

# **SOLIDARITY WITH THE SILENCED: THE CASE OF EOGHAN HARRIS**

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In 2016, I coordinated the International Edmund Burke Summer School with Sir Roger Scruton and French scholar Alexandra Slaby. Set in the majestic countryside of Westmeath, Ireland, the school attracted students from across the world in pursuit of truth, wisdom, and the certainties of conservatism. One of our guest lecturers was Irish public intellectual and journalist Eoghan Harris, a man whose fearless voice had dominated Ireland's public discourse for fifty years. I was determined to have Eoghan on the programme because I wanted our students to learn Irish history from a figure who had not only witnessed the past half-century's great events, but who had, at vital junctures, directly shaped them.

Originally a republican nationalist, he became a devout Marxist who eventually turned to social democracy following the fall of communism in 1989. From there, he followed a path which led him to Burke, whose great example he would emulate in his own war against the 'armed doctrine' of radical nationalists such as Sinn Féin and the IRA. This ideological odyssey was, however, never purely intellectual. Even as a Marxist, Harris abhorred violence and sought, through his writings, to convince a generation of socialist activists to renounce the so-called 'armed struggle' of violent Irish republicanism. That he succeeded at a time when the IRA's killing machine was in full swing, is testament to his persuasive passion and intellectual brilliance.

Eoghan's unique ability to convey complex arguments with polemical authority ensured that he was listened to across the political spectrum. He was also a first-class producer of radio and television programmes, a talent which enabled him to guide politicians in media matters. That, combined with his vast historical and literary learning, made him an indispensable asset to those who sought his counsel. They included Ireland's first female president, Mary Robinson, whose faltering campaign Harris rescued and brought to

victory in 1990. Soon after, he advised former Irish Prime Minister John Bruton, before decisively turning to the then leader of the Ulster Unionist Party in Northern Ireland, David Trimble. Trimble would become the North's First Minister following the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, a year in which he also won the Nobel Peace Prize with his nationalist deputy John Hume. Harris wrote Trimble's acclaimed acceptance speech, in which he famously said that for too long Northern Ireland had been "a cold house for Catholics." It was a speech that directly invoked Burke and cited him liberally, alongside Plato, John Bunyan, Amos Oz, and former American diplomat George Kennan.

In addressing our students in Westmeath, I urged Eoghan to talk about that speech because, for me, it was Harris at his finest. That speech was a masterclass in clarity and cogency, each sentence loaded with philosophical depth and wisdom. Burke, he argued, is "the best model for what might be called politicians of the possible," being as he was "the philosopher of practical politics, not of visionary vapours." The speech continued to assert the following about Burke:

*He challenged the Platonic perfectibility doctrine whose principal protagonist was Rousseau. Rousseau regarded man as perfect and society as corrupt. Burke believed man was flawed and society was redemptive... At the end of Rousseau's road, Burke predicted, we would find not the perfectibility of man but the gibbet and the guillotine. And so it proved. And so it proved when Stalin set out to perfect the new Soviet man. So it proved with Mao in China and Pol Pot in Cambodia. So it will prove in every conflict when perfection is sought at the point of a gun.*

It may seem strange that those words were penned for a protestant unionist by the former high priest of Irish Marxism. Yet, to those like me who have closely followed his remarkable career, that speech perfectly encapsulates the political philosophy of Eoghan Harris. The one principle that has dominated his life and thinking is that when perfection is sought at the point of a gun, we are surely on the road to serfdom. Whether it be the

Jacobins of Revolutionary France, or Sinn Féin/IRA in Ireland, it matters little. Both are driven by an armed doctrine that seeks purity and perfection where none can be found. Hence the necessity for violence as that which will purge society of its wilful stupidity.

