

## TDs must face up to water charges fiasco

UNTIL now, the vast majority of Irish people will have forgotten about water charges. Most probably assumed that the issue was buried after the general election. But they are wrong.

In a few days, the Expert Commission on Water will deliver its report. Early leaks suggest the commission will decree that water will have to be paid for. It will probably rely on strong advice that the European Commission understands Ireland to have signed up to the 'polluter pays' principle: therefore, it will argue, unless charges based on water consumption are reinstated, Ireland could face court action and gigantic fines.

Moreover, it is difficult to argue with the broad principles. The cost of treating and making safe our water has to be met: it seems only fair that those who use the most should pay the most.

It is clear that we need a vast programme of investment in our water infrastructure if supplies, and our health, are to be safeguarded into the future. And it is hard to argue against a single national organisation being in charge of these works, with a guaranteed income stream that cannot be reduced in times of recession.

And yet there is little doubt that the resurrection of water charges will be met with outright opposition by some, and a mixture of resentment and bitterness by the majority. Set aside for now the entirely predictable oppositionism of Sinn Féin and the hard left, or the manoeuvrings of a Fianna Fáil party which first introduced water charging to Ireland, then opposed it at the last election. If there is any prospect of water charges in any form being accepted by the Irish public, some fundamental issues will have to be addressed.

The first and most simple is Irish Water itself. While the logic of a single utility is clear, the reality is that Irish Water through its own actions became a byword for incompetence, cronyism, nepotism, overspending on consultants, haplessness and defensiveness.

It is, quite simply, a toxic brand: the Anglo Irish bank of utilities. The vast majority of Irish people simply will not tolerate that organisation, or any of the senior management team who oversaw the original Irish Water fiasco, being part of the new regime.

Neither will they accept the notion of staff at a monopoly utility company being awarded bonuses for doing their jobs: frankly, their bonus is still having a job. (Nor should the utility attempt, as the last time, to pretend that a bonus is not a bonus by using ludicrous semantics). Moreover, everyone who paid their water charges previously will expect to be refunded, even if that comes in the form of a credit against future water charges. It would be thoroughly unjust, indeed morally bankrupt, for good citizens to be effectively penalised for obeying the law, while those who refused to adhere to that law get away scot-free.

Any new water charging regime would also have to deal equitably with apartment-dwellers who do not have water meters: they cannot be subsidised by others, yet a flat fee would undermine the polluter-pays principle. And people would have to see clear evidence that any suggested allowances were genuinely enough to cover their needs, rather than being set artificially low so as to increase revenues from over-use.

If the people responsible are prepared to listen, consider and then act decisively, these challenges might be overcome. If not, however, there is every chance that this attempt to bring in charges will, like the last one, end up in a watery political grave.

**L**AST week, the world was stunned by the news that a 14-year-old British girl who, shortly before her death on October 17, won a legal case to have her remains cryogenically frozen in the United States. She had been suffering from a rare form of cancer and did not 'want to be buried underground'. Rather, as she informed the judge hearing her case, 'being cryo-preserved gives me a chance to be cured and woken up – even in hundreds of years' time'.

The case has aroused global interest, not least because it offers the prospect of extending life beyond its natural limits. If we can be frozen, rather than interred or cremated, there is always the possibility of being raised from the dead at some future stage. There is always the hope we can enjoy immortality here on Earth.

The girl's mother agreed with her decision to pursue the case through the courts. Her estranged father, however, held a very different view. He stated that, even 'if the treatment is successful and she is brought back to life in, let's say, 200 years, she may not find any relative and she might not remember things'. Moreover, she may be 'left in a desperate situation given that she is still only 14 years old and will be in the United States of America'.

Those concerns are of the utmost importance when considering the ethical implications of cryonics. That is because, should the young girl in question be resuscitated, she may well live precisely as her father predicted – in a world where she is unloved because she is unknown. There is also the bigger problem, which is that this case could well open the floodgates for those who, having lost any sense of an eternal destiny, wish to cling perpetually to their earthly existence.

The human quest for immortality is, of course, much older than this particular case. All the great religious traditions promote faith in an afterlife.

Our lives here on Earth, they tell us, are but a preparation for an eternity elsewhere. However, the eternal reward that religion promises is ultimately rooted in faith, for there is no empirical certainty that we shall exist beyond the moment of our demise.

In a world that is rapidly losing faith in faith, it is natural that people will seek to prolong the life they have rather than depend on a promise of one to come. We may give up on religion, but few can live with the grim prospect that it all ends with the grave. Hence our current fascination with the ways in which science and technology envisage a new earthly eternity.

When compared to the scientific vision of immortality, cryonics seems somewhat quaint. It is, after all, the whole person – body and mind – which is placed in cold storage. Presumably, if that person is at some later stage resuscitated, they will relate to the world as they once did and they shall also have the prospect of a second death.

**T**HIS prompts an interesting question: What if those who have died, and are cryogenically frozen, experience eternal life as promised by the great religions? Will they then want to return to their 'mortal coil', and what shall they tell us if they are drawn down to Earth from eternity? To date, we have only the evidence of those who underwent 'near-death experiences'. How might we react if, one day, we are confronted by someone who actually experienced the real thing?

