

Byrne should burn

You know it was important television because the *Irish Times* didn't review it and it wasn't mentioned again on RTÉ after it had been narrowcast. It was of course Claire Byrne putting the boot into Sinn Féin.

I'm all for the exercise, and think SF deserve a hard time because of all that killing they defended, a dubious commitment to democratic accountability and because they're not actually going to deliver a radical left-wing agenda, and are anti-green.

I wish they were radicals but we can tell from their performance in the North, from what they do at local government and from their policies and manifestos that they're not really going to be the antidote to a hundred years of FF and FG. I've said before I'd like to see them commit to increasing equality by 1% annually, stringently measured by say the Gini Coefficient. And if they're not achieving it they should leave whatever miserable coalition is in their way. They won't though because they want, and have scented, power and because they will go into coalition with whoever will take them, including right-wing parties, if they feel they can pursue a mandate to push an unhurriable United Ireland.

Having said that, they're competent politicians, SF/IRA have ended a longstanding war, making them peace-makers, and they seem to offer the best opportunity of some left-wing policies, if – which is unlikely – they can get a critical mass of (other) left-wing parties in with them in coalition.

Whatever about that, RTÉ had lined up Eddie Hobbs (property man), Michael O'Flynn (property man) and Killiney-based Jennifer Carroll MacNeill (Fine Gael) as antagonists to Sinn Féin, on a programme that was mostly about property.

It launched with a wild-eyed Eddie Hobbs's anecdote of how socialism gives one of your two cows to losers. According to Wikipedia before entering politics Hobbs was known for presenting RTÉ shows such as Give or Take Club, Rip-Off Republic, Show Me the Money



Biased. Michael Smith reviews Claire Byrne *Live: The Rise of Sinn Féin* (14 February, RTÉ 1)

and 30 Things to do with your SSIA.

Let me stop things there: before entering politics he ran a series of shows about how to make money and avoid rip-offs. So it's sub-optimal that before entering politics his main legacy was the auto-erotically-named Brendan Investments which pissed away €13m, 90%, of its investments, on the world's worst properties, mostly the savings of little old ladies from Cork. That was before he entered politics. *Politics* was Renua, the world's least successful party – with no (o) elected representatives and a platform culled from the rural 1970s. And before he became an anti-vaxer.

As an antidote, Jennifer Carroll McNeil came on with very unwild eyes and the world's most expensive shoes to say that capitalism works for everybody, though nobody could stop thinking that it had worked so well for her that there probably wasn't much left for everyone else. Moneybags ex-Nama and FF builder Michael O'Flynn's eyes wandered when he was under pressure but like the other two there was never a flicker that his view could ever be changed.

After consummate performances from this not terribly-likeable trio, it was time for someone called Tony Groves. Fans of left-wing twitter will know Groves as the man who says he is Ireland's leading left-wing tweeter (he's not) and takes his shirt off a lot. He also co-fronts the 'Tortoise Shack' podcasts, probably the most popular socialist programmes broadcast from Ireland. Groves has clearly never been invited anywhere outside his shack before so he'd prepared, with his shirt on and the killer opening line

"Fact Check!". He proceeded to rollick through two minutes of almost entirely accurate fact checks while pointing at an ill-at-ease but plushly-suited Michael O'Flynn and a very not-ill-at-ease Jennifer Carroll MacNeill. Claire Byrne let herself down at one stage by interrupting him to confirm that his name was Tony. She would not have asked that of Jennifer, even when no-one knew who Jennifer was.

There was a bit of flak for Sinn Féin's Matt Carthy, but none of it stuck as much as it could have it had been better-directed and a few punters who seemed open minded were allowed to ventilate without correction. But it was too late. Groves had won the evening; and RTÉ had lost the day.

If RTÉ wants to treat Sinn Féin differently from everyone else, it had better say why. The Broadcasting Act commits RTÉ to fairness and impartiality: Current affairs broadcasts, including matters of public controversy or debate, must be treated in a manner which is fair to all interests concerned.

This show was not impartial, it was clumsily biased. Having embarrassed themselves with this exercise RTÉ needs to do the same for every other party, certainly every other big party. Let's hear a folksy evocation of what Fine Gael, as neoliberals, does to people with two cows.

To achieve that special RTÉ balance, RTÉ will need to find equivalents to Eddie Hobbs, Jennifer Carroll MacNeill and Michael O'Flynn. Has anyone in there still got the numbers for Dessie O'Hare, Joan Burton and Tom McFeely?

It was ludicrous, crude, nasty and inappropriate but most of all it was ineffective. After that, you would almost vote for them. **L**