

Opinion

A civilised insurrection

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September 24, 2005—My home is in the Isle of Man, a small island between the UK and Ireland. We are technically a ‘crown dependency’ of the UK, so we enjoy a semi-independent political status, with our own government and our own ways of doing things.

The island is a deceptive place. While most residents now work, by necessity, in the furiously paced offshore finance industry we stay here to avoid city life. Imagine, if you can, finishing a day at a Wall Street stockbroker, but heading off home in your car down a quiet coast road instead of through a city logjam.

I do that every day, and living here has helped me to develop a different mindset. In particular, I refuse to suffer for even the noblest cause.

For example, on a summer evening in 2003, I sat down to dinner at a friend's house. Had I but known it, I was also in at the beginning of a very civilised insurrection.

My host, Patrick Kneen, was a retired farmer, keen environmentalist and active local humanist. So, the food was organic and homegrown, the company open-minded and the conversation humorous. As I was being treated to the last of his famous strawberry crop and watching the sun set over the Irish Sea I remember thinking ‘this is about as good as life gets.’

But little more than two months later, Patrick was dead, and just a few weeks after that my fellow diners and I were battling against small town religious prejudice and political corruption to save his widow, Pat, from a prison sentence.

At the time, it felt like the overnight collapse of human decency before a squadron of bulldozers driven by crack-addled Baptists. Yet, armed only with humour and a selection of good wines a small group of rationalists have now reclaimed Manx civilisation from the Bible-bashers.

But I digress. . . .

When Patrick invited us to dinner that night, he was dying from prostate cancer. Rather than ‘go meekly into that good night’ he wanted to go down fighting for others to have the ‘good death’ he could not legally request. He had not lived on his knees, so he would not die that way either.

Earlier that day, Patrick had approached two local politicians to ask if they would ask Tynwald (the Isle of Man parliament) for leave to introduce a bill allowing terminally ill Manx people to request doctor assisted suicide. He suspected he would not live to see the bill debated—even if the notoriously conservative Manx politicians would consider such a measure. This was, after all, the only part of the British Isles where even homosexuality was still only partly decriminalised, never mind assisted suicide!

That evening he gathered some of his closest friends around him to ask a favour: should he die before the campaign really got going, would we help his wife, Pat, finish it for him? Patrick was a rare, good

humoured man known for his tenacity mixed with a capacity for gentle persuasion, so we said 'Yes' without hesitation. Much to our surprise, so had the politicians.

In the following weeks we helped him publicise his views in local papers, on the Island's radio and further afield on regional UK and Irish radio and TV. Meanwhile the two politicians prepared their case.

The local newspaper ran a poll which showed about 80 percent support for 'Patrick's Bill.' We followed up with a postcard campaign distributed through the newspaper, with several thousand of the Island's usually conservative population of 74,000 signing up to a petition which Patrick handed in to the politicians.

As Patrick's cancer worsened he weakened until finally blindness even prevented him enjoying his beloved garden, yet he still gave interviews by phone.

One of my fellow campaigners recalls the day the doctor walked in on a blind, catheterised and pain-racked Patrick and called out 'And how are we today, Mr Kneen?'

'Oh, mustn't grumble,' said Patrick, absolutely poker-faced.

When UK pro-life 'experts' were dragged in by local religious bigots to comment in the press, it was his friends who replied, taking apart the facetious arguments Patrick could no longer read with our own versions of his dry wit.

All in all, despite feeling we had stirred up a hornet's nest of religious fury, it was a happy summer. But it could not last.

Soon Patrick was dead. In a final gesture of impish defiance, he insisted on a natural burial in a cardboard coffin, wrapped in a red flag, in a secret spot of his own choosing well away from any church. After the burial his friends and relatives gathered in a village hall for an afternoon wake, with his favourite music, poems, and funny stories performed by those who knew him best.

Meanwhile, Tynwald had approved the submission of a bill, subject to a select committee first gathering evidence and making a report to the House. But on the very morning that the committee was due to meet for the first time the earth fell in on us.

The local morning news should have been dominated by news of the committee meeting. Instead, local radio announced the arrest of Mrs Kneen on a charge of conspiring to assist a suicide.

The local paper also carried the story of the arrest—obviously tipped off beforehand as the arrest was at 9 AM and the weekly newspaper only went to press at that hour.

The pretext for the arrest was a letter written by Pat Kneen for publication in the newspaper, which instead handed it to the police. In the letter Pat explained bluntly how she and Patrick had discussed ways to shorten his suffering. Eventually, she rang a UK doctor known to them both to ask for advice and he offered to come over.

As things turned out, by the time the doctor arrived Patrick was already too close to death for assistance. Even if he had wanted to take pills to hasten his end he was incapable of swallowing them. So he died naturally and painfully, though at least at home.

Detectives arrived to take Mrs Kneen away for questioning, and other officers took apart her home, removing almost anything that was not nailed down as 'evidence,' including every sympathy card and the couple's private letters to each other. They were never returned, as the police forgot to take an inventory and subsequently could not even remember what they had taken.

Pat Kneen—a frail and terrified 74-year-old with a heart condition—was then questioned for almost a day without food or drink apart from a single glass of water. She was not even aware the police had searched her home until the duty solicitor informed her.

