

Garda dilemma not of Government's making

SEVERAL TDs have called for the Oireachtas to close on the days of the Garda strike, should the action go ahead from November 4. They believe it would be wrong to have what few gardai actually are working, on duty outside Leinster House, when there might be more pressing need for their services elsewhere.

There are two ways of looking at this. Some might find a Dáil shutdown offensive; they would consider it shameful that the business of government might be interrupted because of the refusal of thousands of public servants to work.

They would argue it would be a symbolic capitulation to an industrial action which remains, on the face of it, illegal.

On the other hand, were something terrible to happen in Dublin or outside the capital because of a lack of gardai, it would be hard to defend having kept a small but significant number of officers on Kildare Street when they could have been of greater use out protecting the public. The truth is that not much is done in Leinster House on Fridays anyway, beyond committee work and other duties outside the main chamber.

Ultimately, this is a tough decision, and whatever option is chosen, we should remember that it is not a situation of the Government's making, but has been foisted on it by gardai themselves. There is a reason why governments all over the world ban strike action by their police forces, and this is a perfect example of the appalling vista to which any withdrawal of their labour inevitably leads.

Kenny misses point

THE Taoiseach yesterday dismissed the notion of appointing a Minister for Brexit, arguing that the entire Government is working on the issue and that it would be wrong to relegate the matter to a 'section' of a particular department.

Not for the first time in his career, Enda Kenny shows a spectacular misunderstanding of the question at hand. There is no suggestion of a Brexit Minister being contained within a 'section' of another department. What has been suggested is a Brexit Minister at Cabinet level, with his or her own department – staffed by enough people to undertake the gargantuan challenge at hand. This minister would then liaise with all other relevant departments, ensuring they are doing what is required.

As this newspaper pointed out yesterday, the issue is not one of willingness: it is a question of how best we organise the Government so as to meet this challenge head-on. If everybody is responsible, nobody is responsible. Someone must be in charge. After all, if Mr Kenny's Government is doing such a great job, why did the head of the Irish Stock Exchange, Deirdre Somers, say yesterday that she believed there was no cohesive plan to attract financial services companies to Ireland? Why are the Small Firms Association, the Irish Exporters Association and other business groups so vocal in calling for a Brexit Minister?

Mr Kenny should remember that, as with the decision to strip medical cards from sick and disabled children, he is capable of making incorrect decisions.

This is not about personal pride or inter-departmental turf wars: this is about ensuring that the Irish people do not suffer as a result of Brexit. He should put them first – and think again.

A worthy tribute

IF there was any comfort to be gleaned from the untimely death of Munster rugby head coach Anthony Foley, it was the striking display of sympathy from across the nation for his wife and sons, his family and his comrades on the field, at his funeral yesterday in Co. Clare.

We hope this brings them some solace in the difficult days and months ahead.

ITHINK it was only when the consultant first used the word 'cancer' that I confronted the stark reality of our situation. Last year, my wife underwent a series of tests for a recurrent cough. Quite by chance, they found a malignant tumour on her thyroid.

It was a blessing, for who knows where it might have ended had they not discovered it in time.

That is how I saw it from the outset: we were extremely fortunate that this growth had been spotted and could now be removed. In my heart, I knew there was nothing to worry about, and yet I could not help feeling completely numb.

My wife had not been diagnosed with life-threatening cancer. She would have surgery and, if all went to plan, that would be the end of it. Why, then, was I so inwardly shaken by the mere mention of the word?

Perhaps it was the fact that I lived with my grandmother as she perished from cancer. As we sat together one morning eating breakfast, she dipped her knife into the milk and began spreading it on her toast. When I asked her what was wrong, she was not able to get the words out.

A few days later, my dear old Nana was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumour. She knew something was awfully wrong, but believed that, in time, she would recover. As the weeks passed, she grew smaller, thinner and more childlike. Despite the cruelty of her condition, she became passive and gentle. She did not rail against the dying of the light, but slowly, gracefully withdrew from the world.

I remember holding her little hand one night as we discussed her illness. Even then, so close to the end, she believed she would get better. Within days, she was moved to the hospice where, after a week of agony, she finally conceded to the inevitable.

THE experience of watching a person you love being consumed by cancer is heart-breaking. It had a profound effect on me and, in many ways, I am still trying to come to terms with it. Every day, I still think of that little old lady bravely falling into the arms of death.

Years later, my friend Breda Cleary phoned me to say: 'I have lung cancer.' She was only in her early 50s, a woman of enormous vitality, energy and good humour. A former student of mine, she was married to John, with whom I taught at NUI Maynooth. Six months after that phone call, Breda came to our home and melted when she held our firstborn. Two weeks later, John invited me to visit Breda on her deathbed. I held the hand of a woman I hardly recognised. She was unconscious, gaunt and terribly frail. I kissed her head and she died the following day.

In recent years, I have known 20 people afflicted with cancer, four of those from my immediate family. What this has taught me is that cancer does not discriminate. We are all susceptible to something that is, at its worst, cruel and merciless.

And so, when I heard that my wife required surgery to remove a tumour, I could not help

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SATURDAY
ESSAY



by Dr Mark
Dooley

thinking about those like my grandmother and Breda. Now it had come to my own home, to my beloved wife and best friend.