For Harris, Burke's eloquent denunciation of tyranny masquerading as liberty and equality became the standard by which he would judge his age's new Jacobins. In his weekly column for Ireland's best-selling newspaper, the *Sunday Independent*, he relentlessly exposed the evil of such tyranny, whether it be on the streets of Belfast or those of Baghdad. Indeed, his support to remove Saddam Hussein from power in 2003 brought about my own friendship with him. When he read a lecture that I had given in a debate against journalist Robert Fisk on the moral case for removing Saddam, Eoghan immediately had it published in the *Sunday Independent*. He then organised for me to write a column on foreign affairs for the same newspaper, a position I held for the next three years and which launched my journalistic career. By so doing, he rescued me from the insulated world of academia, thereby forcing me to actively contribute to the national conversation.

Like Scruton, Harris always walked the talk. He gave media instruction to former Deputy Prime Minister of Iraq Ahmed Chalabi, in advance of the American invasion in 2003. The fact that Chalabi was subsequently denounced by the Americans, would not have mattered much to Eoghan. For him, removing Saddam was a moral necessity, and the fact that Chalabi was then the most prominent Iraqi exile opposing the tyrant, was sufficient justification for supporting him. As he once observed: "Hindsight history has no moral status." What matters is the current moral exigency and how to effectively deal with it. It was this moral courage which won Eoghan the admiration of many, but also the enmity of others.

One person who directly benefited from his courage was former Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern. Harris began advising Ahern in the middle of his three-term stint at the top of Irish politics. However, his advice and support became decisive when Ahern was polling badly in the days immediately prior to his third General Election victory in 2007. Harris appeared on Irish television and in a remarkable polemic that never grows tired, he

poured contempt on Ahern's media detractors. It was television at its very best, with Harris combining all his talents to redeem Ahern in the eyes of a sceptical electorate. From that moment, there was no doubt that Ahern would be returned as Taoiseach (Prime Minister).

A few weeks later, I was standing in a church yard one morning when I took a call from Eoghan. He began by saying how much he was looking forward to my first book on Roger Scruton (which he would launch in 2009), before telling me that Scruton's philosophical satire Xanthippic Dialogues was the funniest book he ever read. Then, quite casually, he announced that "Bertie has just appointed me to the Seanad." Seanad Éireann is the Irish upper chamber of parliament, and it was there that Senator Harris would demonstrate, in fine Burkean fashion, why the art of oratory is still the best weapon in political combat.

Amid all these twists and turns of his extraordinary career, Eoghan Harris never faltered in his conviction that Irish freedom would not survive a Sinn Féin government. In April 2021, while suffering from cancer, he wrote the following:

*In spite of my cancer, my persona has not changed: I remain the archetypal cranky-cheerful Corkman... Normally, readers get my cranky side. That's because I believe Sinn Féin-IRA is the most malignant force in modern Irish history and, like Cassandra, I must keep predicting trouble, hoping to prevent it.*

*The following month, Eoghan was sensationally dropped as a columnist for the Sunday Independent when it was revealed that he was using a fake pseudonymous ('Barbara J Pym') Twitter account to attack Sinn Féin. It was a bitter blow to him and his family, but also to his many devoted readers and supporters. Eoghan defended the Twitter account by saying, "My column could not concentrate on Northern Ireland and I was desperate to find a wider platform to reach out to unionists and fight Sinn Féin." He used a pseudonym because, he argued, "my own name would filter how my tweets were received. I wanted to be read with an open mind."*

Indeed, he added, “journalists should be allowed to use a pseudonym to fight Sinn Féin on social media.” That is because, if pseudonymity is usefully employed against oppressive regimes, it should also be deployed in defence of democracy. At present, he asserted, “Irish democracy is under siege from Sinn Féin, a party with a military wing—and most journalists are in denial about the danger.” In closing his defence in a letter to The Irish Times, Eoghan bravely declared:

*I will not meekly follow the standard script for the cancelled—abject apologies and pleas for free speech. I make no apology for my Twitter account—and Sinn Féin doesn't believe in free speech. I will not go gently to my grave. I will fight Sinn Féin fascism with my last breath.*

Since then, he has been embroiled in legal disputes with journalists and others who allege they were defamed by tweets on the ‘Barbara J Pym’ account. Worse still is the fact that Sinn Féin is now the most popular party in the Irish Republic and has just succeeded in becoming the largest political party in the Northern Ireland Assembly. If this ominous trend continues, it will result in Sinn Féin seizing power on both sides of the Irish border. Those of us deeply concerned about such an appalling prospect, should be in no doubt that the silencing of Eoghan Harris has merely accelerated what many believe is now an inevitability.

