

Café bars article

One of the strangest phenomena that I encountered in my ministerial days was the total disconnect between opinion in Leinster House and the views of the people of Ireland represented by the strange fate of my café bars proposal.

It was a classic example of the clash between rigid thinking and vested interests on the one hand and a “why not”, reformist mind-set on the other.

The outcome says an awful lot about the “real Ireland” as distinguished from the “imagined, aspirational Ireland” that might have happened and indeed might still happen.

The traditional “Irish pub” was, and still is, an iconic institution and an integral part of Ireland’s international image –used extensively in our tourism drive. Irish pubs are everywhere on the globe. I love traditional Irish pubs and have no problem with them at all. I think we should value them as a very real thread in our social fabric.

There was, however, a considerable and well-justified body of public opinion that an entire generation of young Irish people were being offered a social life-style that involved nights of binge drinking, happy hours, in (and immediately outside) “super-pubs” where waiting staff served drink (and nothing else) freely to intoxicated young customers with empty stomachs, resulting in sickness, violence, anti-social behaviour, sexual assaults on vulnerable people, and long-term serious damage to health.

Critics of the binge-drinking culture, including myself, believed that the existing legal framework of the intoxicating liquor acts was one of the factors preventing an alternative, more “Mediterranean” approach to consumption of alcohol.

By creating a specialist statutory monopoly for selling drink and by locating that trade exclusively in pubs, the idea that a group of young Irish adults or families might avoid the pub and go out for an affordable pizza-type café meal or maybe tapas, where some of them could have spirits, some beer, some wine, and some soft drinks and coffees, seemed an impossible commercial model.

Drinking and eating was effectively confined to expensive licensed restaurants rather than cafes.

I strongly favoured legislating for café bars. The idea was helped hugely by a favourable report of a working group on the issue chaired by the late Gordon Holmes.

The public reaction to the idea was very good and I thought that the great majority were in favour.

All was set for a major reform which would have allowed for café bars while at the same time toughening the laws against drunkenness, “happy hours” and binge drinking.

Then the roof fell in. The vested interests were mobilised. The Cabinet would only allow café bars to be canvassed in a discussion document to gauge the reaction.

The vintners' lobby went into over-drive. TDs' clinics were visited throughout the land.

TDs were told that the café bar would “destroy the family pub”, proliferate drinking, and lead to chaos and crime in every corner of the country.

“Publican pressure” surged. Fianna Fail mutated from the “republican party” to the “publican party”. Fine Gael hotly attacked the idea. So did Labour and –wait for it – the Greens.

The Dail was overwhelmingly hostile to my proposal.

Only the Progressive Democrats stood by the café bar idea – eight out of 166 TDs. There was no support elsewhere for the reform. It was shelved.

Of course, the irony is that the “family pub” was facing a far greater, and much stealthier, threat from legislative proposals coming from my FF minister colleagues - in relation to drink-driving and the tobacco ban.

Publicans, faced with dwindling sales and the tax clearance certificates regimes, increasingly sold their licences to be converted into off-licences in supermarkets and filling stations. Naturally, “off sales” rocketed as prices nose-dived. Home-drinking increased and accelerated the decline in the pub trade.

The licensed trade is now in a sorry state – much of it operated on a part-time basis or managed by bank receivers or faced with closure by the Revenue Commissioners for tax indebtedness.

Some pubs have found a survival strategy in food. Some are still groping their way to becoming – irony of ironies !– café bars.

The once-strong vintners' lobby is a shadow of its former formidable self. You can get beer much easier in restaurants than previously.

I still believe the café bar idea is a good one and that the massive political opposition to it was misconceived.

A modest proposal – why not now legislate to allow each local authority decide whether or not to allow café bars in its area?

Then we might see whether the people or the politicians were right all along.

ENDS