

Switch to Pay As You Go
Electricity – Now!

PREPAY
POWER.IE
Smart control of your electricity.

FREE YOURSELF FROM HUGE ELECTRICITY BILLS

Free Welcome Top Up

€5 credit to get you started!

Stay Free of Debt

No more bills!

Free Installation

No setup fees!*



Join the 70,000 customers that have already switched!

Freephone Now

1800 989 842

LINES OPEN

Mon – Fri 8am to 9pm | Sat 9am to 7pm | Sun 9am to 6pm

*Terms and conditions incl. 12 month contract and charges apply and are subject to change.

Click Now

prepaypower.ie

Smart control of your electricity.

Dr Mark Dooley



MORAL MATTERS

We need real debate, not just shouting

SUPPOSEDLY, we are in the middle of a same-sex marriage debate. So far, this 'debate' seems to be about the meaning of the word 'homophobia'.

My view is we won't have a real debate until we drop words like that.

I have never been called a homophobe. Perhaps this is because I have often written of my affection for a gay relation, living in California, who recently 'married' his long-time partner. Theirs is a union rooted in true love and complete commitment.

I have, however, been branded a racist and an Islamophobe. That accusation was made in a 'debate' on extremism within the Irish Muslim community. Its effect was to prematurely kill the so-called debate.

To accuse people of xenophobia, Islamophobia or any other phobia is to accuse them, not of holding mistaken opinions, but of being sick. 'Phobia' is a term used in clinical psychology to denote an irrational 'disorder' manifesting in anxiety or 'morbid fear'. Sufferers are usually treated with therapy and medication.

You may disagree vehemently with the claim that gay marriage runs contrary to the established definition of marriage: but it is not a sign of sickness. Neither is calling for integration of immigrants a manifestation of some deep disorder. Whether you agree or disagree, when expressed respectfully and coherently, arguments are put forward by people who believe them to be true.

Those people accused of homophobia could, of course, respond by accusing their opponents of Christophobia or heterophobia. But what good purpose would that serve, except to further alienate both sides? Their opponents are also not sick, irrational or morbidly fearful.

Labelling somebody 'phobic' has only one consequence: it shuts down debate. By suggesting your adversary is sick, you make it impossible to debate on fair and reasonable terms.

You imply that no-one who is sane could hold such views. But if you don't try to understand why they think as they do – if you simply dismiss them as 'sick' – how can you possibly hope to persuade them to change their minds?

The fact that so much time has been devoted to the recent 'homophobe' row proves my point. Instead of debating the actual question – should we legalise gay marriage in Ireland? – we are stuck on who is or is not a homophobe. Instead of having a rational dialogue on the issue at hand, people are afraid to speak for fear of being sued – or for fear of being perceived as phobic. If we want gen-

uine free speech we must cease stigmatising our opponents, especially when it concerns moral matters.

We must be able to discuss all dimensions of a topic without anyone's sanity being called into question. Only then will the real issues be aired for a public desperate for clarity.

Still, even if words like 'Islamophobe' were dropped from public discourse, we would be left with the problem of what constitutes debate. For example, does a highly choreographed ten-minute TV segment constitute a debate? What about a heated radio encounter between ideologically opposed commentators? Indeed, is it now possible to have a debate which doesn't quickly descend into a war of words?

I think the problem is we have lost our capacity for philosophical or rational reflection. If TV debates have become predictable, it's because contributors automatically shift into default mode. They come armed with an agenda and refuse to yield even when confronted by a stronger argument.

Surely when it comes to issues like immigration, abortion and gay marriage, we need a debate that tackles the thorny questions rationally and without rancour. We need to hear from all sides in a forum where no-one is afraid to speak. What we don't need are endless, fractious encounters between the usual suspects.

I KNOW I'm biased, but I think real debate is best served by the print media. Writing forces a person to reflectively engage with ideas. It forces writers to clarify what they think and to articulate arguments in a way which anticipates those of their opponents. More importantly, it gives readers the opportunity to assess and respond to the big issues of the day. In an age of soundbite and spin, of trivial texts and tweets, papers like this one ensure the survival of genuine public debate – unlike the 'chatter sphere', where insult often trades as insight.

As we edge ever closer to the gay marriage referendum, we can't afford to lose sight of what is at stake. We cannot risk the arguments becoming obscured in an ideological fog. Neither is it morally correct that people on either side be dismissed as sick or disordered. Too often that is what passes as debate in this country. Is it any wonder there is such a low turnout in referendums? Is it any wonder many people are so apathetic and politically disengaged? If that is to change, we need urgently to redefine what we mean by social and political debate. Otherwise, we will never get beyond the politics of the playground, a place where those who shout the loudest are the only ones ever heard.

—mark.dooley@dailymail.ie—



**DON'T MISS JOHN WATERS' PROVOCATIVE
COLUMN EVERY WEEK IN The Irish Mail**
ON SUNDAY