

Independence Day – insights from the US

The most appealing aspects of US culture are those which are independent of its politics, military prowess, reach and power. They are the reflexes that today characterise the behaviour of most Americans most of the time. Below I touch on those that are attractive to me.

Most Americans are Hibernophiles – they are instinctively positive to Irish people and our style and behaviours. The fact that this positiveness is often ill deserved makes it all the more precious. To those of us with a sporting inclination, it is a huge bonus that the speedy behemoths who play American football do not play rugby; if they did, they would win everything – the delusions of excellence that today obtains in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and the European rugby playing countries would be cruelly and permanently punctured.

Americans are cheerful, even in adversity. It is astonishing how frequently one encounters them bending into the wind and rain on Nassau street in Dublin, assuring all around them that they are having a great time. A man was interviewed recently in New Ross recalling the visit of President John F Kennedy 50 years ago. His main memory was how cheerful and smiling Kennedy and his entourage were, compared to the dour, unsmiling demeanour of our political leaders of the time. Of course our boys had many reasons for gloom (mainly self- inflicted by their inept economic policies) but Kennedy was not without his problems. The American custom of providing clear street signs at the right level and large enough to be read by the short sighted from 5 metres is the opposite of the Irish tradition, where most street signs – where they exist - are placed so as to be read comfortably only from the upper deck of a double decker bus. Those at ground level risk neck and eye strain if they wish to be informed. And then there is the peculiar tradition in Ireland where householders only number about one in every 10 houses. Visitors seeking a particular address must first find the one house on the street with a number that can be seen and then count up or down in hopes of locating their destination.

The lack of government involvement in religion in the US is a feature that has helped both the state and religion. In Ireland, we know better than most that, when cardinals, mullahs or other divines are the final arbiters of policy, outcomes are frequently unhappy. Providing feedback is an attractive American obsession; it is no coincidence that TripAdvisor and most other such sites have their origin and ethos in the US, a culture where self- improvement depends on constructive feedback. Except where lawyers dictate otherwise, practical simplicity is characteristic. One example amongst many is the tradition of universities in cities such as Boston providing mutual access to their courses, as long there is capacity and the students have the necessary pre-requisite training. In Europe, we embrace turf protecting transaction costs, and justify them as necessary for the maintenance of standards. The achievement of the civil rights movement and the consequent laws protecting minority rights has made the US uniquely open and congenial to a diversity of cultures and races. In *The Billionaire's Apprentice – the Rise of the Indian American Elite and the Fall of the Galleon Hedge Fund*, Business Plus, Anita Raghavan documents the rise (and very American fall of two of them) of graduates of the Indian Institutes of Technology ('beacons of excellence in an India bedevilled by cronyism and back scratching') on Wall Street. One observes that 'Wall Street was tough to get into for us. Not to be crude but there's a Jewish mafia, a WASP mafia, and an Irish mafia....They hire their own; they socialise with their own'. But they did get in. No large country provides the degree of cultural mix and the openness to new entrants that the US does.

And this ability to engage across racial and cultural frontiers is also enabled by the widely shared view of life and work as a positive sum game – ‘if you do well, I’ll probably do well, or at least your success won’t harm me.’ And then there is the humour. No one punctures fatuous questioning better than Woody Allen. Asked what, if he had to live his life over, he would do differently, he replied: ‘I wouldn’t read Moby Dick.’

Of course the US has other cultural features that bemuse many outsiders. These include the idea that anyone who wants to own an AK47 or other lethal weaponry should be free to do so untrammelled by any oversight, some TV and radio stations whose propaganda owes more to the style of Pravda than to that of Edward R. Morrow, and where access by all to health services is regarded as bad thing.

But taken in the round, this is a culture to be proud of; it has a lot to teach us all.

Happy Independence Day.

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