

Irish Daily Mail

COMMENT

Get real on Brexit... before it's too late

IT quite plainly is in Ireland's best interests that no hard border is erected after the United Kingdom leaves the European Union. However, as we have consistently warned, it is delusional folly to believe that won't happen just because we don't want it to.

That's why it would be foolish for the Government to pin any hopes on the latest suggestion from the EU, that the North should stay in the Customs Union, while Britain would leave. In June last year, a majority of voters in the United Kingdom opted for Brexit, and they meant the whole of the UK, not a piecemeal effort from which the North would be excluded. Short of another referendum, that cannot and will not change.

The demand from the EU is ludicrous and simply cannot be met.

Indeed, it is much more likely to cause a further impasse and more delays, and ultimately back Westminster so far into a corner that it will lead to an even harder Brexit born of frustration.

If the EU, collectively, decides that the UK be exiled because it will not accept unworkable solutions, it also must know that the inevitable consequence is the rebuilding of checkpoints and security towers on this island.

This would be a disastrous move that not only would cause considerable inconvenience to many who work on one side of the border and live on the other, or who conduct trade between the two jurisdictions, but might also lead to the resurgence of paramilitary groups presented with a fortified line of new targets.

The EU and the Government must accept that what is done is done. All of the UK will leave the union, and the priority is to offer plausible solutions on every aspect of Brexit, not fantasy suggestions that clearly can come to naught.

Time to go, Halligan?

IN the wake of the award of €7,500 to a woman, who was asked at interview by Minister of State for Training and Skills John Halligan if she was married, you would think he, and those close to him, would keep their own counsel.

Instead, Mr Halligan went on radio yesterday to say he had asked a male candidate the same question, and when this immediately was refuted by the Workplace Relations Commission, he rowed back and said he in fact couldn't remember. In a separate interview, his brother Brendan, who also is Mr Halligan's election agent, said the ruling was 'fundamentally wrong', and questioned the trauma the woman suffered, saying it was nothing compared to the trauma of rape.

Meanwhile, John Halligan has not entirely ruled out the incredibly misguided plan to travel to North Korea in an attempt to negotiate with dictator Kim Jong-un, a mission as egotistical and foolhardy as his brother's comments were offensive.

There seems to be no appetite in Fine Gael to see the Independent Alliance minister fired, but if he cannot demonstrate competence, and deal effectively with his role in government, the question must, at least, be considered: is he fit to run a ministerial office?

An insult to victims

MAINTAINING a 24-hour Garda presence at the home of the late former taoiseach Liam Cosgrave is an affront to victims of crime. Mr Cosgrave died last month, and his wife predeceased him last year, so why is protection still needed?

If there are fears the house might be burgled, there are many in the country who will be envious as they stay awake and alert half the night terrified they will be attacked in their own beds.

Gardaí should be out protecting them, not watching an empty property.

IN the words of Ancient Greek philosopher Diogenes, 'the mob is the mother of tyrants' and anyone who has ever witnessed the terrifying frenzy of a mobilised mob will know that he spoke the truth. Mobs operate outside the law and according to no accepted values. They are dangerous, destructive and diabolical in the way they treat their targets.

When unleashed, the mob is a monster that can cause mayhem and murder. And how easy it is to whip one up: simply choose a scapegoat and blame that person or group for the ills of society. The Nazis did it with the Jews and it led to nothing less than the Final Solution.

This is what journalist Hugh Greene, of the Daily Telegraph, wrote after witnessing the events of Kristallnacht – that infamous night in November 1938, when the Nazis unleashed their wave of terror against German Jews: 'Mob law ruled in Berlin throughout the afternoon and evening and hordes of hooligans indulged in an orgy of destruction. I have seen several anti-Jewish outbreaks in Germany during the last five years, but never anything as nauseating as this. Racial hatred and hysteria seemed to have taken complete hold of otherwise decent people. I saw fashionably dressed women clapping their hands and screaming with glee, while respectable middle-class mothers held up their babies to see the "fun".'

