

The West needs to punish ruthless Putin

VLADIMIR Putin becomes more dangerous every day, because he has boxed himself into a corner from which it will be hard, if not impossible, for him to escape.

He has made Russia an autocracy in which free speech is a dead letter. It is now a crime to criticise the Red Army in history books as well as in modern speech. All broadcast channels are state-controlled, and pour forth a torrent of deceptions, not least about Ukraine. Russian viewers are obliged to feast on atrocity stories about alleged crimes by Ukrainian troops against Russian speakers, including public crucifixion of a three-year-old child.

In the mad world Putin has created, a dismaying number of his people are ready to believe such stuff. He may even do so himself: the Kremlin becomes ever more Stalinesque, with the president dependent for information and counsel on a slavish circle of intimates who tell him only what he wishes to hear. Enemies and critics are imprisoned after show trials, or liquidated by hitmen. Unsurprisingly, Putin has failed in his efforts to modernise the Russian economy: 55 per cent of the nation's budget now depends on foreign sales of gas. Moscow's Ukrainian adventure has caused growth forecasts to be slashed from 1.8 per cent to below 1 per cent this year, and at least €40 billion of foreign capital has left the country.

Putin has constructed a narrative to explain all this: Russia is encircled by enemies, Nato and the EU foremost among them, forever seeking to extend their tentacles into Moscow's rightful sphere of influence.

He said in March, after the Crimean annexation: 'Russia finds itself in a position it could not retreat from. If you compress a spring all the way back to its limit, it will snap back hard.'

So how should the West address this pocket Stalin? Since the end of the Cold War, US and EU diplomacy has been extraordinarily clumsy: wilfully humiliating the Russians; then making offers of partnership to Ukraine and other neighbouring states without considering their implications or impact on Moscow; and finally, responding feebly when Putin began to lash out.

But whatever the West's mistakes in the past, these should not obscure the fundamentals: Putin is a brute who must be shackled. Since the spring, US rhetoric has been far more robust than that of Europe, and especially that of Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel. She seems afraid of taking any action that might tempt Putin to cut off her country's gas supplies. Back in March, the EU issued a statement: 'Any further steps by the Russian Federation to destabilise the situation in Ukraine would lead to additional and far-reaching consequences for relations in a range of economic areas.'

It seems hard for anybody in Brussels or Berlin to deny the killing of 298 innocent people does indeed constitute 'further steps'. Action must be taken. The list of Putin associates whose funds are frozen and whose family members are denied access to Western countries must be drastically extended, even if some of them own European football clubs.

Graduated sanctions must be extended to Russia as a nation. France should refuse to continue construction of warships for the Russian Navy. There should be no EU finance for Russian projects.

Dangerous state enemies should be offered a way out. But if Putin persists on his current path, his country has to be punished economically. Russia, and its president, are today complicit in an appalling crime in the skies over Ukraine. If the West fails to punish Putin for the ruthless adventurism which has caused this to happen, it will be a bad day for the security of us all.

SOS: SAVE

As a parent, Dr Mark Dooley looked on in horror as Ruairi Quinn led an ideological war against our education system. Now that Ho Chi Quinn is gone, we have a chance to start again: to build schools and universities which put children's futures ahead of party dogma or personal crusading

IT is difficult for my children to comprehend that I was routinely 'leathered' in school. My eldest, in particular, sits dumfounded as I describe how certain teachers patrolled the schoolyard looking for someone to slap. That was a time when the leather was no less a part of a teacher's paraphernalia than chalk or a duster.

Removing the leather from Irish schools was not only a much-needed reform, but a moral necessity.

For children of my generation it had a profound and lasting impact. No longer were we tormented by a weapon which had no place in the classroom.

Even after its abolition, it was however difficult for some teachers to resist physical violence. I remember defying one teacher who had just boxed a fellow-student across the head. Before a stunned class, I told him it was thanks to people like Martin O'Donoghue that such behaviour was now against the law. He simply smirked and said: 'Well, we all know what happened to him, don't we?'

