

The Parameters of the Permissible: How *Scrap Saturday* got away with it

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Dermot Morgan photo from <http://www.dermotmorgan.com/>

published in *Irish Communications Review* in 1992

From October 1990 to December 1991, weekends had to be organised carefully. If you were not listening to RTE Radio 1 on Saturday morning or didn't catch the repeat on Sunday or make arrangements for it to be recorded for you, you were at a loss during the next week. The word spread like wild fire and *Scrap Saturday* became central to the public discourse. Talk of audience fragmentation was forgotten. Here was a society talking to itself, coming to terms with itself, laughing at itself. We were connected to each other in a particular way through it. There is something missing between us now that it is gone. It captured the popular imagination on a grand scale and it will undoubtedly live on in folk memory for a long time to come.

Scrap Saturday pushed out the parameters of what was permissible in the realm of political and social satire. There has long been a problem in this area. Years ago, a writer in Hibernia referred to "our parish pump society in which private malice never matured into political satire". Those who endeavoured to push out the boundaries of what was possible in the past, such as Niall Toibin, were left feeling embittered by the barrage of self-righteous abuse to which RTE often responded with apologies. In the days of *If The Cap Fits*, *Time Now*, *Mr T* and *Hall's Pictorial Weekly*, RTE programmes were often the subject of questions in the Dail and resolutions of denunciation of county councils, as well switchboards jammed and mailbags bursting with condemnation.

But *Scrap Saturday* went further and got away with it. This is not to say that there was not a lot of hostility out there, but it was reduced to near silence at least as far as the public discourse about it was concerned. There may have been rumblings of uneasiness and discontent, but there was scarcely a word said against it in public. It was eerie. In fact it was not healthy. It may have been good that the balance of forces has changed in favour of what *Scrap Saturday* was doing, but the lack of public debate about it was not.

What was the most explicit attack on it so far was done with the most astonishing ineptitude and ignorance. Madeleine Taylor Quinn, TD was like a daft child stumbling into a minefield. Based on garbled accounts from her constituents and without the most elementary understanding of the satirical nature of the programme, she went on to the nation's airwaves to complain about RTE carrying an ad for Sky news trivialising the Gulf War. From then on the programme went for her and she gave them plenty of material, even if she didn't mention the programme in public again. MTQ missiles were not considered to be smart weapons.

It wasn't only those who attacked who became targets. What was more remarkable was the way the programme took on even those who had praised and promoted them, quite amazing in a society in which there is so much shameless toadying and mutual backscratching. It was Mike Murphy, don't forget, who gave Dermot Morgan his start as a media comedian in the days of *Live Mike*, and yet the jovial lightweight levelling banality of his role as arts presenter has been a running theme. He enthused over a piece of sculpture at an exhibition "the striking red motif ... the phallic symbolism" only to be told that it was the fire hydrant on the wall. On Shakespeare: "he's really in right now". Gay Byrne too

gave Dermot Morgan a most sympathetic platform on the *Late Late Show* (the LLS interview was a superb performance) and the *Gay Byrne Show* and played a selection of his favourite sketches at the end of the previous season. His enthusiasm for the show may well have dimmed since they began portraying him as vain, cynical, manipulative, condescending and parasitic on the grief of others. Even the radio audience itself got taken on, with GB being besieged by "every menopausal old one in the country looking for a washing machine".

No one can say they went for easy targets. All the institutions of church and state and civil society were considered fair game, including those with most power over their own lives. "And now on RTE, your only national broadcasting station, we bring you your only national religion..." RTE itself was often satirised scathingly. It was described as "a charitable organisation for distressed artists who provide part-time work on full-time pay for those suffering from alcoholism and broken marriages and who would otherwise find it difficult to secure steady employment". The competition came in for it as well. Century was "a pension fund for ex-pat chat show hosts and Argentinian schmaltz peddlars." On Ray Burke as Minister of Communications: "a confidence trickster called Rambo, due to his gung ho attitude and unpleasant demeanor". On his broadcasting legislation: "While he offered the pitch for sale, he was unaware what the game was, who wanted to play, how to score it or anything else. He just wanted to see RTE take a hiding".