The so-called 'fun' was Jewish shop windows being smashed to smithereens. It was the sight of once-respectable Jewish citizens being kicked, punched and lynched by their former neighbours and 'friends'. It was the mob, foaming and raging with fanatical fury.

Such is the essence of the mob mentality: ordinary decent people losing all sense of right and wrong, striking at the scapegoat as though possessed. The Nazis were masters of mob manipulation, which is what made them so terrifying. They knew that democratic decency was no match for the power of a maniacal mob.

WHAT was true then is still true today, and no more so than in the case of cyber-mobs that operate completely outside the democratic order. I would go so far as to say that this is a form of mob rule that seeks to undermine the rule of law. And what makes our online mobs so threatening is that they are anonymous, ubiquitous and can be whipped up in a matter of seconds.

I am not referring to the recent sexual harassment cases – although it is interesting to note that while many alleged perpetrators have been subject to trial by Twitter, no-one has yet been prosecuted by the law. More specifically, I am referring to those cyber-bullies who spend their days pouring venom on their arbitrarily selected targets. I am referring to those who, shielded by their screens, summarily condemn innocent people without a trial.

The examples are countless: a person takes a stand on an issue, voices an opinion and, no sooner is the ink dry, but the Twitter trolls are unleashed. Death threats are issued, the person is abused, condemned and their character demolished. Put simply: mob justice is summary justice and it operates without due process.

Children are, of course, especially vulnerable to cyber-bullying and the psychological violence it wields. A global survey conducted in 2015 found that Irish teenagers were more likely to be cyber-bullied than teens in any other country. Last year, a report by ZenithOp-

In the past, great democracies were defined by the fact that you could debate controversial issues – be it abortion, Islamist terrorism, faith or even politics – without fear of reprisal or personal attack: only tyrannical states (be they run by fascists, Communists or religious zealots) set the mob onto those who dared disagree. Now, however, a new tyranny threatens us all: the social media mob, ready to publicly vilify, demonise and terrorise and those who dare speak out against the liberal orthodoxy of a self-appointed elite...

THE RETURN MOB

SATURDAY
ESSAY



by Dr Mark
Dooley

timedia, showed that 20% of Irish children had been bullied online. The same survey also found that one in ten Irish adults had been targeted by cyber-mobs.

