make you jump.

This wasn't Jonathan Swift's A Modest Proposal of 1720s, this was Ireland in 2018.

PROOF

By Rita Ann Higgins

It wasn't all the states fault-
you played a cameo role.
You stole those apples.
You also took the biscuit
looking for compensation for your incarceration.
We didn't just grab you off the street
and give you a life of misery
you are a thief, you actually stole.
I grant you thirty-five years in lock up
might be a tad excessive for stealing an apple or two
but hell you got three squares a day and a cot
what more could you ask for?

We are here to improve the lives of survivors
of institutional abuse.
We can hear you when you jabber on about it
but we are going to help you
we can give you stuff lots of stuff but no money.
We can give you a lovely heater.
Anyone now for the last heater?
we can fix your windows, we really can.

Look at the state of your rotting teeth
See what your biscuit eating did now?
As a redress board we can slap in a new set
of teeth for you as soon as we make a mould.

Once you give us proof that you were beaten
black and blue by a hose pipe
wielded by Father Greasy Smile.
Did you take pictures when Father Magillicuddy
reeked of whiskey and hammered
the teeth out of your skull?
That was a perfect opportunity for a picture
where was your polaroid then?

We might not be able to give you a full set of teeth
but you probably have no need of a full set
what would you be eating anyway,
trans fats and fried bread?
This is how we save the country money
By giving you no money
Just stuff, the stuff of dreams.
When we finish with you
Your smile will be seen from Uranus.

White clear and portable
You might complain that you only have a half set
but the top set will do all the work
You can grind your troubles
Into your bottom jaw,
ok there might be a little suffering
but compared to thirty-five years
of our five-star bleakness
this will be a cake walk.

We are giving you a coffin never used,
the quicker you occupy it
the better for my staff.
We want to make a real difference to your life
this state body is like no other for helping
and improving the lives of survivors.
Are you a survivor?
You need to start acting like one.
No, I repeat we can't give you the bottom set
you greedy yoke.
This is not twin set Tuesday
this is top set Monday
Now don't come at me or my staff
with that back cheek.
You won't be a burden to the people of Ireland
when we are finished with you.
The name of our organization is
Humilia, Humilyou, Humiliation
our staff will provide you with stuff
to help with day to day living
all we require is proof.

NICK LAIRD

I have never had a smart phone, but I've noticed, certainly in the last few years, that everyone is always their head down in the phone, and I think if you explained to someone ten years ago how they would behave all the time, how they'd be looking to check on this stuff constantly, and not being in the world, they wouldn't have believed it, but it has certainly happened, so my modest proposal is about the smart phone and about social media and I think whenever we go to get a little dopamine hit and, you know, hit refresh and see if someone has liked our picture on Instagram or whatever else, it's just a rat in a trap. So I think people need to take a step back and sort of really work out what has happened to them.

SMALL PLAN TO DESTROY YOU COMPLETELY

By Nick Laird

What I propose is to gift you this magic stone
You'll stare into its inky depths and find yourself

reflected back, mesmerized by the intensities
of your own wide-eyed reflection.

Even the gods need a rest from themselves.
They manifest as a burning bush or a swan
or a drop of rain - but you'll remain yourself,
always alone, always seeking your suffering,
forking it from a pocket to scrutinize it hard
before walking headfirst into a lamppost.

I will not offer real rewards but only symbols
of rewards, and this will make no difference.
Here is a raised thumb. Here is a yellow circle
with two small black dots, a sickle-like slash.

Working from ethically dubious but statistically
incontrovertible experiments like the Milgram
and Stanford Prison experiments, I know most
people will pile onto any victims since they fear
the real pain social anxiety brings. The rest will
stand around and chant Fight. I propose there is
much unplanned in the transformation out of
advertising into direct behavior modification
and it will cause an explosive amplification
of negativity in human affairs.

I propose to make you into an idiot or a fake-
nice person. Addiction can be hidden for a bit,
but the disposition shifts; and one will notice.
Justify it as the price of this, a kind of rhythm
to one's life founded on a nervousness,
compulsive pecking at the soul's scabs,
an itch for affirmation as you grow more
focused on portentous events invisible to
those around you.

You will stare into the stone
like one who spots the bright sky reflected
in a well, and cannot look away, when overhead
the whole unclouded blue continues on without you.