# As human beings, we love because we will some day die. But if the horizon of death disappears, and the dreams of cryonics come true, do we run the risk that the emotions that make us human disappear too?

# WHO WANTS TO LIVE FOREVER

SATURDAY  
ESSAY



by Mark  
Dooley

That question aside, it remains a fact that cryonics merely seeks to prolong life, but not to infinitely extend it. In order to imagine how we might experience eternity here on Earth, think of the 2014 science fiction movie *Transcendence*, starring Johnny Depp.

In that film, Depp's character is a scientist whose wife responds to his imminent death by uploading his consciousness onto a quantum computer.

In other words, the scientist's mind lives on after his body dies. In case you think this is the stuff of fantasy, consider the work of American scientist Ray Kurzweil, founder of what we have come to know as 'transhumanism'. Kurzweil is no quack, having been awarded the National Medal of Technology and Innovation from President Bill Clinton in 1999.

Kurzweil also uses the word 'transcendence' to denote the idea that we shall soon be in a

position to 'transcend our biology'. We shall, he says, 'enhance our own intelligence by merging with the intelligent machines we are creating'. We shall do so by downloading our thoughts and feelings and, after death, uploading them to a cyborg – thus perpetuating ourselves eternally. As he puts it: 'We didn't stay in the caves, we didn't stay on the planet, and we're not going to stay with the limitations of our biology.'

Kurzweil is supported by the Extropian Institute, an outfit headed by American philosopher Max More. More also believes that science and technology will ultimately extend life indefinitely. 'We can,' he declares, 'achieve much by remaining human. Yet we can attain higher peaks only by applying our intelligence, determination, and optimism to break out of the human chrysalis... Our bodies restrain our capacities.'

Some would argue that we have

already, at least partially, reached that stage. When we go online, spending hours in a virtual world, we create disembodied identities that seem to transcend our normal human limitations. We relate to each other as spectral beings not bound by biology but existing in the realm of pure thought.

Imagine if we could download those thoughts, emotions and feelings that are exclusively 'yours'.

Now imagine that they could be uploaded to a cyborg that fully resembled you. As each cyborg wears out or breaks down, 'you' are simply downloaded to a new machine. The thought is not far-fetched when you consider the rapid advances we are currently witnessing in the realms of technology.

This, of course, raises the question of whether we are still the same people when disconnected from our bodies, or when we become 'ghosts in a machine'.

It also invites us to ask whether we could withstand living forever in such a mechanised condition. In other words, would life be worth living without the emotions generated by our natural embodiment?

Since the dawn of philosophy, the question of how the mind relates to the body has been of central concern. Plato believed



Replicant: Rutger Hauer in Ridley Scott's 1982 sci-fi classic Bladerunner. His character in the film, Roy Batty, desperately tries to extend his life

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that we are composed of soul and body, and that it was our goal to neglect the dying flesh in favour of the eternal.

In so doing, we would transcend that part of us which decays so as to nourish that which is immortal.

Likewise, the sixteenth century French philosopher, Rene Descartes divided the human being into a material and a mental component. All material things, he said, could be doubted or lead to deception. Only one thing cannot be denied which is that I am a 'thinking thing'. Hence, his famous saying: 'I think therefore I am.'

It could be said that it is but a short step from Descartes to the transhumanists. If 'I' am essentially my mind or my thoughts, then surely I could be as happy and fulfilled in a cyborg?

To live forever in the absence of pain, poverty, death or decay, would require the loss of my body. But if my body is not essentially who 'I' am, why worry about its loss?

Living forever in such a disembodied condition would be like existing as a 'brain in a vat'.

We would be all thought without biological sensation. In the case of cryonics, the body eventually burns out, but in this scenario the mind lives forever in

a borrowed container. Even now, when such technologies are unavailable to us, we still cling desperately to this life. We spend a fortune on trying to optimise health and wellbeing. And even when we are forced to face disease, we do everything we can to defeat it.

Who would not trade mortality for the guarantee of an earthly eternity without the fraught prospect of pain and decay?

Surely happiness is best defined as the absence of those things which compromise health and threaten extinction? If we already live half our lives online, why not just go for broke and upload the rest?

**T**HE vision of eternity offered by religion is of a paradise which transcends all physical and mental constraints. It is a realm of pure spirit beyond time and space. In that 'world', we are not bound by anything - least of all a mechanised container.

The happiness we are promised by the transhumanists is that of a mind without corporeal connections to the material world. Obviously, we don't yet know

whether such happiness will even resemble what we now experience as joy.

However, what we can speculate about is whether or not we could live contentedly without our bodies.

Despite Plato and Descartes, what makes us human is that we are embodied beings. It is through our bodies that we feel, experience and sense joy, pleasure and elation.

Indeed, it is through our bodies that we enjoy our deepest human consolations, such as when we hold each other in times of crisis or when we embrace a loved one or kiss a child.

Our bodies, in other words, bind us to the world, to reality and to each other.

It is not solely to the mind of another person that we are drawn or attracted, but also to their 'being-in-the-world'. We grow to love the incarnate person, his physical quirks, his presence and the way he moves, talks and acts.

To feel the touch of another human being, to hold the body of that person in your arms, is what makes human life worth living.

Minds are not created in a vacuum but are born into bodies. And it is the flesh and blood body that we long to live and grow old with.

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