Even by the appalling standards of the Manx police, it was a disgrace.

Meanwhile, as the attorney general had conveniently decided that any publicity would ‘prejudice possible legal proceedings,’ the press and radio could not carry comment or news, and this was taken to include public discussion of assisted suicide, the work of the Tynwald committee, or indeed anything remotely connected. So the Isle of Man had a media blackout as matters got ever more bizarre.

The visiting doctor was revealed to be Michael Irwin, then chairman of the well-known UK campaign group, the Voluntary Euthanasia Society. In a highly publicised arrest he was flown to the Island for questioning, then released. Both Dr Irwin and Mrs Kneen were ordered to report back for a police decision in several months, during which time the attorney general’s media ban remained.

Next, the police hinted that it might be necessary to exhume Patrick Kneen’s body as part of the enquiry. Things were past bizarre and now positively and obscenely surreal. Could officialdom really want to dig up a dead man to check that he’d died as painfully as the law demands?

Meanwhile, allegations of police misconduct elsewhere emerged. Amongst other effects, this meant the investigation of Pat Kneen had to be halted because the most senior detectives on the Island were themselves under suspicion. Dr Irwin and Mrs Kneen were told any decision on their case would be delayed until the new year, because there was no-one left to investigate it.

By this point, local anger had reached boiling point and we had to act. We posted a link from the Manx Death With Dignity website to the chief minister’s office (copied to the local newspaper) inviting people to tell him what they thought. Within minutes it was passing around the world and e-mails thundered in.

Just a few hours later the newspaper rang, saying both their website and the government website had collapsed under the onslaught and begging me to stop it.

The very next day the Council of Ministers and the attorney general met, and announced to the press that Mrs Kneen and Dr Irwin were no longer under investigation, due to lack of evidence.

As things returned to relative normality, Pat Kneen bounced back. Our next move was a confidential poll of all Manx doctors to get their opinion. The results showed a cautious acceptance that the law must change, subject to tough enough safeguards for doctors and patients. We passed the results to the press and invited public scrutiny of our survey by any competent professional. It was also added to a set of academic surveys collated by the VES, which have showed a uniformity in medical opinion around the British Isles.

Our campaign was becoming marked by the singular approach of our committee members. Placards, T-shirts, buttons, and professional marketing strategy were all conspicuous by their absence.

Each meeting—generally at Pat’s house—was preceded by an excellent lunch, with one wine buff and committee member contributing his monthly selection of fine wines to accompany the food. Lunch was long and leisurely, until at last we broke off to get through the formal, minuted business, then passed on to local gossip and more wine shared with any passing visitor, then staggered off home.

Never in the history of secular civil rights campaigning can so few so have been so well fed, or so much serious discussion interspersed with so many jokes.

Perhaps that was what made it so difficult for the religious and political ‘professionals’ to oppose us. We just would not play the (lobbying) game, where identical bipolar opposites trot out their laughable textbook ‘strategies’ until the general public give in and choose one or other just to stop the idiocy.

By this point, the government committee had invited public comment on the possible bill and now followed up with public hearings of selected evidence. Though the committee itself was a well balanced mix of local politicians, the token barking mad weekend evangelist amongst them insisted on as many of his strange friends as possible being called as 'experts.' These included the PR officer of a pro-life cult group and the pathetically under informed retired surgeon now leading a Christian medical society which uses minor surgery as an evangelistic bribe for poor Africans.

Perhaps the most bizarre sight was the presentation of the local Anglican archdeacon, representing local Christian 'opinion'—though never troubling to seek it beforehand, I might add.

A pleasant enough man himself, this cleric entered the room surrounded by late middle-aged, miserable looking, men—the leaders of the local Catholic, Presbyterian, Salvation Army and Baptist faithful.

As his guards scanned the room like FBI goons looking for assassins, the archdeacon read out a bland statement. Without waiting for questions or comment, the entire black serge clad ensemble then rose to their feet and marched out again. It was all anyone present could do to stifle their laughter until the God Squad's marching feet had faded to silence.

That was last summer, and as the UK government introduced their own bill, general elections in the US and UK passed and 'test cases' around the world on the rights of dying people emerged, the Manx government has prevaricated.

We are not surprised. Nothing happens in a hurry on this island.

In Manx gaelic we have a saying, 'traa dy liooar,' which means 'wait until tomorrow'—in effect the Celtic 'mañana.' It might be our unofficial national motto.

Still, two years later, Patrick Kneen rests in peace, his wife is free and we may be seeing the change in legislation that the Kneens and their guests talked about that night, but hardly dared imagine could come. In addition, the myth that a small community rigid in fundamentalist religiousness cannot change is shattered.

It was noticeable that our opposition was both hierarchical and bureaucratic. I would argue that it was marked by a fear of life that, somewhat illogically, they chose to demonstrate in their attempts to maintain control over death. Confronted by a small group of freethinking friends who joked their way through a campaign on, literally, a life or death issue this po-faced, monolithic nonentity just crumbled away as we laughed at it.

I hope that atheists and other freethinkers elsewhere can learn from our little adventure. Don't get serious, get happy.