Free societies need people like Eoghan Harris—courageous contrarians who defy the culture of amnesia. Such people are the vanguard of memory, reminding us that liberty is a precious but fragile asset that we must not take for granted. Having lived through the great dramas of Irish life in the 20th century, and having witnessed first-hand the horrors of the IRA, Harris was a latter-day Burke who consistently foretold what awaited Ireland should it forget its dark past. As Burke himself wrote: “People will not look forward to posterity, who never look backward to their ancestors.” The woke generation are simply too insulated against reality to look beyond themselves. They are somehow intoxicated by the chic radicalism of a party that seeks to whitewash a toxic legacy with pseudo-socialist

sentiment. Without the likes of Harris, they will never be exposed to a past, the grim truths of which will help shine a light on our present predicament. And so, they will push us inexorably towards an outcome we will live to regret.

If Harris is our Burke, it is because, having been a central actor in Irish affairs, and having studied the cunning stratagems of fascists and tyrants, he knows what is required to save Ireland from its dark temptations. Hence, what Burke wrote of the Jacobins is something from which Harris never deviated:

*In all that we do, whether in the struggle or after it, it is necessary that we should constantly have in our eye the nature and character of the enemy we have to contend with. The Jacobin Revolution is carried on by men of no rank, of no consideration, of wild, savage minds, full of levity, arrogance, and presumption, without morals, without probity, without prudence. What have they, then, to supply their innumerable defects, and to make them terrible even to the firmest minds? One thing, and one thing only—but that one thing is worth a thousand: they have energy... If we meet this energy with poor commonplace proceeding, with trivial maxims, paltry old saws, with doubts, fears, and suspicions, with a languid, uncertain hesitation, with a formal, official spirit, which is turned aside by every obstacle from its purpose, and which never sees a difficulty but to yield to it, or at best to evade it—down we go to the bottom of the abyss, and nothing short of Omnipotence can save us. We must meet a vicious and distempered energy with a manly and rational vigour.*

In the absence of Eoghan Harris, we have taken our eye off the nature and character of the enemy. We have traded wisdom and courage for vacuous assertions and uncertain hesitation. All the while, this “dreadful and portentous energy” is “always vigilant, always on the attack,” for it “allows itself no repose, and suffers none to rest an hour without impunity.” In contrast, the governing parties of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, and the Green Party are turned aside by every obstacle from what should be their primary purpose.

Consequently, down we go to the bottom of the abyss.

When they journeyed to Westmeath in 2016, Roger Scruton and Eoghan Harris warned our students of the dangers of the new Jacobins who, as Russel Kirk wrote, “are of the sort which work their own fulfilment—if honest men credulously accept the ideologue’s dogmatic assertions.” Scruton and Harris, each in his own way, fought to expose those assertions as the lies that they are, but ‘cancel culture’ fought back and nearly destroyed Scruton in the months preceding his death in 2020. And now, with cynical contempt, it seeks to permanently silence Eoghan Harris, one of Ireland’s great voices of freedom.

That is why those of us who still care for the cause of liberty should lend Harris our support. For, as Kirk reminds us, “corruption and fanaticism assail our era as sorely as they did in Burke’s time.” In turn, our response should never be one of fatalistic indifference, for we are all potential targets of a cowardly culture that brooks no dissent. Rather, we should take the side of those who have been ‘silenced’ so that the resonance of their voices is still “heard amidst the howl of our winds of abstract doctrine.”