Dr Martin O'Donoghue was a distant relation of mine. He was also credited with Fianna Fáil's resounding success in the 1977 General Election. When the party returned a 20-seat Dáil majority, the new Taoiseach Jack Lynch rewarded O'Donoghue with the new portfolio of Economic Planning and Development.

In 1979, Lynch resigned and was replaced by Charles Haughey, who immediately abolished Dr O'Donoghue's department. However, when Fianna Fáil regained power in 1982, Haughey appointed him Minister for Education. It was a short-lived stint as O'Donoghue bravely sided against the Taoiseach in a leadership heave later that year, a move that effectively ended his political career.

Still, Martin O'Donoghue's time in Education coincided with the abolition of corporal punishment in Irish schools. The regulation to ban the cane was actually signed by his predecessor, Fine Gael minister John Boland. However, it was O'Donoghue who ushered in a new era in which physical brutality was largely consigned to history.

My boys have never met Martin O'Donoghue. Yet, it is thanks to courageous politicians like him and Mr Boland that they can go to school without fear. It is thanks to them that they love, rather than loathe their teachers.

Martin O'Donoghue taught me that no government ministry impacts the lives of children more than Education.

THAT is why my heart sank when, following last week's Cabinet reshuffle, I realised the Labour Party had retained control of the Education portfolio. Within hours of Jan O'Sullivan's appointment as the new minister, she was on radio vowing to continue Ruairi Quinn's so-called 'reforms'.

I had desperately hoped Enda Kenny would see sense, and rescue our beleaguered education system from further assault.

I say this, not only as a former university academic and husband of a secondary schoolteacher, but most especially as a deeply concerned father.

Two of my three sons are already in the primary school system, while my youngest will join the ranks in 2016. Hence, if things don't change, my children

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by Dr Mark
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are destined to feel the full force of what Mr Quinn once called his 'big agenda'.

Before Ruairi Quinn, reform of education meant modifying various elements of the system which were no longer fit for purpose or, in the case of corporal punishment, which were morally indefensible. It meant opening the doors of our schools and universities to those previously excluded. What it certainly did not entail was tampering with the system to the point where it was unrecognisable.

When I compare my education to that of my children, I am filled with fear for their future. The timeless curriculum in which I was schooled has been ground to dust. They are now set to be served a hotchpotch of child-centred claptrap masquerading as wisdom.

Some believe there was some-

thing deeper than socialist ideology driving Ruairi Quinn's dislike of the old system. After all, there were some former education ministers who shared his socialist convictions, and yet they did not seek to dismantle this precious legacy.

Think, for example, of Niamh Bhreathnach, whose tenure at Education resulted in the abolition of Third Level tuition fees. I believe that decision negatively impacted on the quality of university education in this country. It was not, however, one that sought to subvert the system.

Mr Quinn was a product of the best that Irish education could offer. He attended the exclusive St Michael's College on Ailesbury Road in Dublin, and subsequently Blackrock College where he achieved distinction both in the classroom and on the rugby pitch. He also won the all-Ireland

Texaco Children's Art Competition, and earned a degree in architecture from UCD.

SO how is it that a boy so academically gifted, so steeped in the Catholic faith, and so naturally competitive, could become a figure so seemingly opposed to the system that gave him his chances?

I have no quick answer to this, except to say that, at some point in the mid-1960s, Ruairi Quinn must have rejected his privileged past and totally abandoned his religion.

This man of undoubted distinction, who thoroughly availed of a system he would later attempt to dismantle, became a hard-line egalitarian and evangelical atheist.

Most people go through a period of adolescent rejection, but few become rejectionists for life. The fact that Mr Quinn used his time as education minister to peddle a rejectionist agenda shows he was one of the few.

The problem is we parents now face the prospect of having our

OUR SCHOOLS



Legacy:
Education is too important to be treated as a social experiment

children suffer, probably because Mr Quinn could not come to terms with his privileged past.

But why should my little boys be deprived of those distinctions and advantages availed of by Mr Quinn?