RTE programme formats were used as vehicles, not only for satirising RTE programmes and presenters, but for opening out to the whole society as mediated by the media. *Today at 5*, *Morning Ireland*, *Bibi*, *Donncha's Sunday*, Charlie Bird's news reports, as well as sports and quiz shows, proved highly effective for their purposes.

Other media formats too were appropriated: the Hollywood trailer "Our Left President ... the story of a woman who gave up socialism for love", 2001 music underscoring the epic of "the primates from whom homo sapiens would eventually evolve, the Furies". Long remembered foreign tv series such as *The Flintstones* and *Upstairs Downstairs* were called into play. Newspapers were combed both for form and content, *The Keane Edge* column looming large here. The *Bible* too had its uses with a reading from *The Book of Manipulations*: "This disk will appear for 21 days and 21 night and its number was one." U2's marketing strategies came up in a number of formats. Paul Mc Guinness, being interviewed by Bibi, laid down

the law: "The days are gone when anybody can just walk into any mega-store and just pick up a U2 record".

No person or institution, dead or alive, home or abroad, could be considered safe, especially when Eamon Dunphy was allowed to rant about everything from the weather to the history of philosophy. Even Mother Teresa: "a tea towel on your head and good works with India's lower castes doesn't make a nun." The relationship of poetry to power was a recurrent theme. There were the Bank of Free Publicity arts awards, Richard Kearney's poem celebrating the accession of Noel Davern as Minister of Education and Brendan Kennelly's preparation for performance at Kinsealy: "I thought I would use the metaphor of the Toyota to suggest the powerful movement of the Haughey factor". From a different ideological position, there was Fintan O'Toole explaining how Abbey plays would be "like my newspaper articles, only with dialogue."

Brendan and Caitriona, who achieved instant mythical status as symbols of an Ireland on the run, came into it with a new SPUC sex video describing the "now famous John Paul II method". The Provisional IRA and the GAA were targets, as were the specific qualities of parts of the country stretching from Tallaght and Neilstown to Limerick. As the Soviet Union fell apart, free peoples of the world were invited to join the Limerick Union of Socialist Republics. And there was Eoghan Harris quoting Marx to Fine Gael as he coached them for the introduction of television cameras in the Dail.

Politicians were a prominent presence, particularly those of the party in power. Perhaps in the end they became too myopic with respect to the leadership struggle of Fianna Fail, but perhaps the nation was as well. The last programme had RTE including in its autumn schedules a nightly Charles Haughey Resignation Show. Dermot Morgan did not do justice to himself and his colleagues and their astute grasp on ironies permeating Irish society as a whole to suggest that they would be lost were Haughey to go. Haughey is gone now and, even with *Scrap Saturday* off the air, Dermot Morgan and his colleagues are not lost. The tape *Scrap Charlie* done in the *Scrap Saturday* format went to number one in the charts in its first week, getting the maximum mileage out of his going. Then Morgan immediately moved on to his successor. Over the airwaves came the sounds of his latest single *A Country & Western Taoiseach*.

It is impossible to imagine an Ireland in which he would be short of material.

Nevertheless, the CJ-PJ dialogues provided a picture of Charles Haughey, which intuitively seemed far truer than that of public persona and much more interesting as well, the monstrous venality and vanity being far more vital than the stupefying banality and clichéd verbosity of his pretentious public performances. In the outpouring of sugary sentimentality that filled the newspaper pages when Haughey finally did fall, when even some of our most respected commentators lost the run of themselves altogether, Morgan did not recant. When asked for his final verdict on Haughey, he simply said that he said what he had to say in *Scrap Saturday*. Remembering *Scrap Saturday* sketches helped keep me going through some of the most sick making eulogies.

The programme ventured into territory considered taboo by the media until now, although the person who went farthest in breaking the taboo was Terry Keane. For months there were the most blatant references to 'the loved one' and intimate details of the leader's off-stage life in her *Sunday Independent* column and then, come autumn, nothing more. All *Scrap Saturday* did at first was a parody of her ravingly pretentious column (which wasn't so easy to parody as it seemed to be pretend parodying itself so as to get away with it straight). When these references disappeared, they leapt into the gap. Interestingly, the only pressures to refrain were of the "think of Maureen" variety.

