



Face-to-face with the real victims of Noonan's cuts



George Hook continues his tour of the country and finds that the old may not be organised but are getting more angry

LAST week my tour around Ireland as part of the engagement with **Bluebird Care**, entitled *Are We Minding an Ageing Population*, took me to Cork. Two hundred people turned up to the Radisson Blu Hotel to talk about being old in Ireland.

Cork was the fourth in this series but the first meeting after the Budget. As usual, there were speakers from other charities like **Age Action**, **Response and Alone**; there was a cookery demonstration from award-winning chef Gary O'Hanlon; and advice from the Garda crime prevention unit.

However, it was Senator Deirdre Clune, former Fine Gael Lord Mayor of Cork, who came in for the toughest time. Senator Clune bravely held the Government line but there was no doubt that the grey lobby, which may not be very organised, is distinctly angry. One gets the sense that in the local elections, the Government parties may well take a hiding from voters over the pension age.

Because Finance Minister Michael Noonan rather cleverly delivered his Budget speech and the spin doctors worked assiduously to diminish its

effect on the old, the sick and the vulnerable, the real pain was disguised. It is only when one hears the outrage that one senses the attitude around the country.

Noonan's suggestion that raising **Dirt** would prompt people into spending rather than saving money had no evidence to back it up from world markets. On the day, economists in my radio studio made derisory comments about the minister's tactic.

However, when the bald facts are enunciated by a pensioner about how 3 per cent is the best he can achieve on his lump sum and that this will now be eroded to half that made one wonder just how much is required to live in some comfort in the new Ireland envisaged by this Coalition Government. On that night in Cork, the calculation was made that €1m would probably deliver a taxable income of €30,000, reduced to €15,000 by **Dirt**. Certainly, never again will people talk about the millionaire in hushed tones with visions of a lifestyle spent on the tropical isle, sipping a Pina Colada.

There was a distinct intake of breath in the audience when the cuts in home care

were vividly described in a story about a deaf and mute man who had his one hour a day of home care cut by the new budgetary restrictions.

That was followed by an uplifting account of how an entire family together cared for the aged scion of the family. The account painted a vivid picture of how young and old worked together in a carefully orchestrated timetable to deliver care, that not only made the final days of an older person worthwhile but demonstrated the old family values to a new generation.

Every meeting in this series has opened with the presentation by the Garda crime prevention unit. In Cork, Sergeant Tony Davies put in context for older people who might be fearful in their homes the comparatively low crime statistics for burglary and particularly for aggravated assault.

There was lots of good advice about how to make one's home more secure, which in turn begged the question that so many of us make life easier for the burglar by our unwillingness to install safety devices. Interestingly, the great motorway network delivered by the Celtic Tiger has, in fact, made crime detection more difficult for the gardai as Dublin criminals can now get to Cork in two hours and be back home almost before the crime has been detected.

It was during this segment that the Budget first reared its ugly head. The withdrawal of the free phone service from pensioners meant that many devices connected to the forces of law and order are now unworkable because of the loss of a landline. It was the first time that I was brought face-to-face with the value of an instrument that was to me seemingly made redundant by

the mobile phone.

The most dramatic contribution came from the podium when Cillian Twomey, a retired geriatrician, spoke about the celebration rather than the depression of growing old. Professor Twomey questioned how this State is willing to pay for someone with cancer but has a completely different approach to someone suffering from dementia in old age.

He outlined how the so-called Fair Deal scheme of the HSE is hardly fair and because it is based on a percentage of the value of people's homes, it is open to future governments at any time to change that percentage.

Once again, there is a real current of opinion abroad among people of pensionable age that they should be organised into one powerful group to represent their views. I suspect it would not take much effort to mobilise this extraordinary group of Irish citizens who by their good sense, foresight and frugality made this a worthwhile country only to see their efforts dissipated by others and who are now being asked to foot the bill. Somebody is going to light the blue touch paper and the explosion may not be pretty for conventional politics.

'State has a completely different approach to someone suffering from dementia'

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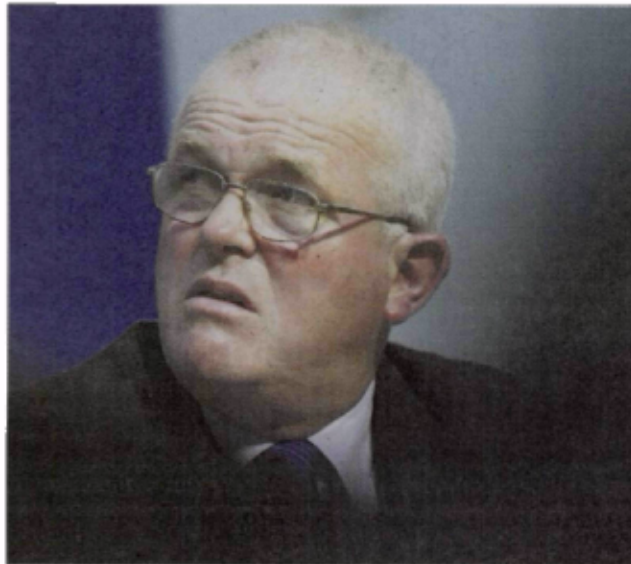
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CELEBRATION OF AGE: Professor Cillian Twomey, retired consultant physician in geriatric medicine