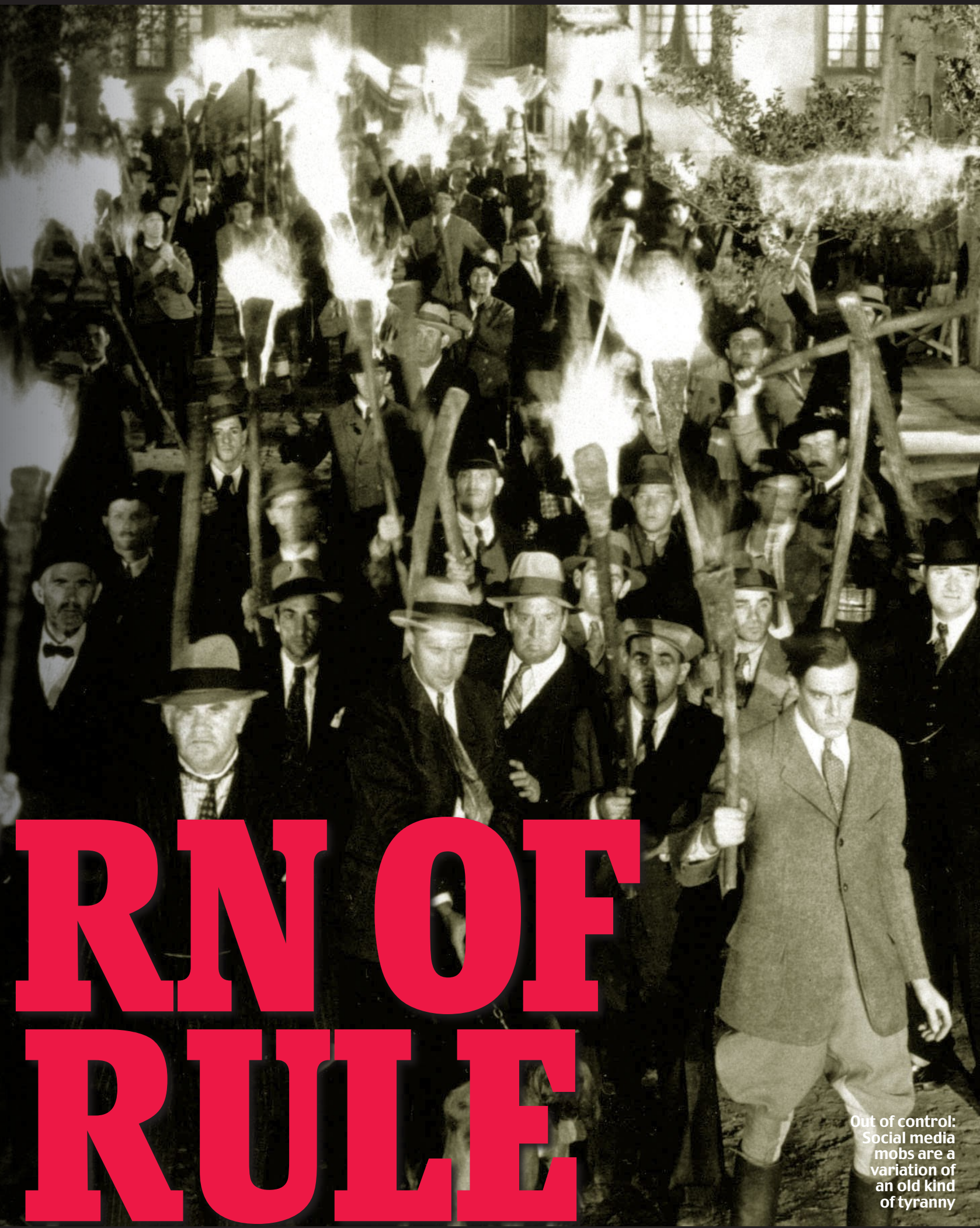
Indeed, so serious has this epidemic become that an Independent county councillor was recently forced to appeal to the Justice Minister. According to Councillor Noel Collins from Co. Cork: 'Cyber-bullying is not only confined to schoolchil-

dren, but is sadly in other spheres'. It is 'rampant', he says, in political circles, with many politicians simply 'left suffering in silence'. His response was to bring a motion to Cork County Council requesting that the 'Non-Fatal Offences against the Person Act' be updated to encompass online bullying of children and adults.

Under a democratic rule of law, it is the law itself which

ought to determine the guilt or innocence of a person. But online trolls believe they are constrained by no such norms as due process. In that shady sphere, the mob rules, seeking to silence whatever or whoever it dislikes.

Like those who put the witches of Salem to the sword in 1692, the cyber-mob gathers and dispatches its victims through harassment, intimidation and fear. Of course, you don't have to be a cyber-bully to decry those who say or do things which are gratuitously offensive. But when the cyber-mob decides that it is judge, jury and executioner, surely we are teetering on the edge of tyranny. When it attacks vulnerable children, driving many



RN OF RULE

Out of control: Social media mobs are a variation of an old kind of tyranny

laws already at our disposal – such as those of libel, defamation, incitement to hatred and contempt? And what can we, the ordinary citizens of Ireland, do to protect ourselves from such online aggression?

First, our politicians need to realise that while online mobs may be loud and abusive, they do not speak for the vast majority of Irish people. For most, social media is a way of connecting and sharing. It is not, as it is for the Twitter trolls, a means of peddling insults, propaganda and malicious falsehoods.

Twitter mobs are just that: mobs that speak only for themselves, which is why they should never be permitted to silence or intimidate those with whom they disagree. Therefore, policy makers, politicians and those in the public eye, should stand firm in the face of online onslaughts, knowing that most Irish people abhor such abuse. Many died so that we might enjoy democracy and freedom of speech. Why, then, should we allow any mob, however menacing, to threaten the foundations of our democracy?