It met with little censorship. The one hard case had to do with Brian Lenihan's liver. There were some pressures within RTE to lay off Limerick, but the Treaty 300 sketches continued unabated. It is remarkable that there were no libel suits. It was during this time that William Roche, who plays Ken Barlow in *Coronation Street* won a libel suit in Britain over remarks about being boring and smug. It was very mild stuff compared to qualities attributed to public figures by *Scrap Saturday*.

The programme was designed to break the barriers. Dermot Morgan said that he decided to go for broke, to pull no punches. He did not consider it to be a bit of harmless fun. He sees himself as "a political activist on stage" and believes that his strongest work comes from his deepest anger. *Scrap Saturday* came out of a long smouldering rage at the state of Irish society "the pettiness, the greyness of it all", the stifling influence of the church, the excess of self-esteem radiated by politicians. There were icons that just had to be shattered and he was proud to be their iconoclast. *Scrap Saturday* was conceived in a deep inner necessity and its coming to fruition has brought catharsis.

But it was also fun. Watching the process of production one day, the humour in between the sketches was often as funny as the sketches themselves. It flowed from the whole of their sensibility, the whole of their approach to the world. At one point, perhaps for my benefit, Morgan went into his Noonan persona and had Noonan castigating him for going too easy on the left.

That it caught fire on such a grand scale was a surprise. Morgan and Stenbridge expected that it might have a cult following, but the generality and scale of response was unexpected. It reflected a sea change in Irish society. It came at the same time as the election of Mary Robinson as President and tapped the same hidden constituency, as they saw it.

Not everyone got every joke. Not everybody had to get every joke. I have to admit that some of the sporting references passed me by, as some of the political, philosophical or literary references may have been lost on others. This was part of the cleverness of the programme: that it could work on a number of different levels and appeal to diverse sections of the audience. It could reach a mass audience without reducing itself to the least common denominator to do so.

The programme had its faults. In the last season it disappointed almost as often as it delighted. Some gags were done to death. "Gerry, sorry Gerard" started to drive me to distraction. "Around the world on eighty grand" was a great idea, but it often degenerated into a list of travel clichés and menus. It had lapses of taste: far too much detail about oral projectiles in relation to anal orifices.

Asked why it was ending, John P Kelly, the commissioning editor at RTE, said that he thought it had started to run out and that it was better to get out on a high and leave them laughing. The best comedy series, such as *Fawlty Towers*, had only a limited run, he reminded. There were no immediate plans to fill the slot and there was a possibility of a further series later on, but in the meantime, he was looking for new ideas. He admitted that it has raised the stakes and made it very difficult for anything which might follow.

Scrap Saturday brought to our collective life something we should not do without. I am willing to accept its ending only with the hope that it will be reincarnated in some new form, perhaps this time on television, which would make use of the visual virtuosity of Dermot Morgan as a performer, the originality of

Gerry Stembridge as a television director and the skills of Pauline Mc Lynn and Owen Roe as television actors.

What is important is that this acute sense of the satirical potential of Irish society not be lost.

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Notes:

1) John Boland *Hibernia* April 6, 1978

2) Radio Telefis Eireann satirical productions of the 1970s.

For an account of the character of these programmes and the controversies they generated:

Helena Sheehan *Irish Television Drama: A Society and Its Stories* (Dublin: RTE, 1987), pp 177-181

3) Eamon Dunphy, a footballer, who became sports commentator and then expert on all-things-under-the-sun; Richard Kearney, a philosopher, who has turned to publishing poetry; Brendan Kennelly, a poet, who has written paeons of praise to Charles Haughey and fronted Toyota commercials; Fintan O'Toole, an Irish Times columnist, who was appointed literary advisor to the Abbey Theatre

4) Brendan & Caitriona, a married couple who appeared on *The Late Late Show* criticising the video *The Lovers Guide*; Eoghan Harris, a television producer, who transformed himself from Workers Party ideologue to Fine Gael advisor, who denounced socialism while still claiming to be a marxist

5) Maureen Haughey, wife

6) Brian Lenihan, TD, Fianna Fail candidate for president in 1990, who had a liver transplant

7) Michael Noonan, TD, Fine Gael spokesman on finance

8) Gerard Collins, TD, Minister of Foreign Affairs at the time