It is true that we know so much more about cancer than when my grandmother died from the disease in 1991. It is also true that the word 'cancer' is everywhere and that we are much more open about it today. However, nothing prepares you for the fear you feel when it directly enters your life. The

oncologist said the word 'cancer' and, inwardly, I went into shock. As someone subsequently said to me: 'No matter what way you look at it, cancer is cancer.' Even though my wife was not in mortal peril, she still had to undergo surgery for a disease which, under any circumstances, is hard to accept.

Although I never openly voiced those concerns, and however remote such a scenario was in our case, I remember confronting

the possibility of having to bring up three young boys by myself.

For the first time in our marriage, I had to seriously contemplate the mortality of our lives. How would I cope if anything ever happened to my beloved? What would I do? To whom would I go for help? How would I get through without my best friend?

Reason told me not to be silly and that everything would be fine. However, I had seen what this disease can do, the sheer brutality and terrifying finality of it. Notwithstanding the fact that my wife wasn't in danger, perhaps it was irrational not to feel fear.

Strangely, I found myself resisting the word 'cancer'. I found myself telling people that my wife had to go in for 'a procedure'. When, on the rare

Little word that lives forever



The joy of living: Dr Mark Dooley with his wife and their three young sons

Mark Dooley and his family had the perfect life: then, one day, a doctor said his wife had cancer. This is their poignant (but ultimately joyful) story...

occasion, I did manage to utter it, it was usually in a hushed voice or in a whisper.

Was this because, upon hearing the word, people would react with deep and heartfelt shock, thus making all

too real? Even now, I find it difficult to say that my wife had a cancer operation. Even now, long after the scare has passed, I still find myself becoming fearful when I say the word. The day arrived and, as I

approached her ward before the surgery, I heard my wife joking with the nurses. As usual, she was taking the whole thing in her stride and joyfully embracing life.

The laughter that echoed through

the corridor was, for me, a God-send. I shall never forget the moment the consultant rang me to say the tumour had been safely removed and that the operation was a success.

Until you find yourself in a similar situation, you cannot fully appreciate the profound relief that those words give. My little boys knew only that their Mommy was in hospital and would soon be home. That night, as I fetched them from their Granny, I hugged them for dear life.

In however small a way, cancer had directly touched our lives at a time I least expected.

As it turns out, I had little to fear. My wife was in very capable hands and her post-op care was superb.

That said, I don't think my fear was illogical or foolish. When it comes to cancer – any cancer – such fear is a real and legitimate response to something awful. That is why I strongly

support and applaud the Irish Cancer Society for running Cancer Week Ireland this past week.

The idea is to get 'everyone involved in a conversation about cancer and how we can prevent it, spot it earlier, improve treatment, and survive and thrive afterwards'.

In discussing it, the awfulness of cancer should never be denied or downplayed. My grandmother was, quite literally, ravaged by something that showed no remorse. Likewise, Breda's disease and death were so harrowing, so devastating to dear John that, within three years, he followed her to an early grave.

We must never forget the appalling effect cancer has had on so many families around this country. And yet, if we can, we must also see it as something that has the potential to change everything. So often we wander through life taking it for granted, bemoaning the small pains and problems that beset everyone.

Cancer puts everything into perspective. We are all 'siblings of the same dark night' – each person no less vulnerable than the next. And when it strikes, you are confronted with the fragility of life, with the fact that we cling to this beautiful existence by nothing more than a thread.

COMING to this realisation fundamentally transforms the way you see people and the world. In my case, the whole experience has given me so much more love of life. Today, I try to take absolutely nothing for granted. I try to see each day as the gift it is, each minute as a golden opportunity.

I find myself looking at my wife as if for the very first time. I find myself staring at her, smiling and counting my eternal blessings that we were so lucky. Each time I hear the sound of her footsteps approaching the front door, I cannot help but exclaim: 'Thank God!'

Indeed, I now look at my beautiful sons and all my family with fresh vision. My whole life has been transfigured by having to confront the fact that we are all potentially susceptible to this cruel fate. I now see that, despite all our defences, we are each so tender and so fragile.

To perceive this truth is a moment of awakening. It is to awaken to the vital realisation that each second is sacred, each encounter with those you love a benediction. It may be an overused cliché, but how true it is that your health is your wealth.

Today, I endeavour to relativise everything in relation to good health. Like everyone, I still have my worries and my fears. I still tend to blow small dilemmas out of all proportion. However, it doesn't take me long to come to my senses and to see each problem for what it is.

That is because, in my quiet moments, I ponder the wonder of life – the wonder of my wife and children, those who give meaning and purpose to my existence. In so doing, I can barely imagine a day without them. I look at the lilies of the field and the birds of the air and find myself giving praise for each one. Having confronted the worst, I now try to see everything at its best.

Somehow, the word that I feared to speak – that I still fear to speak – has taught me to value all life anew. It has taught me that, in the end, we are all united by our fears and our fragility. In the end, we long simply for someone to sit by our bedside and to hold our hand.

I held my wife's hand as she awoke from her surgery. The sun was shining on her face and, despite all the tubes, she still looked like an angel. 'I'm very, very tired', she said, and, with a smile, she fell back to sleep.

My wonderful wife was alive and well and, knowing that, so was I.

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