Secondly, as it stands, the law is sufficiently capable of dealing with those who would seek to undermine it. Last year, for example, former Circuit Court judge Patrick McCartan sentenced a man to five years in prison for the online harassment of a Garda Sergeant. In a second case, a Co. Monaghan man was ordered to pay €75,000 in damages for defaming someone on Facebook.

IN other words, those who harass and intimidate people online are subject to the very same laws of libel as those in the conventional media. That is why victims of online abuse should never hesitate to report such incidents to the gardai. For only when those who have form on Facebook or Twitter are prosecuted for their trouble will the mobs realise that they are not beyond the reach of the law. Only then will it become clear that it is not they, but the Irish courts who are the exclusive arbiters of guilt and innocence in this country.

Earlier this year, a judge in Manchester jailed two women for hacking a third woman's Facebook page to claim that she attempted to smother one of their children. Their victim was Jayne Pearce, a 23-year-old mother who died of an overdose after being viciously trolled for three months following the hacking.

In jailing the women for whipping up what she termed a 'pitchfork mob', Judge Angela Nield observed: 'Social media has a great deal to answer for. It does do a great deal for good, for bringing together friends who have not met each other for many years – but sadly, as is often the case now, people find it to be a tool for evil, a tool for wrong and a tool for criticising each other.'

'In this case', she added, 'it was a tool to bring down upon the head of an innocent person the wrath of social media by way of public opinion.'

Far too many lives have already been destroyed by those who would use their online platform to subvert our most cherished values. It is, therefore, high time that those who persist in using social media as a tool for evil, as a tool for undermining our laws and our democracy, are dealt with accordingly.

Perhaps, when their own future depends on it, they will finally see the true value of due process and the rule of law. And perhaps they will see why, without it, we are all potential targets of the would-be tyrants.

to suicide, we are surely witnessing a new form of lawless terror.

When it targets politicians, journalists, writers or activists, what we are witnessing is an assault, not only on the democratic process itself, but on the very idea of free speech. The mob takes up a cause and those who dare oppose it are suddenly besieged, their character besmirched, and, in some cases, their career destroyed. And then, in a flash, the mob is off to chastise its next target.

Only the law should possess that type of power, for when a group believes it has the right to summarily try and condemn without trial, the rule of law cannot survive. If the law is not sovereign, if it is not the sole arbiter of guilt or innocence, then what happens when

you, me, or any innocent person is maliciously accused of something online? Are we to be tried by Twitter, guillotined on Instagram? Are we to be silenced simply for expressing an opinion that offends some self-righteous petty tyrants?

So bad was her experience of online abuse during the general election last year, that Fine Gael senator Gabrielle McFadden opted to publicly support the 'I am a Friend' initiative. This initiative, organised by victims of online abuse in the Midlands, seeks to provide support for those targeted by trolls. Senator McFadden explains: 'Just as a Pioneer pin makes a statement about the wearer, it is hoped that wearing the symbol will spread the message to others'.

A noble gesture of solidarity for sure. But what sort of society is it where democratically elected politicians feel they must sport symbols of their victimhood at the hands of those who respect neither the rule of law nor the will of the people? We elect them to make the law, and yet in the face of cyber-mobs they appear powerless. But in abusing and threatening our politicians, the Twitter trolls are doing much more: they are striking at the very heart of democracy itself.

It seems to me that we have a cyber culture that considers itself, not only outside the rule of law, but one that thinks it can also manipulate the law and the democratic order. The result is that people are too afraid to speak, too

fearful that their lives and careers will be subject to an online onslaught from which they shall never recover. Those howling from their online sidelines do not believe in the age-old dictum of innocent until proven guilty. Once guilt is decreed, it is brutally enforced.

What does all this mean for due process, for future elections, for the abortion referendum next summer? For when people are too apprehensive to raise their head above the parapet, fearing a barrage of online abuse, what future has freedom, dialogue and democratic debate?

Is it that we need new laws for a digital age, laws that would extend to that anarchic sphere under mob control? Or is it simply that we need to more robustly enforce the