Why should my sons be forced to endure a system drained of those resources which enabled him to rise to the highest offices in the land?

Why, in other words, should they be guinea pigs for a 'reform' agenda, an adequate reason for which has never been provided to Irish parents?

Like most parents, I want my boys to compete at the highest levels. I want them to avail of that historical and cultural capital which constitutes our education system.

I want them to become adults who recognise the true demands of life, and who are not afraid to reach for the stars.

That may be considered elitist and discriminatory by people like Mr Quinn. It is, however, what every devoted parent wants for their children. For we all know that real life involves tough challenges for which no amount of 'creative learning' will suffice.

Education is like ecology. It contains the wisdom of our ancestors, wisdom without which children cannot adapt to the adult world. That is

why reforming the system without due regard to the past, is a type of ecological degradation.

Despite her political origins in Democratic Left, Jan O'Sullivan must recognise that children instinctively desire to grow up.

As both a former teacher and a mother, she must realise that children know when they are being treated like juveniles. Even at the tender age of nine, my eldest can see right through the child-centred curriculum.

On one occasion, he arrived home from school in a state of acute anxiety. 'What's the matter?' I inquired, to which he replied: 'Today, I was told that something I knew to be a fact was merely "my" opinion. I must be able to say when teachers are wrong.'

I spent the next half hour explaining why, in all circumstances, teachers must be shown respect.

However, I also explained that he was right to feel aggrieved, for opinions can always be tested against facts. The thing to do, therefore, is politely discuss the matter with the teacher in private.

The purpose of education is not to confuse children, but to impart those objective truths which have stood the test of time. We can't simply

decide to dispense with such wisdom on a whim, for it is nothing less than the birthright of our children. It is nothing less than the foundation stone of a successful future.

AS a child, I could clearly see this was a country fraught with problems. Our streets were shabby, our State was under fire from subversives and corruption was rife at every level.

Yet I also sensed my education was sound, that it would provide me with opportunities unknown to my parents' generation.

That it did so is a tribute to all those who recognised the importance of education rooted in genuine scholarship. They saw that the supreme goal of schooling is to create independent individuals who can think rationally, judge comprehensively and act responsibly.

If Jan O'Sullivan wishes to add her name to that venerable list of political luminaries, if she wishes to do right by my children and yours, she will reverse her predecessor's reforms and rebuild our educational ecology.

This does not mean she cannot

implement change. Our universities, for example, are plunging down the international league tables simply because they cannot cope financially.

Hence, they are haemorrhaging their best students and academics.

If we are to compete globally, that is one situation which needs the new minister's immediate attention.

So long as they are to be starved of the resources the need Irish universities will never become major research and development hubs, thereby damaging our long-term competitiveness.

So why not drop the current system of registration fees, for one that is both equitable and fair and which enables our universities to compete on the international stage?

Whatever happens, Jan O'Sullivan will not spend long in the Department of Education.

In less than two years the country will face into a general election, which may see her party dispatched to oblivion. However, she has more than enough time to leave behind a legacy no less noble than that of her greatest predecessors.

All it takes is to stop thinking of education as a social experiment. All it takes is to ask parents like me what we want for our children. Were

Ms O'Sullivan to do this, she would very quickly discover that we simply want to give our children the very same chances that were given to us, Mr Quinn and, indeed, to the minister herself.

The bottom line is this: I love my children too much to see their future risked on some idealistic ideology.

I want them to look back on their time in school with pride, knowing that we - their parents and their teachers - honoured their birthright.

I desperately desire that, equipped with the best our education system has to offer, they will be able to hold their own in the face of every challenge and trial.

If Minister O'Sullivan were to help me, and indeed all Irish parents, in that endeavour, she would rank among the best of those in whose shadow she now serves.

She would claim a place in the hearts of our children that those like Martin O'Donoghue once claimed in mine. Then, whatever her political destiny, she will be remembered by future generations with lasting affection.

Better that by far, than going down in history as someone who blew their precious inheritance on her predecessor's pipe dream.